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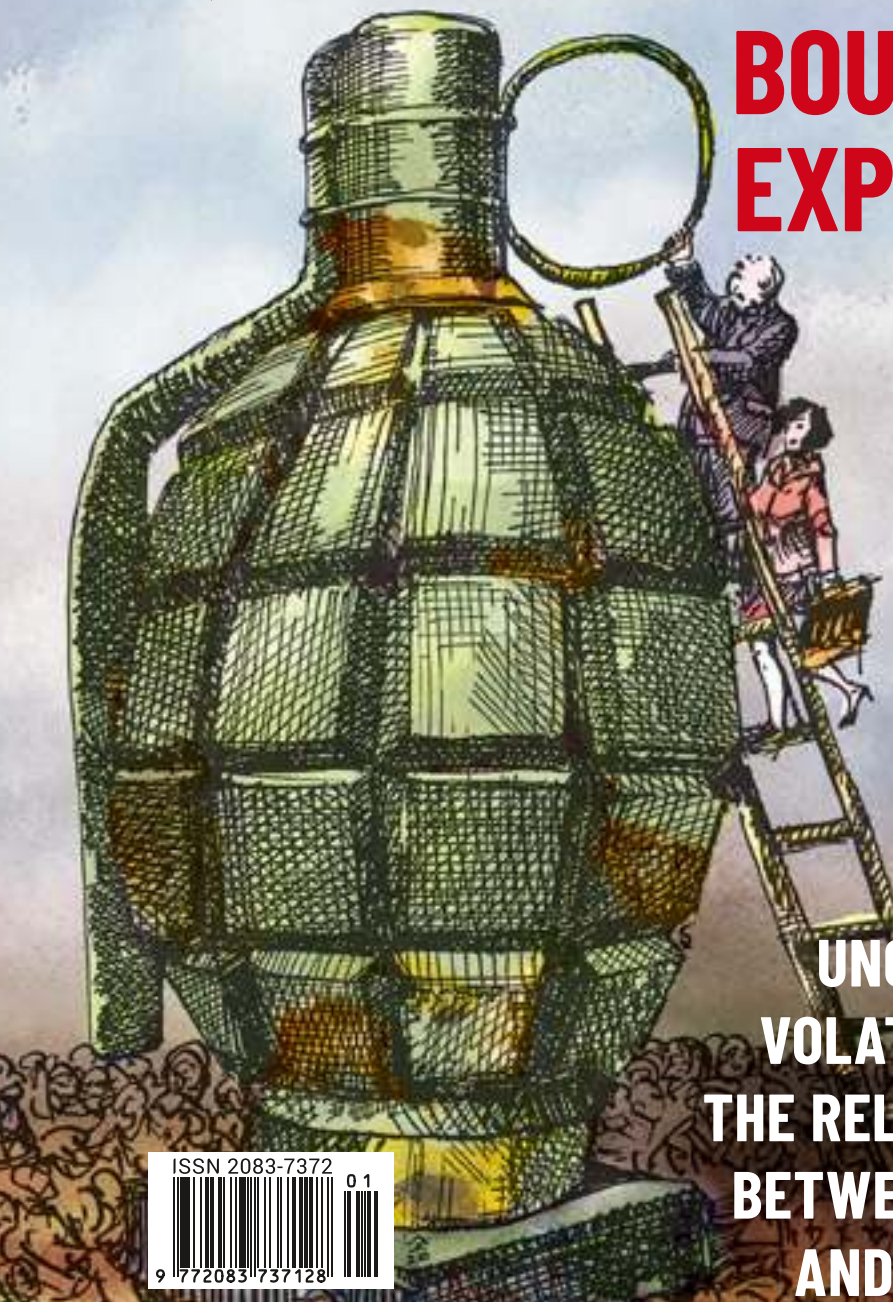

UNCERTAINTY, VOLATILITY AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

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DEAR READER,

Undoubtedly, at the outbreak of 2020, tensions are on the rise – not only in our region but also in global affairs. If the final weeks of 2019 were any indicator, this decade may indeed bring a new level of instability and uncertainty towards the future. Thus, in this issue we dig deeper to explore the emerging trends in the world and try to better understand what they mean for the region on which we focus. Among the issues that we consider vital now are political polarisation, growing populism, the battle of narratives, economic shifts and the start of the next generational change.

The issue opens with an interview with American analyst Brian Whitmore, who explains these new trends in detail, looking in particular at Russia, Ukraine and the mood in Washington DC ahead of this year's US presidential election. The provocative essay by Paweł Kowal outlines why we may be nearing the end of a second *belle époque* and what this means for the West. Kowal argues that the growing power of the oligarchy is becoming an underestimated trend in the West and poses a serious danger to democracy.

Another trend that we address in this issue is the growing call from some western politicians, experts and media for better relations with Russia and the Kremlin, despite no progress in the war in Ukraine (and constant attempts to undermine the western democratic process). Most vocal and prominent were Emmanuel Macron's statements calling for a renewed strategic dialogue with Russia. Likewise, a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* published Thomas Graham's essay meant to convince US policy-makers to "let Russia be Russia" and give up on any Euro-Atlantic ambitions of the post-Soviet space. We believe that *New Eastern Europe* should be at the centre of this debate, which is far from over. We asked a group of experts to weigh in on this discussion – including from the United States, France, Germany, Poland and Russia.

We urge you to also take a look at a special section we have in this issue which examines the role of information in shaping the hearts and minds of the society. We all know the challenge that exists, but more can be done to make us more resilient and less susceptible to manipulations and disinformation – whether these threats come from foreign or domestic sources.

Please join us online at www.neweasterneuropeeu for up-to-date information on the latest developments in the region and don't forget to check out our podcast series: "Talk Eastern Europe" and "In Between Europe". Enjoy the reading!

The Editors

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PUBLISHER
The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College
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office@kew.org.pl, www.kew.org.pl

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EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CENTRE
pl. Solidarności 1
80-863 Gdańsk, Poland
https://ecs.gda.pl/
ecs@ecs.gda.pl

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COVER LAYOUT
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SUBSCRIPTION:
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LAYOUT AND FORMATTING
Małgorzata Chyc | AT Wydawnictwo

EDITORIAL OFFICES
New Eastern Europe
ul. Szlak 26/12A, 31-153 Kraków
editors@neweasterneurope.eu

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The West Berlins of our time

An interview with Brian Whitmore, a senior fellow and director of the Russia Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). Interviewer: Adam Reichardt

ADAM REICHARDT: I would like to start with a question on one of the main topics we are covering in this issue – which is the movement of some in the West, like the French President Emmanuel Macron, and others, who are calling for more dialogue with Russia. *Foreign Affairs* recently published a piece by Thomas Graham titled "Let Russia be Russia", where the author writes that the West "should give up any ambitions of expanding NATO farther into the former Soviet space." What is your take on this? Why are so many voices calling for better relations with Russia despite the fact that Russia has made zero concessions or offered any compromises after its aggression in Ukraine or interference and disinformation campaigns in the West?

BRIAN WHITMORE: There are two ways to look at this. First is the cynical view, that Russia is using its financial network of influence in Europe and the West to push these messages. The other interpretation is that there is a certain level of naiveté in the West when it comes to Russia, and especially Vladimir Putin. Whatever the case, we have to ask ourselves some serious questions here. When we have voices saying, "We should have a dialogue with Russia" – the question is, dialogue about what? What is it that we are going to talk with them about? Are we going to talk about Ukraine's sovereignty? Because that is what Russia really wants to talk about. They won't put it in those terms, of course, but that is exactly what they want to discuss – the limited and conditional sovereignty of Russia's neighbours. This is something that the West does not have the ability to give, let alone the right to give.

Again, when voices in the West call for dialogue, what do they really want to talk about? We talked to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. We talked about preventing an accidental conflict from breaking out. We could talk to Russia about these issues and others, like

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Photo courtesy of Brian Whitmore

strategic arms control. But we should not even consider a conversation about whether or not Ukraine should be able to pursue its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. That is for Ukraine to decide. Russia has no part in that conversation.

So, I am very sceptical when I hear voices like Macron talk about how we should have a strategic dialogue with Russia. I think there is a tendency among the elite in the West, on both sides of the Atlantic, to see dialogue in and of itself as a virtue. I disagree with that. It depends on what you are talking about. If we were to have a dialogue about Russia respecting Ukraine's sovereignty, leaving Donbas, returning Crimea to Ukraine, returning Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region to Georgia – then I support that dialogue. But I do not support a dialogue where we will talk about limiting the sovereignty of Russia's neighbours. We have to understand that Russia wants things that the West cannot give. Therefore, such a dialogue is pointless.

Given that, why do you think there are voices in the West calling for dialogue?

Certainly there is pressure in some places in the West, on both sides of the Atlantic, to get back to business as usual with Russia. A lot of people were mak-

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ing a lot of money from this. The Kremlin is very aware of this fact. They managed to use finance and corruption to establish networks of influence – that is part of the picture. The other part is, as I said in the beginning, a certain level of naivety about the regime in Russia and what it wants. I think that the Russian regime in its current form and the West are incompatible and, as a result, we will be in conflict. What we should be focussing on in the West is how to contain this regime and how to contain the damage it is inflicting on western institutions and discourse.

How would you describe the mood in Washington right now? How does it view the current situation? There seems to be a lack of clarity on US policy towards Russia…

Among the security and foreign policy professionals in Washington there is a consensus that Russia is a threat and something that needs to be dealt with. The problem is in the political sphere. Unfortunately, the issue of Russia has become a partisan issue and we have to get out of that mindset. The threat coming from Russia needs to be seen as a national security issue. Being a hardliner on Russia is now seen as partisan. I hope we can move away from this. I hope what we are going through right now is the exception and not the new normal. If we look at something that is clearly a national security threat through a partisan lens, that is potentially dangerous. The good news is the consensus of the professionals. When you look at the various assessments coming from the think tank and expert community, they clearly understand the situation.

But does that have an influence on the administration's foreign policy?

It certainly does. If you look at the actions of the administration – they actually have not been bad on Russia. Sanctions are in place and even stronger. Ukraine, despite everything, has been given defensive weapons. Assistance to Ukraine has been increased. If you look through all the noise, the policy does not look so bad. My concern is that we need to forge a bipartisan and transatlantic consensus that this regime is a threat and needs to be contained. That has to extend into the political realm.

That seems very challenging in the current environment…

In the current environment, it is extremely challenging. But I am hoping this can change.

If we think about US politics and the role Russia plays in terms of disinformation and interference. Do you expect a Russian hand in the 2020 election?

Absolutely.

Do you think there have been lessons learnt from 2016 that can be applied this year? Or are we doomed to repeat the same situation…

I do not think we are doomed to repeat it in the same way, because we were really caught off guard in 2016. No one

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thought that Russia would have the audacity to try that against the US. We have seen it before in many other countries, but no one thought they would interfere in the American process. This time we will be a lot more prepared. We are certainly not immune, but in terms of activities like social media campaigns, disinformation, cyberattacks, hacking and doxing – I think the public and the elite will be more ready for it this time. Russia will not have the element of surprise.

But, again, a part of this is viewed in the lens of partisanship, and I think in order to be really effective we need to move beyond that. This includes proper election protection legislation. The current challenge is that if you want to get tough on Russia, you are seen by many as anti-Republican.

You mentioned Ukraine and the support that it has received, despite all that has happened over the last few months. And we have seen Ukraine at the centre of the impeachment process which has also put a huge media focus on that country. Has the American public learnt anything about the situation in Ukraine as a result? Or has it been completely politicised and we missed a moment to teach about the current geopolitical issues in Eastern Europe?

It depends what part of the American public you are talking about. Those who are more informed have certainly learnt something. But I would say that there is a good side and a bad side to all of this. On the good side, it is now going to be very difficult for the administration not to support Ukraine. It has actually given Ukraine a degree of protection. One of the damaging things here is that it is creating the impression of Ukraine as a dysfunctional state, which it certainly is not. By and large, the US support for Ukraine is safe and secure. Any attempt to end it will look suspicious.

I had a sense that Ukraine has almost become a toxic word in Washington discourse…

That has not been the case. In fact, there are a lot of people who have done a good job explaining why Ukraine matters. Several think tanks teamed up to have an event on Capitol Hill to explain to policy-makers why the country matters, why it is not a partisan issue and why it is more about national security. Ironically, it is one of the positive developments in this situation. It has reinforced the sense of urgency among Ukraine's friends in Washington.

I would like to come back to Russia and get your view of the domestic situation, as someone who always has a finger on the pulse of Russian politics. Last summer we saw the outbreak of protests against not allowing independent candidates to run in the Moscow city duma elections; and there are signs that Putin's popularity is fading. What could this mean for the internal situation?

It is a very interesting and paradoxical situation. Nobody is really happy with the situation right now, nobody knows how to get out of it, and nobody knows

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what follows. Putin's popularity is at an all-time low, but nobody can articulate or even imagine what happens after Putin. Meanwhile, the Kremlin is busy trying to construct scenarios for keeping Putin in power beyond 2024. They are looking at forcing Belarus into a closer union state – a de facto annexation. They are looking at constitutional changes to create a so-called State Council that would rule Russia and that Putin would lead. The resignation of the government and the constitutional changes Putin proposed – which include elevating both the State Council and the Security Council, effectively making them new versions of the Soviet Politburo – suggest that the regime is getting an early start on preparing to keep itself in power beyond 2024. My feeling is that we are heading into a prolonged period of stagnation for Russia, much like the late-Brezhnev period.

And if Putin leaves, who and what will replace him?

Actually, I do not think it really matters. If Putin falls, he will fall in one day and be replaced by something exactly like him the next. We do not have a Putin problem, we have a Russia problem. It is a systemic problem. Russia is basically governed by a system based on institutionalised kleptocracy, arbitrary rule and patron-client relationships, and it has always been this way. I have conversations with people in the Russian opposition about this, and I say if you get another chance you have to find a way to break this system and set up a new one based on accountability and rule of law; not like what happened in the 1990s, when there was a nominally democratic and nominally pro-western government that operated according to the same system based on patronage. That is doomed to foster continuity. But my hopes are not high for deep and serious political change in Russia in the short term.

In fact this is one of the key differences between Russia and Ukraine. Ukrainian society has made a conscious decision, and brought enough of the elite along with them, that they have to break out of the *sistema* that had existed in the Soviet times; and existed in Russia since the Grand Duchy of Moscovy. They are not out of it entirely, but they are making good progress. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, every single election in Ukraine has been competitive. Only one incumbent, Leonid Kuchma in 1999, won re-election. In Russia, not a single election has been competitive. Not a single incumbent has lost. This illustrates a key difference. We may see cosmetic political change in Russia, but right now it is hard to see how Putin goes and under what conditions it happens. Even with a re-energised opposition and more street protests, I just don't see how this regime can change. In that sense, I expect 2020 to be similar to 2019.

You have illustrated nicely the key difference between Ukraine and Russia, and I wonder, now with Volodymyr Zelesnkyy as president, do you think that Ukraine can serve as some sort of inspiration for

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Russians? That things can change democratically?

What is very interesting is that during the Ukrainian elections, the Russian media was trying to show Ukraine as a chaotic place where people were debating and having arguments. But as Russians were watching, many were thinking "wow, I wish we could have that." There was a quote on social media by someone in the Russian opposition who said "I feel we are is still in kindergarten and Ukrainians have grown up and dating girls." With the Zelenskyy phenomenon, the Kremlin does not know how to deal with him precisely because he is a Russian speaker who is a Ukrainian patriot. Russian political analyst Konstantyn von Eggert put it perfectly when he said that the leader of the opposition in Russia is now the president of Ukraine. Zelenskyy has done quite well; and Ukraine is doing better. The economy has improved. For the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union, the minimum wage in Ukraine is actually higher than in Russia. That is remarkable.

So you would assess Zelenskyy positively so far…?

So far, so good. I was a little worried going into the Normandy talks last December but Zelenskyy held his own. He didn't give up anything. And what was telling in fact was how the Russian media focussed almost obsessively over Zelenskyy's notes, making a big deal that his notes were written in Russian. And it shows how the language issue, which is one of the divisive issues pushed by Russia, is no longer a big deal in Ukraine; and the Kremlin doesn't know how to react.

Maybe we could end with some of your insights and thoughts on what we can expect for 2020 and the year ahead beyond Russia and Ukraine. There is potentially a lot of developments that can happen in the region; I am thinking of Belarus, Moldova and Georgia… In your opinion what should we be looking for in the coming year? Any expectations or predictions? Perhaps something that is not on the radar that you are watching closely…

Belarus is clearly on the Kremlin's radar. That is completely obvious. We have had this long term relationship between Belarus and Russia under the Putin period where Alyaksandr Lukashenka has looked at the relationship basically as transactional; while Putin views it as imperial. They have mostly tolerated each other throughout this period, but it has gotten to the point where something has to give. Putin is no longer happy with the transactional relationship. And despite all his faults, Lukashanka is not interested in Belarus becoming part of Russia. He wants to preserve the country's sovereignty. Russia has been putting a lot of pressure on Belarus to accept a new airbase, for example, which Lukashenka has so far resisted. My big question for 2020 is how much longer can Lukashenka hold out? Russia will probably take escalation in three steps. The first one would be to pressure Lukashenka into accepting Moscow's terms. That basically means

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turning Belarus into a de facto extension of Russia's western military district. But Lukashenka has no interest in being on the frontlines of a conflict between NATO and Russia. The second step would be an attempt at regime change. Belarus has presidential elections coming up this year which could be an opportunity for Russia to create problems in Belarus. Failing that, the third step of the escalation ladder would be a military option. So we should definitely keep our eye on Belarus.

Georgia is another interesting case. What we have always suspected is becoming very clear, that Bidzina Ivanishvili is doing the bidding of the Kremlin. This has led to a conflict between the Georgian civil society and a government that is effectively run by an unelected oligarch who appears to be beholden to Moscow, which is not representing Georgia's interests. In a lot of ways, Russia has learnt some lessons in Georgia and is now using a different approach. I think we are headed for a decisive round in Georgia and the ruling Georgian Dream coalition is doing everything in its power to ensure it wins the elections later this year. They were supposed to switch to a proportional system, which would have benefitted the opposition, but has backed down on that. The big question here is – are we about to see another big change in Georgia? And how would Russia respond to that?

Are you watching Moldova as well?

Moldova is also another interesting country to watch in the region. The pro-western government fell at the end of the year being replaced by a more pro-Kremlin one and setting up elections for this year. Unlike Ukraine, Moldova is a very divided society; virtually split evenly in terms of which direction the country should go. And I expect these divisions to maintain and manifest in the elections this year. What would be helpful would be a serious recognition on the part of the West that Ukraine and Moldova are the front lines in a war of governance that is going on right now between Russia and the West. We have to expend resources in order to win that war of governance. We need to understand that what happens in these countries really matters. These are the West Berlins of our time.

Brian Whitmore is a senior fellow and director of the Russia Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), in Washington DC. He is also the author of The Power Vertical Blog and host of The Power Vertical Podcast, both of which focus on Russian affairs.

Adam Reichardt is the editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe* and co-host of the *Talk Eastern Europe* podcast.

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The end of the *belle époque*

PAWEŁ KOWAL

It seems that the latest *belle époque* in western history is nearing its end, which could mean the end of the West as we know it. A miracle can happen, of course, as history is full of unexpected turns and changes, but if the current trends continue we can only await the melancholy of the *fin de siècle* before another massive change.

The first *belle époque* preceded the First World War. It took place when, after the end of the French-Prussian war in 1871, European states experienced an extraordinary economic and cultural boom. The telephone, the automobile, as well as the aeroplane were the great inventions of the *belle époque* which defined our understanding of the comfort and progress of the 20th century. Thanks to these three inventions, as well as peace and prosperity, the Third French Republic and Imperial Germany were able to increase their might and thus rapidly developed. The term West meant "Western European states" for the last time in history. The First World War and its continuation, the Second World War, could not have been concluded without the US's involvement. After 1945, the political West was rebuilt with the US playing a leading role.

Wind of change

Since the end of the Second World War the term "West" began to take on a new meaning. It started to include the US and Canada, Western European states

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(including Greece), as well as Australia and New Zealand. This new, bigger West sealed victory over the Germans in 1945 and forced its de-Nazification (similar processes took place in Italy and Japan). Unfortunately this new West did not manage to overcome the power of the Soviet Union. The latter was necessary to defeat Hitler but the USSR soon became the key adversary of the West.

It was only in 1989–1991 when the West, or the US to be more precise, managed to defeat the Soviet empire, which was in fact the second state responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War – and even to this day the Kremlin denies that before 1941 the USSR was actively co-operating with Nazi Germany, and half a century later it lost to the West. Yet this is precisely where the new *belle époque* of the wider transatlantic West began. Each of these epochs was a prefect mixture of vivid cultural and technological advancement, economic prosperity, and an extended period of peace. In 1990 the German rock band The Scorpions released their hit ballad "Wind of Change," in which they solemnly announced the changes that were going to come after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the USSR. In its place, and in place of the former Yugoslavia, 30 new states emerged.

After the First World War, US President Woodrow Wilson did not finish his work of implementing a grand change for Europe. The US Congress did not accept the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, while the League of Nations did not become a platform of co-operation for smaller nation states. Today, its failure is still used as an argument by American isolationists as an example of a failure of trans-national activities. The success of the European Union and NATO are, in turn, an argument of the internationalists who claim that there are possibilities to effectively coordinate the works of many states with the consent of their citizens.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the US did not withdraw from Europe and thereby helped this new *belle époque* for the West emerge.

After 1991 US President George H. W. Bush did not repeat the mistakes of his pre-war predecessor. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the US did not withdraw from Europe and thereby helped this new *belle époque* for the West emerge: the states that were coming out of the totalitarian and authoritarian systems were even given a chance to join the EU and NATO. Almost all of these 30 new states, during their transformation, received an offer of assistance. The question as to how they used this opportunity is another topic for discussion. Nevertheless, the new *belle époque* was again a period of economic growth and prosperity. But more than anything else, it was also the birth and development of the internet, a revolutionary innovation on par with the inventions of the post-1871 period.

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Prophecies

In just three decades these new technologies revolutionised the media and people's access to information. They changed trade, banking and people's lifestyles. What would today's production look like – and how much lower would profits be – without the information technologies that allowed it to be more effective and to maximize distribution and consumption? These new technologies also gave rise to the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI). Along with ongoing social changes, they are leading us towards huge and unique civilizational changes.

In the Old Testament the prophet Jeremiah foresaw Jerusalem's destruction. The success of the last *belle époque*, however, had from the very beginning its own Jeremiahs. Among them was Zygmunt Bauman who, in 1988, demonstrated the scale of the dangers of what he termed "fluid modernity". In 1992 the influential book by Francis Fukuyama, titled *The End of History and the Last Man*, was published. It is often interpreted as presenting the end of liberal democracy. Yet Fukuyama also foresaw the future role of nationalism in less modernised regions of Europe and the deep crisis of liberalism in democratic states. It was Fukuyama who prophesied that people will turn against the culture of "rational consumption" and against the idea that they are members of a "universal homogeneous state"; that, in other words, they will get bored with democracy.

The world did not need to wait long for this prophecy to be fulfilled. On September 11th 2001 the international community became paralysed by the news of a terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York City and the Pentagon outside Washington, DC. The attacks were carried out by Islamic terrorists inspired by Osama bin Laden, a co-founder and leader of Al-Qaeda. As a result of the trauma that came in their aftermath, the American public, through its political representatives, agreed to a restriction on its civil liberties via the passing of legislation popularly known as the Patriot Act. It quickly turned out that the new *belle époque* of the West was taking place at a time when many people around the world did not support western ideals or values.

At the same time, the late Walter Laquer, in his 2007 book, *The New Order: Last Days of Europe*, illustrated the scale of changes taking place in the European West, highlighting its departure towards a political non-existence. In his view, the latter was caused by, among other things, the demographic crisis. Laquer argued that due to low birth rates the previously large and important industrial areas in Europe are now turning into a kind of Disneyland for more sophisticated tourists from India, and China as well as colonies for an increasing number of Muslim migrants. The three Jeremiahs of the end of the liberal order – Bauman, Fukuyama and Laquer – all, in their own way, proved to be correct in their predictions.

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The spectre of oligarchy

In recent decades western societies became used to the fact that politicians are elected based on experience, activities and their electability as candidates. In the ideal model, there is transparency of those in power; democratically-elected leaders can be asked any question about their family, money, holidays, etc. Opposite to this model is oligarchy, which is one of the oldest forms of governing as described by Aristotle in *Politics*.

The commentators of our time share the view that a characteristic feature of politics today is populism, a term which remains difficult to define. But maybe it is not? Maybe it is not populism, but a return of oligarchy and its sick vision of rebuilding empires. Maybe this is the key characteristic of the collapse of the West? Clearly, populism is one of the instruments that oligarchs use to gain power, but populism is not the essence of what is to come.

> Populism is one of the instruments that oligarchs use to gain power, but populism is not the essence of what is to come.

The context of the return of oligarchy can be seen in the following way. First, in the last three decades the post-Soviet space saw the emergence of huge oligarchic fortunes which – with time – became so powerful that they started to play an important role in the political life of the West. It can happen that a single individual, whose name ends up on the list of the richest people in the world, can – through his companies, banks and business operations, as well as access to modern techniques of manipulation – make a huge impact on society as a whole, not just state structures and political parties. The liberal structures of the West have no protection against a new generation of Eastern European oligarchy. Even more, it has turned out that the greatest achievements of the West – globalisation and the transfer of capital – are available to all, especially the wealthy. Hence, new technologies have allowed Eastern European oligarchs to infect, like a virus, the West. It is symbolic that London, one of the hearts of western liberal democracy, is a centre of this oligarchy. The idea of London as a city of Eastern European tycoons has been implanted on many people's minds thanks to the TV series *Londongrad* and books like *Londongrad: From Russia with Cash*.

In addition to the transfer of great fortunes from the post-Soviet space to the West, a similar trend is taking place in Southeast Asia and China. The latter have created a very unique type of oligarchy which is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and provides a group of its wealthiest with certain opportunities. The internet and social media, as described above as the great inventions of the last *belle époque*, allowed these oligarchs, with almost unlimited opportunities, to

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impact voters outside the traditional political structures. This process has clearly accelerated in the most recent years.

American paradox

Our *belle époque* started with America's dominance and America will likely bring its end. The calm period of the "end of history" was not threatened by an external enemy. The obstacle that hindered the West was the revival of oligarchy in the West, enforced by supplies from Eastern Europe and Asia. This process affects the West at its core – its democratic conviction of equal opportunity for all. It is also a signal to the people that what matters is no longer politics, but money. In the West, the oligarchy was legitimised by Donald Trump who came to power by criticising the democratic establishment (his well-known slogan was to "drain the swamp") and who built his support through social media. In this way, he reached out to many Americans with his populistic messages, operating outside the framework of the Republican Party which – in the end – capitulated to support his candidature for president. Even during the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama, anti-Beltway rhetoric was present, however its scale and speed in 2016 was unprecedented.

We cannot also exclude that Trump was financially supported by Russia. Evidently, after becoming president he refused to reveal data on his fortune. In policies towards important allies like Ukraine he was driven – as testimonies of his staff suggests – by personal, not state, interests. On top of everything, his own son-in-law became a top member of the president's staff, much like what we see among oligarchic regimes in Eastern Europe.

The current paradox of the US system lies in the co-existence of the neo-oligarchic office of the president, with the parliamentary structures which are partially in opposition to the president (the US House of Representatives) and the structures of the "deep state" which are trying to survive the current presidency. At the moment it is difficult to say whether, in the long-term, the US will see a takeover by the neo-oligarchy or whether traditional democratic mechanisms will prevail. One thing, however, is certain. The whole world has noticed that at the centre of the post-1989 order we have now a power model which can be used as justification for anti-democratic processes to develop throughout the West more broadly. What comes to mind here is Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, who is the wealthiest Czech citizen and an employer of thousands of his voters. The same can be said about the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who is clearly trying to build "a new oligarchy" around himself.

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Oligarchic forms of government have become the norm in the post-Soviet space; both in larger countries and smaller ones. In Georgia, nearly all decisions are made by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, while in Moldova the political process is a reflection of a battle between a few of the richest men with wide political and business influence. Meanwhile, a unique system of oligarchy has developed in Ukraine. There the wealthy tycoons control one another and compete with each other. The latest protests in Hong Kong have also oligarchy in the context as they were driven by the collapse of the middle class.

The mechanisms of the oligarchy's growing strength are similar everywhere. In the beginning there is criticism (at times very justified) of the democratic elite. Then comes support for a candidate (often a very wealthy citizen) who becomes the face of this criticism. At the next stage there is a wide wave of populist criticism (a fight against the elite) which uses social media as its tool. As a result of this mechanism, which is based on manipulation, the oligarchic structures have been getting stronger in more countries in the West. This process was also well-illustrated by Volodymyr Zelenskyy's coming to power in Ukraine, but overall it is a quite universal matrix of the activities of the wealthiest players who act behind the politicians' backs with slogans of "fighting the oligarchy".

The imperial spectre

After three decades of the *belle époque* western societies seem to have become somewhat bored with the calm life where international law decides on everything and borders are "permanently" demarked. This boredom is accompanied by uncertainty, a lack of belonging, fear of climate change and refugees. All these emotions are further emphasised by the populists. Possibly one of the strangest reactions to the *belle époque*, and a sign indicating its end, is the nostalgia for the old imperial order, one that was built by strong states that were able to demand the subordination of other states based on their means of impact: political, military or economic, but never in accordance with international agreements. Their role was to provide citizens with a sense of stabilisation and security. This kind of mechanism explains why so many in the United Kingdom have opted for Brexit.

The mark of the post-war period in western history, and especially after 1991, was the multilateral diplomacy and strong international organisations which became a forum to determine states' interest and whose agencies were also respected by strong players who could, theoretically, put pressure on smaller actors outside the framework of international institutions. After the First World War the weakness of the League of Nations turned out to be problematic. After the Second

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World War the strength of the West lied in its ability to keep the United Nations as a platform for agreements on the global scale. However in terms of keeping the West's cohesion, the EU and NATO have proved to be particularly important. These organisations, through their structures, clearly eliminated imperial sentiments that were present in the functioning of many states. Thus, the headquarters of NATO and the EU were not placed in London or Paris, but in Brussels, which symbolically marked the non-imperial nature of the West's new institutions.

Imperial sentiments have become an important motor in attracting voters in many western countries.

It appeared that this order was widely accepted by western citizens. However, this turned out to be largely an illusion. What has proved to be true, instead, is that perception is more important than facts. Thus, many people started to view the EU as an institution that is not sufficiently democratic and too technocratic – an artificial power which is limited by certain conditions and dependencies which are incomprehensive to the average person. Possibly for this reason imperial sentiments have become an important motor in attracting voters in many western states.

Donald Trump openly criticises multilateral institutions. He stresses that for the US it would be most effective to negotiate with other states separately. The "make America great again" mantra is a populist promise to regain America's imperial power, without co-operation with other western partners in search of a global consensus. This slogan, like it or not, was positively accepted by a vast number of American voters. Brexit, similarly, is also based on the illusion that a return to empire is possible; while the neo-Guallist policies of Emmanuel Macron are plain references to the neo-imperial sentiments which were so deeply implanted in French politics after the Fifth Republic lost Algeria.

Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, which is the second largest NATO member state, is openly implementing a policy of symbolically bringing back Turkish imperial influence. The idea of Turkey's integration into the EU was replaced by the paleo-imperial idea of a return to former influence. In Hungary, 2020 is proclaimed to be the year of national unity in the sense of the unity of Hungarians living on all territories that were within the Hungarian borders before 1920, when the Treaty of Trianon was signed.

This essay is too short to cover the complex issue of Russia's neo-imperialism which Vladimir Putin has masterfully developed in the last several years. Thus, I only focused on the examples where the imperial idea plays an important role in western states which are members of NATO or the EU. In this way, there are many indicators that just like when the first *belle époque* ended because of the many bad

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decisions made by the West, the current one will also see its end come not from external powers, but because it is not able to maintain the narrative of values and universal human rights.

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After the end of *belle époque* the western world will be shattered and less relevant than before. It will be less susceptible to wars, but it will be vulnerable to external influences, especially those coming from large non-western powers (i.e., China and Russia). The illusions that former western metropoles hold of their return to previous glory are not going to be fulfilled, as was predicted by Laquer (demographic crisis) and Bauman (identity crisis).

Much of what we see today indicates that one thing is paramount. Our democracy is at risk as a result of large scale manipulation which takes place with the use of new technologies. The paradox lies in the fact that the best period in western history, that is, the years after 1991, which gave us the internet and artificial intelligence, also paved the way to the rule of a new oligarchy. Nobody knows what will happen next. It could even be that societies will opt for tyranny, just to free themselves from the oligarchs… NEE

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Paweł Kowal is a member of the Polish parliament (Sejm) and an adjunct professor at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He is also a post-doctoral fellow at the College of Europe's Natolin campus. He is a member of *New Eastern Europe*'s editorial board.

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A renewed strategic dialogue with Russia?

A debate

Putin has done nothing to deserve an extended hand from the West

DAVID J. KRAMER

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited Washington, DC last December for a meeting with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and a visit to the Oval Office with President Donald Trump. This was Lavrov's second such visit during the Trump administration; his first visit occurred in May 2017, when pictures emerged of him, Trump, and then-Russian Ambassador to the US, Sergei Kislyak, yucking it up in the White House the day after Trump fired the head of the FBI, James Comey. On this latest visit, Lavrov was seen smiling once again with Trump in a photo the American president tweeted out after the meeting. "Just had a very good meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and representatives of Russia. Discussed many items including Trade, Iran, North Korea, INF Treaty, Nuclear Arms Control, and Election Meddling. Look forward to continuing our dialogue in the near future!" Trump wrote.

Photo courtesy of David J. Kramer

The lack of any mention of Ukraine in Trump's tweet is striking, especially since Lavrov arrived in Washington the day after the meeting in Paris among Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President Emmanuel Macron. That meeting fell short of producing

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any major breakthroughs toward ending Russia's war against Ukraine, though it did produce an exchange of prisoners on each side. The United States was not represented at that meeting.

Lavrov's meeting in the Oval Office is his second in three years. Zelenskyy, whom Trump promised to host in the Oval Office after the Ukrainian leader won the election with 73 per cent of the vote in April, still has not set foot in the White House. This became an issue, along with Trump's withholding of military aid to Ukraine, at the centre of Trump's impeachment before the US House of Representatives. Zelenskyy and Trump did meet in New York in September on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly meeting, for what proved to be an awkward encounter. The former Ukrainian foreign minister, Pavlo Klimkin, met with Trump in the Oval Office the day after Trump's first meeting with Lavrov in 2017. There are no known plans for the current Ukrainian foreign minister, Vadym Prystaiko, to visit DC and meet with Trump or Pompeo on the heels of Lavrov's latest visit. And Pompeo cancelled a plan visit to Ukraine in early January to focus on the crisis in the Middle East, his second such postponement of a trip to Kyiv in less than three months.

Why, one might ask, is the Russian foreign minister granted such an audience with the American president? What has Russia done to deserve such royal treatment? The short answer is absolutely nothing. That did not stop Pompeo from making the following puzzling statement during a press conference following his meeting with Lavrov: "We should have a better relationship – the United States and Russia – than we have had in the last few years and we have been working on that." How can we have a better relationship when Russian forces still illegally occupy Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine? Russian forces also occupy 20 per cent of Georgian territory, a country it invaded in 2008. Russian security services attempted an assassination on British soil of a former Russian spy, Sergei Skripal, in 2018 and carried out the execution in Berlin last August of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, who fought with Chechen rebels and the Georgian military against Russian troops. Russia's readiness to carry out murders on western soil is matched by its brutal muscle-flexing in Syria. It props up Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro and supports the regimes in North Korea and Iran. It violates arms control agreements and engages in reckless military manoeuvres against Western territory, aircraft and vessels. The Kremlin's disinformation campaign and interference in western elections and efforts to sow discord in western societies have not slowed in the least. Finally, the human rights situation inside Russia has deteriorated significantly. If anything, Putin's brazen behaviour has only worsened. That is why, Secretary Pompeo, relations are not better.

Despite these glaring facts, Trump has been talking for years of how it would be "great" if Russia and the United States

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got along. As long as Putin is in power, at least, however, US-Russian relations will not get better unless the United States sacrifices its values, interests, and countries along Russia's borders. Trump's desire for better relations with Putin has been matched more recently by Emmanuel Macron, who hosted Putin for a visit to southern France in August right before the G7 meeting. Both Macron and Trump have called for the return of the G8, which would mean bringing Russia back into the fold. Macron has insisted that Russia is "not NATO's enemy" and described the current strained relations with Moscow as "a profound strategic mistake". In an interview with *The Economist* in late November, Macron said, "If we want to build peace in Europe, to rebuild European strategic autonomy, we need to reconsider our position with Russia."

Merkel had been the glue holding EU sanctions together, but as her term winds down, her effectiveness and power are also in decline. Germany is moving ahead toward the final stages of the Nord Stream II pipeline, a project that would do serious harm to Ukraine and other countries by making them unnecessary for transiting Russian gas to Europe. The US Congress imposed sanctions on companies involved in that pipeline at the end of last year. But there have been no new significant sanctions imposed on the Putin regime for its ongoing aggression against Ukraine; instead, there are growing calls to lift those sanctions already in place. "The time has come for the German government to pressure the EU for a partial lifting of the sanctions [on Russia]," long-time Christian Social Union politician, Peter Ramsauer, told Reuters. Last spring, Germany and France led the push to allow Russia back into the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) despite Putin's continued occupation of Ukrainian and Georgian territory, as well as his atrocious human rights record in Russia.

Instead of pressuring Putin ahead of the recent Normandy meeting, western leaders were leaning on Zelenskyy to resolve the crisis with Russia.

We see western advocates of "Let Russia be Russia" push for a return to business as usual with Putin, urging, for example, that NATO close the door on countries aspiring to join the Alliance, like Ukraine and Georgia, to remove a major irritant in Russia's relations with the West. Talk of closer Russian-Chinese ties, often exaggerated, is frequently cited as an additional reason to kiss and make up with Russia. As a result, instead of pressuring Putin ahead of the recent Normandy meeting, western leaders were leaning on Zelenskyy to resolve the crisis with Russia so that they can

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justify normalisation of relations. The political scandal in Washington has revealed how Trump – notwithstanding his providing military assistance to Ukraine in contrast to his predecessor, Barack Obama – does not have Zelenskyy's back and distrusts Ukraine. Ahead of the Normandy gathering, western leaders should have threatened more sanctions on Putin's regime if Russian forces did not withdraw from occupying Ukrainian territory. Instead, they gave Zelenskyy the impression that their patience with Ukraine is running short.

Putin senses that western leaders are eager to return to business as usual with Russia and all he needs to do is wait them out.

Making matters worse was the NATO meeting in London in early December where open disagreements among NATO allies were on display, starting with Macron's description of the alliance suffering from "brain death". Differences between Trump and Macron, along with the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, suggested an alliance too busy fighting among itself than focused on the threat coming from Moscow. In the declaration issued at the end of the meeting, there was a noteworthy mention that "Russia's aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security" and a reference of Russia's violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. But a paragraph later, the Allies stated, "We remain open for dialogue, and to a constructive relationship with Russia when Russia's actions make that possible." Aside from Macron, member states largely ignored Moscow's wooing of Istanbul, which is posing a serious challenge to the Alliance's cohesion. After the NATO meeting, Hungary's foreign minister pledged that his government would block Ukraine's membership in NATO until Kyiv restored the rights of the roughly 150,000 ethnic Hungarians over language issues. Putin must have been smiling.

The West has a much stronger hand to play vis-à-vis Russia but chooses not to play it; Putin, on the other hand, plays his weaker cards comparatively well, though one should not exaggerate Russia's gains. The problem is more of western losses – of confidence, of unity, of sense of purpose, of values and principles. Putin senses that western leaders are eager to return to business as usual with Russia and all he needs to do is wait them out. In the process, however, the West risks sacrificing Ukraine and other countries along Russia's borders. It looks the other way amid Russian war crimes and atrocities in Syria. It denounces Russian disinformation and interference campaigns but signals a total lack of resolve in dealing with the threat posed by Putin.

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In late November 2019, Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov received the Sakharov Prize in Strasbourg, France, awarded to him last year by the European Parliament but which he was only able to receive recently because he had been held illegally in a Russian prison for more than five years until his release in September. His warning at that ceremony is worth bearing in mind as western leaders prostrate themselves in front of Putin: "Every time, when some of you think about stretching out a hand of friendship to Putin over our heads, you should remember each of the 13,000 killed in Ukraine, the hundreds of our boys kept in prisons, who may be tortured as we speak, the Crimean Tatars, who may at this very moment be arrested."

Putin deserves no praise for releasing Sentsov and other Ukrainians in September nor those released in December – they never should have been taken hostage in the first place. Putin has done nothing – repeat nothing – to deserve a return to normal relations with the West. His actions and behaviour have only gotten worse and more aggressive and threatening. This argues for an even tougher policy from the West – but the chances of that happening any time soon, sadly, with the current roster of western leaders are close to zero. NEE

David J. Kramer is a former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor in the George W. Bush administration. He is a senior fellow in the Václav Havel Center for Human Rights and Diplomacy and director of European and Eurasian Studies at Florida International University's Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs.

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France-Russia, a love-hate history

CYRILLE BRET

Photo courtesy of Cyrille Bret

France has a passionate relationship with Russia: the French love Russia…but they also love to hate Russia. This has been the case at least since the Napoleonic Wars, the Berezina trauma, and the unexpected alliance of 1892 between the young French Republic and tsarist Russia. Today, those contradictory passions are very much alive: in French political debate, Russia has acquired an importance that goes far beyond foreign policy. Since 2014 Russia has become a topic of debate for French domestic policy. The annexation of Crimea, the role of Russian television channels abroad, sanctions, the nature of the Putin regime, etc. – all these issues divide the French political elite. The question "Should we let Russia be Russia?" has become a domestic political marker.

For many French political movements, improving bilateral relations with Russia is a diplomatic, military and political priority. According to them, French economic interests on the continent are at stake. In several sectors such as the pharmaceutical industry, luxury goods, energy, and banking, the sanctions are to be quickly dismantled. Sanctioning Russia, they argue, undermines French growth. This is the line of argument of some parliamentarians who regularly propose resolutions in the National Assembly and Senate.

The political inspiration of those movements is very heterogeneous. Marine Le Pen's far-right, to be sure, shares with contemporary Russia a cult of authority, a vertical notion of power, a distrust of Islam and a fascination with the Russian president. The authoritarian, nationalist and French traditionalists believe that Vladimir Putin is the international leader of their national branch. But the sovereignist left of Jean-Luc Mélenchon also finds today's Russia attractive. Is it not the only country in Europe to resist the United States and NATO? Does it not show the way to sovereigntists by criticising multilateralism since the 1990s? That deeply rooted French political tradition finds a source of inspiration in Russia. Even some classical conservatives plead for a rapprochement between France and Russia. They share with Russia the goal to protect Christi-

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anity in the Middle East. For them, Putin has the same goal in Syria as King Francis I and Napoleon III.

For all these political leaders, restoring bilateral relations with Russia is a way to challenge the "political correctness" they loathe in France. For all these very heterogeneous currents, France should let Russia be Russia. Moreover, France should be inspired by Russia…

Among the French elite, an opposite current enjoys great influence. Atlanticists and liberals are the main opponents of Putin's Russia. They have long been active in the ministry of foreign affairs, the establishment press and in think tanks. They see Putin's Russia as a direct and immediate threat to the security and stability of Europe, as we can see in Georgia, Ukraine, Crimea, the intervention in Syria, and Putin's close relations with Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Russia, in their view, is dangerous for the very identity of Europe. They criticise the centrality of the Orthodox Church in Russia, and the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. The religious soar in Russia undermines secularism and modernity. They see Russia as a land of persecution for feminists and human rights activists. Russian domestic politics, with its vertical power, is a synthesis between post-Soviet and tsarist authoritarianism. Europe must not allow Russia to conquer it, territorially and politically. Letting Russia be Russia, they claim, would be naïve and even suicidal. The goal of today's Russia is nothing less than the destruction of Europe – its values and its democracy. For Europe's sake, Russia should be prevented from being Russia.

These two positions are deeply rooted in French political tradition. The pro-Russian authoritarian far-right, the sovereignist leftists and the Christian conservatives use the term "Russian question" to reinforce their statesmanship. Russophobia is also very well established among the French elite: the moral high ground always belongs to those who criticise Russia absolutely.

Last August, President Emmanuel Macron seemed to renew pro-Russian trends in the French diplomatic line. And in October he bluntly branded NATO as "brain dead". Does he want to pose as the heir to de Gaulle's presidency? Is he planning to reshuffle the alliance network and restore the Franco-Russian Alliance of the 19th century?

For many French political movements, improving bilateral relations with Russia is a diplomatic, military and political priority.

A few days before the G7 summit, from which Russia has been excluded since 2014, Macron staged a relaxed and friendly moment with the Russian leader on the Riviera. I would contend

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his rapprochement with Putin's Russia is much more modest. On a few issues, France and Russia have the same goals. On nuclear proliferation, for instance, both states want to preserve the 2015 agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. Yet they explicitly diverge on the implementation of Intermediate Nuclear Forces. On international terrorism in the Middle East, they share the fear or the "returnees" (i.e. the ISIS fighters recruited in Europe). Yet even after the 2015 Paris attacks, they never managed to co-operate on the ground. A common French-Russian front against terrorism remains a slogan. Regarding Ukraine, France has promoted the Normandy format for the resolution of the conflict in Donbas. Yet it never ceased to promote the renewal of sanctions against Russia.

In other words, the French President does not seem to be interested in destiny, or even the future of a post-Putin Russia. To him, Russia is a power of the past, a legacy of the 20th century. Yet it cannot be the useful partner the Soviet Union was to de Gaulle's Great Vision for France. NEE

Cyrille Bret is an associate professor at the Higher Institute for Political Studies (Paris).

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To Macron or not to Macron?

LIANA FIX

Photo courtesy of Liana Fix / Körber Foundation

When Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the former foreign minister and now federal president of Germany, once tried to describe Germany's role in Europe; he called it the "*chief facilitating officer*". France's newfound role under Macron now seems to be that of Europe's "disrupter-in-chief". That these two roles do not necessarily match is no surprise. Especially for the Central and Eastern European states, Macron appears to be the proverbial fox in the henhouse. The list of what makes Macron's recent moves suspicious to these countries is long, and it mostly relates to Russia. Apart from his notorious "braindead" comment when it comes to NATO, Macron called for a rapprochement Russia – without any coordination with Germany and Central and Eastern Europe.

First, Macron demanded a reassessment of relations with Russia at the ambassadors' conference in August 2019: pushing Russia away would be a major strategic error, he claimed. This was followed by a French roadmap focusing on disarmament, security dialogue, and crisis management to be implemented by the newly appointed special envoy, Pierre Vimont. In the run-up to the G7 meeting, Macron met with Vladimir Putin and dispatched his minister for Europe and foreign affairs and the minister for the Armed Forces to Moscow to resume the 2+2 bilateral dialogue. He also suggested considering Russian moratorium proposal with regard to the deployment of short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles, which NATO deemed not credible.

Finally, yet importantly, the French veto on North Macedonia's and Albania's accession perspective was perceived as playing into Russia's hands by Central and Eastern European states. Macron's Russia policy shift also resulted in fears that France might pressure Ukraine into concessions at the Normandy-format meeting in Paris in December 2019 to remove obstacles and achieve a quick fix with Russia. This mistrust was also fuelled by Macron's rhetoric.

Although Macron claims to be "in no way naive", he partly shares the narrative advanced by Russian commentators: namely, that in the 1990s and 2000s, a "series of misunderstandings" took place, which created the impression of Europe as a "Trojan Horse for the West, whose

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final aim was to destroy Russia". A Russian analyst even argued that Macron's views on European security and world order coincided with those of the Russian president, and went on to declare that "Macron is 'Ours".

> The litmus test for Macron's new Russian policy will be to what extent he is willing to soften the existing red lines.

This, however, is a fairly simplistic understanding of Macron's position. What Macron is actually saying is that, in a changing international context, Europe cannot afford a conflictual relationship with Russia. This would prevent Europe from achieving strategic autonomy and leave it at the mercy of decisions taken by the US and Russia.

For Europe to remain a relevant player in a future world shaped by a bipolar US-China rivalry, as Macron argues, a "common front" is needed between the EU and Russia. In particular, Macron wants to offer Russia a strategic alternative to China, as Moscow would "inevitably" face the decision of whether it wants to remain a "minority ally of China". Macron's logic is similar to traditional Gaullist geopolitical thought: in a time of strong competition between the US and China, Europe needs to rely on itself, and this includes getting along with its powerful neighbour – Russia. This is particularly relevant since – according to Macron – Russia has regained a crucial role in many regions due to western "weakness" while a Russian-Chinese alliance would not be in Europe's interest.

This geopolitical logic, at first glance, seems compelling: if a rapprochement with Russia is required out of geopolitical necessity, namely, to have Russia as an ally against an increasingly powerful China, why not soften Europe's stance towards Russia? There are two important fallacies in this way of thinking. First, an unconditional European outreach will not prompt Moscow to choose between Europe and China, but it is likely to take advantage of both of them. It is a significant overestimation to assume that Europe might be able to drive a wedge between Russia and China by offering better relations or lifting sanctions. Traditionally, Russia has always preferred bilateral relations with member states, instead of a strong EU. Second, the changing international context has not led Russia to change. From domestic repressions to violations of international norms and interference, Russia's approach towards many areas remains a challenge on its own and cannot be qualified as the "lesser evil" when compared to China.

Does this mean that Macron's call for outreach and dialogue is wrong and misguided from the start? No, it is not.

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However, it crucially depends on framework conditions. In his ambassadors' speech, Macron described a "rapprochement accompanied by strong conditions". The litmus test for Macron's new Russian policy will be to what extent he is willing to soften the existing red lines – sanctions, the Minsk agreements, and Russia's return to the G8. Progress within these guardrails is highly desirable, but it might prove more difficult than Macron imagines, as the Normandy summit has indicated.

Macron is right though: Europe should start thinking more geopolitically. However, lowering European preconditions for strategic dialogue with Russia risks not a European-Russian win-win, but rather a double win for Russia. Europe can only assert itself by upholding the principles, rules and values it is built upon. Abandoning these principles for the sake of presumed geopolitical necessity means that it would be entering into uncharted territory. This scenario is particularly relevant for Europe's Eastern neighbourhood. If reaching out to Russia implies accepting its claim to a sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, this would set a dangerous precedent.

Finally, Macron should not repeat mistakes of the past. Germany's Meseberg initiative from 2010 is an important lesson: without prior coordination, Germany concluded a bilateral agreement with Russia on the establishment of the EU-Russia Political and Security Committee in return for Russian conflict resolution in Transnistria. The response from Brussels and member state capitals was, to say the least, lukewarm. Macron needs to weigh the balance between ambition and inclusiveness in Europe if he wants to improve security co-operation with Russia. To achieve his aim, however, he needs a united Europe – otherwise, he will be perceived as lightweight, and not only in Moscow. NEE

Liana Fix is programme director in the international affairs department of Körber Foundation in Berlin.

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How not to be a useful idiot in relations with Russia

AGNIESZKA LEGUCKA

Photo: PISM

Russia is a state of mind. This applies not only to Russian citizens, but it also manifests itself in its foreign policy. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014 many have understood that Russia is a revisionist power, one that is seeking to regain its position in the world. Russia's goal is to secure and control its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area by limiting the sovereignty of its neighbours. At the same time, its assertive foreign policy helps to safeguard the interests of the current power elite within the Kremlin, using very often anti-western propaganda, disinformation and meddling in political processes. But discussion about policy towards Russia depends on the strategic culture of each state. Poland's historical experience, as well as Russia's activity in the neighbourhood, has led the Poles to talk about Russian aggression and/or a different interpretation of common history. In fact, security and identity issues dominate Polish-Russian relations. Generally speaking, it is a challenge to talk about Russia and find the balance between security (including energy independence) and the box of useful idiots, spies, traitors or a Kremlin fifth column. To make matters worse, attitudes towards Russia in Poland have become an expression of support for one or another political option.

But we, Poles, do have to talk about Russia. First, it is important for us to really know our neighbour as much as possible and to see and understand the "other Russia" – the people in Russia who disagree with the regime. Second, if we do not talk about Russia, then others will decide on the policy towards it without us. Third, we have no plan or strategy in the situation where Russia regains its international position after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In this scenario, Russia is welcomed back into the group of countries deciding on global affairs without any concessions on its part. In this case, Poland would call for respect of international law, but may be alone in this call. That is why we should learn how to convince others who have different strategic culture towards Russia. Poles need to have persuasive instruments which go beyond

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complaining. Since foreign policy is an art of persuading the national interest outside of the country, the ability to defend it externally is even more important than the interest itself.

Attempts at a new deal between western countries and Russia have been visible for some time. Five years after the annexation of Crimea, the question is raised, again, not *if* but *how* to conduct a dialogue with Russia? One can hear voices in the European Union and the United States saying "We need to talk to Russia", "be pragmatic" because without "dialogue with Russia we are unable to solve many contemporary international problems".

In Poland, where there is a social consensus about the necessity of freezing relations with Russia, the question should be asked – what next? How to prevent a scenario of returning to business as usual with Russia? We are in a crucial moment in which it may be too difficult to maintain a coherent EU policy towards Russia. Although this consistency has always been obscure, since 2014 it has been based on the need to introduce sanctions as part of the EU's foreign policy, in which security has been a priority.

The most surprising fact for Poland is that a change in the West's mood did not come from any transformation in Russia's behaviour, or a reduction of a threat in Ukraine and elsewhere. Instead of offering co-operation with the EU, the Kremlin has employed a strategy of coerced negotiations. As a result of frozen contact with the EU, Russia increased the range and methods of influence in the world through its intervention in Syria, its disinformation and interference in the political processes of western states (including the 2016 presidential election in the US), but also increased activity in Africa and South America. Russia's goal has been to emphasise that the world should be divided into zones of influence by larger powers.

However, the real change in western attitudes towards Russia came from an even broader context. The unpredictable policy of Donald Trump causing tension in transatlantic relations, as well as the increased role of China, and a weakening of the European Union due to Brexit and internal crises were decisive. This was a favourable situation for the Russian authorities who understood that the West is undergoing internal erosion and that Russia could benefit from a US-EU-China rivalry, while acting through disinformation impacting many social processes in those countries.

Russia is trying to marginalise Poland's voice on the international arena and is not interested in any dialogue with Warsaw. For example it promotes a Soviet version of history, full of lies and misleading information. Recently, Vladimir Putin brought up the subject of Poland's responsibility for the outbreak of the Second World War. By using false arguments the Russian authorities want to negatively affect Polish-Israeli and Polish-German relations. The Kremlin argues also that Poles are

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consumed by an anti-Russian approach and that is why they are not worth being listened to. Pro-Kremlin media argue that the Poles would reject any proposals concerning Russia which do not lead to the overthrow of the current authorities. Sometimes those myths or lies are heard in political circles in Western Europe where Polish arguments are reduced to irrational phobias. Another myth concerns power games in which, according to Russian media, the Americans use Poland to increase their military and economic position in Europe, and Poland acts as an intermediary, or even a "puppet". This, in turn, facilitates Russia's talks with France and Germany, in which they do not trust Trump any more than Vladimir Putin.

The Kremlin argues that Poles are consumed by an anti-Russian approach and that is why they are not worth being listened to.

Yet Poles are not anti-Russian and there are many aspects that connect us. However Poles are suspicious of the Russian authorities and the imperial ambitions of the Kremlin, which they have experienced in the past. Today, Poland is closer to the concept of a double approach to Russia: deterrence and dialogue to reduce international tension. However, separating negotiations from deterrence for dialogue for dialogue's sake is seen in Poland as a long-term threat to European stability. From Poland's perspective, a split between transatlantic allies is extremely unfavourable as it limits the possibility of playing on several pianos in diplomacy. There is a belief that we can talk to Russia, but from a position of strength. We do not have this power alone and we need the support of the EU and NATO. However this is not just hard power, because social and cultural contacts are no less important in building a positive Polish image in Russia and the West (to defend our interests). That is why there is so much public support in Poland for European integration and NATO. Clearly, this multilateral power works on the imagination of the Russian power elite. At the same time, Poland is committed to close relations with the United States, because, as the leading NATO member, it can guarantee the maintenance of transatlantic co-operation in security matters.

Improving relations with Russia without preconditions is perceived in Poland as naïve, short-sighted and dangerous. It is naïve because the authorities have manipulated the Russian public with propaganda in its confrontation with the West. Thanks to this, they can justify the difficult economic situation and maintain support for its assertive foreign policy. The power elite in Russia fears, first and foremost, a colour revolution and the rebellion of those who can negate the existing political system. When

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voices in the West claim that we should forget about any democratic agenda in Russia, that means business even better than usual for the Kremlin. Vladimir Putin and his cronies, to be sure, are suffering the most from the sanctions imposed by the US and EU.

Restarting relations with Russia is short-sighted. The Kremlin is counting on deepening economic co-operation with the largest EU member states in order to change the EU's position on sanctions. This would mean reducing the principle of selective engagement in favour of principles selected by Russia, encouraging the Russian authorities to continue aggressive policies that are incompatible with international law. Finally, an unconditional re-start of co-operation with Russia is dangerous because it will strengthen the Russian authorities' conviction that the annexation of Crimea and support for separatism in Europe do not limit those actions in the long run. The fact that the West will not set up preconditions does not prevent Russia from setting them. At first, Russia will ask for a lifting of sanctions, and then will wait for a silent (and, with time, de facto) recognition of Crimea as Russian territory. It would limit the effectiveness of the EU's policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries who count on support but with difficult conditions of progress on internal reforms. Meanwhile, Russia will reward its partners in the EU who help break the deadlock (for example, it will repay Germany with cheap gas from Nord Stream 2). And once the German economy becomes more dependent on cheap Russian gas, Russia will gain a significant influence on the entire EU. The geographic distance will then be less important, and it could completely change the ways western states view Russia. NEE

Agnieszka Legucka is a professor at Vistula University in Warsaw and an analyst with the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM). In her work she focuses on the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

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A "Grand Bargain"

What would Russia want?

IGOR GRETSKIY

Photo courtesy of Igor Gretskiy

If you take a closer look at the discussion around the "grand bargain", it is fairly noticeable that it is being mainly conducted in the West. In Russia, this topic is almost irrelevant. The Kremlin's foreign policy is dictated by the task of preserving the political regime created by Vladimir Putin. A demonstrative confrontation with the West in the form of a "besieged fortress" brings significant advantages for domestic politics. For the political elite, a confrontation with the West in the international arena is a way of legitimising the further tenure at the helm of the country. Nonetheless, this tactic has a limited period of utility.

The fact is that the majority of Russians nostalgic for the Soviet era belong to one of the two largest demographic groups of the population – the older generation, born in the 1950s. Among them, the demand for Soviet-style stability, great power, anti-Americanism and the "special path" is particularly high. It is no coincidence that the face of Russia in the international arena have become professional propagandists and PR specialists: Alexey Pushkov, Pyotr Tolstoy, Maria Zakharova and others. They professionally reproduce the necessary rhetoric; and for the Kremlin, it does not matter whether the West believes the rhetoric. More important is whether the Russian public believes it.

Any compromise with the West that is not accompanied by a significant increase in wages and incomes will be perceived by the older generation as a "betrayal". This is probably the lesson Putin learned from the experience of Mikhail Gorbachev. Consequently, a "grand bargain" with the West is impossible, by definition. However, such a deal looks impossible for several other reasons, too. The main one is the level of confrontation between Moscow and the West, which is significantly lower than during the Cold War. Today, the Russian elite is much more connected with the West than the Soviet Communists were. Previously, members of the Politburo had more arguments for pressing the "red button". For example, a nuclear war with the West, on the pretext of continuing the

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global revolution, could be used by the Kremlin to avoid recognising the failures of the postulates of Marxism-Leninism. The impoverished Soviet state had much less to lose than the developed, wealthy countries of the West.

Today, the situation is radically different. Russia, in the same way as the USSR, exports energy resources, raw materials and weapons, but it has also begun to import significantly more goods due to a notable improvement on commodity markets. The main beneficiaries of increased consumption were a very narrow circle of the Russian elite, as evidenced by the data of the colossal property stratification in Russia. And, moreover, many of the elite's assets are stored in the West. Therefore, the militant rhetoric of the Kremlin is essentially a bluff. This was clearly visible when Montenegro announced its intention to join NATO and Russian generals hastened to announce the re-targeting of missiles towards it. An hour later this statement was disavowed. It is clear why. Montenegro is one of the most popular countries for real estate investment among Russian officials. The USSR could realistically aim and launch a missile at a European country. Unlike the Soviet secretary generals, however, the Russian kleptocracy has much more to lose in the event of a full-fledged armed conflict. Aiming rockets at your property is absurd. In addition, the children of officials study in Europe and keep their savings there. Therefore, I am sure that if Switzerland joins the EU, or Finland joins NATO, Russia will pass and the matters will not go any further than rhetoric.

Another reason for the impossibility of a "grand bargain" is that the West, today, is not as consolidated with respect to a Russian threat as it was during the Cold War. The Russian economy cannot compete with the American or European in terms of volume, and in the borrowing market, Russia is inferior to Belgium. But the capacity of the Russian market and the high solvency of the Kremlin are important factors for many European companies that have decided to continue co-operation with Russia, despite many cases of international law violation and the Kremlin's explicit interference in the internal politics of western countries.

For the Russian authorities, this is an inexhaustible resource for exerting pressure on western governments. And while the Russian economy is supported by favourable energy prices, any sort of "grand bargain" seems simply impossible. NEE

Translated by Margarita Novikova

Igor Gretskiy is an associate professor at the School of International Relations at St Petersburg State University.

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A clash of narratives

WOJCIECH MICHNIK

In the clash of narratives between Russia and NATO states, Moscow has clearly gained an upper hand. Russian success stems not only from the fact that the Kremlin has been able to send a much clearer and more coherent message than the Alliance, but also because NATO states do not have one narrative, or counter-narrative.

One of the central concerns when analysing international security and its history is how to explain certain events and their impact on international politics. For policy-makers and societies it is crucial to define "who we are" and "what kind of world order we want". The passing decade has been marked by a return to a crisis between the West and Russia (sometimes referred to as the New Cold War), with conflict over Russian aggression in Ukraine being the most striking example. Yet the indirect confrontation between NATO and Russia should be measured not only in political disputes, economic calculations and military build-up, but also in terms of the competing narratives that have shaped the understanding or misunderstanding of partners and adversaries alike.

One of the ways that the Kremlin gains political and diplomatic ground in international affairs is by putting a wedge between NATO allies, namely, between the United States and its European partners. This was quite evident in the recent intra-NATO rift over Turkey's decision to purchase S-400 missile systems from Russia and deploy military troops, hand in hand with Russian forces, in Syria last October. Simultaneously, even a glance at Europe reveals challenges to its security and stability: Ukraine, Libya, Syria, Algeria, Iran, Turkey – to name just a few states that lay in the so-called arc of instability, and which are influenced, to a certain extent, by the direct policies of the Russian Federation.

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Context is king, but the king is naked

It is a euphemism to claim we live in the world of storytelling. In pre-internet times, the victors mostly had a monopoly on telling "the truth", while those who came second or third were forced to tell their story mostly to themselves. This is no longer the case. With the rapid development of social media, the rise of populist movements, and rampant disinformation campaigns, states have increasingly focused on pushing their narratives to reach domestic and sympathetic global audiences. As a result, a contemporary struggle for power, security and influence among state and non-state actors alike has increasingly been supported with targeting audiences with tailored interpretations of events.

Macron's comments symbolise the growing trend within the transatlantic community that serves – though unintentionally – Russia's long-term interest in Europe.

There seems to be no better example of diverging narratives than ones employed during the latest rift within the Euro-Atlantic alliance. To be fair, though, some of the actions and official rhetoric from the western states made the lives of Russian propaganda makers a bit easier. The most famous example of such behaviour in 2019 came from the French president, Emmanuel Macron. He told *The Economist* that NATO is "brain dead" and "European countries can no longer rely on America to protect its allies". It happened to be almost irrelevant that the French leader also touched upon a number of key issues, including a clear-eyed and cold-blooded realpolitik analysis of European security and transatlantic relations. Or that his assessment that Europe needs to rethink its strategic role is accurate, while NATO should reassess its role in contemporary security architecture. The damage was done to the already strained transatlantic dialogue; and the Kremlin surely enjoyed it.

This is not to single out one particular European leader, as critics of the Alliance within NATO itself are plenty (from Donald Trump to Turkey's Recep Erdoğan). Yet Macron's comments symbolise the growing trend within the transatlantic community that serves – though unintentionally – Russia's long-term interest in the European realm. Even when Macron is partially right – when he points towards American slow disengagement from Europe in order to concentrate on the Asian continent – he fails to mention the deployment of US and NATO troops to the Eastern flank of the Alliance. In other words, the narrative that he advances tells only one side of the story, a side that, according to a common understanding of the French position within NATO, serves the purpose of developing European defence autonomy.

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In this context, the biggest issue with his interview was the part where he doubts whether Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (which states that an attack on one country is an attack on all) would work, turning his attention to the imperative of European defensive autonomy, and finishing with a statement calling for a need of reopening a strategic dialogue with Russia. It can be argued that saying those things did no good to either transatlantic relations or European fading attempts of finding a coherent response to a resurgent Russia.

The sympathisers

There are a few European politicians who have played into Russia's narratives much stronger than Macron. Hungary's prime minister, Victor Orbán, famous for his euroscepticism and departure from the liberal democratic path, has not shied away from tightening Budapest's relations with Moscow (even after Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea which was unequivocally seen by the West as a flagrant violation of basic international norms). Suffice to say that in the span of four years (2016–2019) Orbán and Vladimir Putin met five times, making Hungary one of Russia's closest partners within the NATO and the EU alike. In October 2019, the Hungarian leader explained this close relationship through the prism of old fashion geopolitics, remarking that "we live in a Berlin-Moscow-Istanbul triangle".

The diverse European political spectrum has produced a number of fringe parties that are openly pro-Russian and pro-Putin.

In Italy the tradition of pro-Russian sentiment among political circles is also strong with Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini being the most obvious cases. Even the pro-western and pro-US prime minister Matteo Renzi (2014–2016) attempted to pursue closer economic co-operation between Rome and Moscow. Even though his government backed initial sanctions against Moscow after the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, Renzi opposed their renewal "and searched for openings to bring Russia back into Europe's security discussions". It did not help transatlantic coherence when Renzi referred to Russia as an indispensable partner for Europe, and "praising Putin's 'wise approach' to controversial issues on the global stage, such as the Syrian crisis."

Meanwhile, the diverse European spectrum has produced a number of fringe political parties that are openly pro-Russian and pro-Putin; Marie Le Pen's National Rally being one of the examples, followed by UKIP, Podemos, Syriza and the Northern League. What seems worrisome from the European perspective, is a

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reoccurring pro-Kremlin stance of some mainstream European leaders, especially since this trend has occurred at a time when Russia's hostile actions include targeted disinformation campaigns, assassinations of western citizens, and anti-western propaganda. Yet in order to understand why such a trend might be dangerous for NATO's European members one would need to look at Russia's official narratives that have been used to justify its foreign policy.

From Russia with disinformation

For a casual observer of Russian politics, the narratives behind the Kremlin's foreign policy advanced for the last two decades (not coincidentally equal with Vladimir Putin's reign over Russia) appear to be straightforward and cohesive. First, they refer to the status of Russia as an "independent global power" and its identity as something that is "historically destined" to remain fully independent from the West or China. In 2005 Putin famously called the collapse of the Soviet Union a catastrophe, and reinforced his statement in 2018 saying that "he would reverse the collapse of the Soviet Union if he had a chance to alter modern Russian history". From this perception comes the Kremlin's (mis)understanding of its place in the world, with its core demand to be treated as a global power, equal to that of the United States or China. Moscow refuses to be dominated by other powers and hegemons.

Second, such a view helps to justify official Russian rhetoric of treating NATO as a hostile threat. For the Kremlin, NATO is nothing more than an "American puppet" in a grand chess game for "spheres of influences". This explains Russia's paranoid reaction to the instalment of elements of the US strategic missile defence system in Poland and Romania. As Putin claimed in a 2018 interview: "this poses a direct threat to our national security. Therefore, the advancement of NATO infrastructure towards our borders poses a threat, and our reaction to it will be extremely negative." In 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea, Putin not only justified these steps by protecting Russians living there but also said that most of Russia's actions were nothing more than reactions to the West's menacing and "dishonest" policies. "This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders," Putin said in 2014.

Another element of the Kremlin's narrative is that the current international relations landscape has changed favourably for Russia, as the current world order is no longer dominated by the United States. Therefore, in what Moscow sees as a post-West world (or the declining liberal order), Russia should regain its rightful position as a global superpower.

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When Macron stated that NATO is brain dead, Russian officials praised him, calling his words "golden" and "… an exact definition of the current state of NATO".

These narratives along with an increase in Russian NATO-phobic rhetoric have several explanations. According to Vasile Rotaru (a 2019 Parnership for Peace Fellow at NATO Defense College) they include what Moscow calls "the expansion" of NATO towards Russia's borders, "Moscow's perception of being a 'besieged fortress', the Kremlin's need for both a scapegoat for its foreign policy failures and an impetus to rally the population around the flag; a strategy to secure the annexation of Crimea and to consolidate Russia's foreign policy positions".

In the clash of narratives between Russia and NATO states, Moscow has clearly gained an upper hand. Russian success stems not only from the fact that, as an autocratic state and unitary actor in international relations, it has been able to send

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a much clearer and coherent message than the Alliance; but also because NATO states do not have a single narrative, or rather counter-narrative: they have diverging and often competing perceptions of Moscow's role in international relations. Those competing narratives within the transatlantic alliance do not come from the weakness of NATO, as some of the critics have argued, but from the sheer number of member states, diversity of interests and visions they bring. Nevertheless the problem of different competing narratives has been used by Moscow to drive a wedge between the allies.

And this brings us back to the Russian dimension of Macron's interview. For many leaders in Central and Eastern Europe the most controversial part was not necessarily about NATO's inability to act, but rather about the French president's call for Europe to rethink its relations with Russia. Nothing reinforces Poland's scepticism towards a European security framework more than the idea of appeasing Moscow, as articulated by Paris or (lately not that often) Berlin. Needless to say Russia is here to stay and the need to have communication with Moscow that can, at some point, turn into dialogue is a necessity. States that neighbour Russia would be first to admit that. Yet talks do not equal concessions – especially if a concession at hand would have to be a silent consent of the West and accept that Crimea is now a Russian territory.

Even though this might be a fact of life, Crimea, legally speaking, is still part of Ukraine. By accepting Russia's *fait accompli*, western powers would virtually reward the Kremlin's aggressive actions that would in turn send a terrible message – namely, that the territorial integrity of (European) states is up for re-negotiation. Therefore, few should be surprised that Central and Eastern European and the Baltic states are wary of the situation where European powers would make a deal with Russia to go back to business as usual. Particularly, if this potential rapprochement with Russia would coincide with diminishing US security presence in Europe. For NATO and European security that would be a strategic blunder.

Competing intra-NATO narratives… and Moscow's gains

As the heated discussions within NATO indicate, there were a number of narratives that shaped the transatlantic debate and the question of European security. Here, let us concentrate on four of the most predominant ones*.

* I cite the first three narratives from Justyna Gotkowska's recent article, published by the Centre for Eastern Studies: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-12-04/nato-transition.

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First, the Western European narrative, introduced and promoted by France, and also quite popular in Germany, concentrates on the assumption that, since the United States is mostly preoccupied with competition with China and engaged in the Asia-Pacific region, the Americans are withdrawing their military and political commitments from Europe. As a result, the transatlantic Alliance might not be the best tool for European defence and security.

Second, the current American narrative emphasises global overstretch of the United States, intensely signalling that Washington cannot, and will not, solve all the security problems that European NATO member states are facing, while, at the same time, maintaining its strategic posture *vis-à-vis* China. Therefore, from this vantage point, European allies should become more self-dependent in providing their own security, which requires an increase in military spending within NATO Europe (the famous two per cent of GDP threshold).

Third is a narrative of the eastern flank states that emphasises an ongoing threat from Russia and the necessity of countering it through NATO; or even better, via bilateral security arrangements with the United States. In this view, NATO is indeed an important part of European security architecture, but mostly if it is able to "keep the Americans in". As long as the United States stands strong within the Alliance, NATO proves its value and utility as a defence pact. By adopting a similar logic, one of the worst-case scenarios from the perspective of the eastern flank states, would be a situation where an adversary decides to test NATO's collective defence by pursuing an unconventional (i.e. cyber; paramilitary) attack on one of its members. For Central Europe and the Baltic states, future interpretations of what constitutes an attack under Article 5 are much more than a red herring.

And finally, the southern flank states adopted a narrative that argues that most of today's threats to European security come from the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel. In contrast to the previous narrative, this one advocates a focus on addressing immigration, the refugee crisis, and the rise of violent non-state actors (including ISIS). From this perspective, the United States, with its inconsistent polices in those regions, is not entirely seen as stability-bringing and NATO is viewed as a welcomed force, provided it can address the issues of the southern flank (and after intervention in Libya, that proposition is highly contested).

Not good news

Each of these narratives, in themselves, constitutes a by-product of a clash in national interests and different geopolitical realities. Each of them has caused some stir within the Alliance. But most importantly, the Kremlin has used them

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to discredit NATO and diminish the security of European member states. When Macron stated that NATO is brain dead (referring to the lack of strategic communication between the US and other members), Russian officials praised him, calling his words "golden" and "… an exact definition of the current state of NATO."

Furthermore, a potential American withdrawal from Europe (and potentially from NATO) would be a gift for Putin and Russia's position in international relations. The Kremlin has repeatedly singled out NATO as a threat to Russian security. NATO, without the Americans in Europe, would virtually mean no NATO at all. This is why Russian officials praise President Trump every time he criticises NATO or hints that a withdrawal might be contemplated.

Putin interpreted the Arab Uprisings and NATO's intervention in Libya as an impulse to re-engage with the Middle East and North Africa.

With regards to the eastern flank narrative, the Russian official response has been consistent for the past two decades, implying that countries like Poland and Romania dwell on Russophobia and warmongering, and that the Baltic states are oppressing the Russian minorities and thus obstructing one of Putin's sacred rhetorical elements: "defending Russian people abroad". Putin's latest rhetorical attack on Poland and its alleged role in starting the Second World War is not only an attempt to discredit Poland but more broadly an example of Kremlin's narrative to target one of the NATO members. Given the lack of a strong unified response from the European allies, so far it seems like Moscow has succeeded.

In the southern flank of NATO, a Russian counter-narrative has also been heard. Putin interpreted the Arab Uprisings, and particularly NATO's intervention in Libya, as an impulse to re-engage with the Middle East and North Africa. According to the Kremlin, Russia is much better suited to solve problems in the region since it is "impartial" and does not seek to change non-democratic regimes there, unlike the western powers. The obvious benefits for Moscow of such an approach towards NATO's southern flank were visible in Russia's relations with Turkey, Syria and Libya. Moreover, Russia has exploited the lack of a coherent western policy in the region to become the leading political and diplomatic force there; a power that would participate in all major negotiations, thus boosting its credibility as an "independent global power".

As each country within NATO is sovereign, they can pursue their foreign policy independently, which includes the ability to sustain bilateral relations with other states in a manner they see fit. Yet it seems undeniably risky for the Alliance and European security to send mixed signals about the main strategic direction *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin's policies.

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While NATO has been doing a sufficient job of deterring Russia and reassuring allies after 2014, some of the member states have decided to pursue warmer relations with Russia. In this way, some of Moscow's perceptions of NATO and the West have been validated: but even though we might live in a post-West and post-liberal world order, diffusion of transatlantic unity is by no means good news for Europe and its security. While avoiding escalation and establishing a working relationship with Russia should be one of NATO and the EU's top priorities, even more central should be the goal of keeping both the transatlantic and European projects alive – as they, not the Kremlin, have been, and will remain, guarantors of prosperity and security for the whole Euro-Atlantic realm. NEE

Wojciech Michnik is a 2019 Eisenhower Research Fellow at the NATO Defense College in Rome, and an assistant professor of international relations and security studies at Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków. The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College or NATO.

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The battle of the USSR in Georgia rages on

BEKA CHEDIA

Nearly 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgians who have a sense of pride after they defeated the Soviet Union suddenly find themselves drifting back towards the cultural, informational and economic space of Russia. The stakes are high. There is no doubt that if the process of democratisation deteriorates in Georgia, it will certainly bring the country closer to Russia.

Georgia has always been considered one of the most pro-Western countries of the post-Soviet space. During the late Soviet period, Georgia, together with the three Baltic states, fought for an exit from the USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia and the Baltics were the only former republics that refused membership of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The first national non-communist Georgian government set the goal of turning the country into a European state. For its western and European aspirations, the Kremlin punished Georgia – provoking a civil war and an overthrow of power. Moscow is also responsible for two ethno-political conflicts in the country.

As a result, Georgia changed its political vector and reluctantly joined the CIS. The regime change transformed Georgia's foreign policy: instead of the non-communist leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, came into power. Despite this, Georgia never stopped its fight against the Soviet legacy. At times, the policy of the ruling elite and the will of the public coincided; other times opinions differed. This is how the present mo-

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ment can be described: a fear that the Georgian authorities may harm the national interest with their indecisive steps.

Two Russias

The core of Shevardnadze's foreign policy was reflected with this expression (which he stated while being the leader of Soviet Georgia in the 1970–80s): "The sun of Georgia rises from the North" (i.e. Russia). During his first term as leader of independent Georgia, Shevardnadze was fully subordinate to Moscow. Ministers of the law enforcement agencies were appointed with the recommendation of the Kremlin, while the Georgian defence minister, Vardiko Nadibaidze, was the godfather of the then Russian minister of defence, Pavel Grachev. In the second term of his rule, Shevardnadze started to become disappointed with Moscow. He was unable to enlist the support of the Kremlin regarding the conflict resolution in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (the so-called South Ossetia region). Yet Shevardnadze never crossed any red lines in relations with Moscow.

By the end of his rule, Shevardnadze began the process of rapprochement with NATO and officially declared Georgia's desire to join the Alliance.

Tbilisi did not directly blame Russia for instigating conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Instead, Shevardnadze created the concept of "Two Russias", which argued for the existence of two types of Russia – one which was "good" (with its intelligentsia, culture, etc.) and the other, the "bad Russia", with its hawks and military generals. Despite the flexible policy, Shevardnadze began to develop large-scale geopolitical projects for Georgia which laid the foundation for a new geopolitical function for the country. In particular, Georgia was included in projects for the transportation of Caspian Sea energy resources. Thanks to this project, Georgia gradually became a more attractive place for the West. By the end of his rule, Shevardnadze began the process of rapprochement with NATO and officially declared Georgia's desire to join the Alliance.

After the 2003 Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili came to power and abandoned Shevardnadze's delicate approach towards Russia, becoming much more confrontational. Starting from 2003, Saakashvili began the process of full-scale de-Sovetisation and de-Russification. The country left not only the political orbit but the Russian cultural space. The Russian language under Shevardnadze naturally began to lose its status in Georgia, but during Saakashvili's time, the collapse of the Russian language and its cultural tradition became visible. Following the

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end of the Soviet Union, almost no ethnic Russians lived in Georgia and the Russian language lost its position. Russian remains the lingua franca only for ethnic minorities living in Georgia (e.g. Armenians and Azeris).

The authorities, led by Saakashvili, contributed to the spread of English through various free programmes. In fact, one could say this was a linguistic revolution: a huge step in the de-Russification process and the integration of Georgia to the West. The sharp turn towards the West was not only the choice of the political elite; it was the wish of the whole nation. Georgians believe they are Europeans and have chosen to abandon the Soviet past and its legacy. The then ruling elite attempted to accelerate the "arrival" of the West in Georgia and the withdrawal of Russia. It was already clear that the Soviet Union in Georgia was losing.

The 2008 Georgian-Russian war became a turning point. The Russian army invaded Georgia and occupied two of its regions, recognising their independence. Georgia cut diplomatic relations with Russia, withdrew from the CIS and officially labelled Russia as "an occupier". Only the Georgian Orthodox Church keeps contact with Moscow. The Georgian authorities were able to maximally neutralise the church's involvement, which the Kremlin was trying to use as a political tool. Russia lost all the levers (political, cultural and economic) of pressure on Georgia. Georgia focussed on economic independence from Russia, diversifying the country's energy supply by abandoning Russian gas supplies and electricity.

Georgia was also able to overcome the economic embargo placed on it by Moscow. Instead of the traditional Russian market, Georgian wine (which was one of the most exported goods to Russia) found new markets in Europe, Asia and America. A new iron curtain was erected in the Caucasus, and Georgia managed to stay on the side of the West. This was a huge moral victory, despite the fact that 20 per cent of its territory was lost. Georgia continued its de-Sovietisatoin by banning Soviet symbols and opening a museum of Soviet occupation, to demonstrate that Georgia was never voluntarily part of the Soviet Union. The Stalin Museum, in his native city of Gori, was renamed the Museum of Stalinism (a museum of totalitarianism). It seemed that the Soviet period had finally come to an end in Georgia and the battle against the USSR had finally been won.

Path divergence

In 2012, a new political force called the Georgian Dream, led by the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, came to power. At first, the government began to maintain the western path established by its predecessors. Ivanishvili put in place a governing team that had many pro-Western leaders and the country officially remained

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committed to joining NATO and the European Union. It was the Georgian Dream government that signed the Association Agreement with the EU and achieved the visa-free regime. Yet the party gradually diminished the influence of pro-Western forces, and now informally works with pro-Russian political groups such as the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, an anti-western group that opposes the country's integration into NATO and who many believe to be Moscow-funded.

Georgia's foreign policy has sharply dwindled. Ivanishvili put forward a new concept for the ruling party – a policy of non-irritation of Russia. He claimed that Georgia's foreign policy should be more like the Armenian model, and created a new position in the government: a special representative of the prime minister for relations with Russia. In the absence of diplomatic relations, this format has become a kind of behind-the-scenes instrument for negotiations with Russia. The topics the special representative discusses with the Russian deputy foreign minister, during regular meetings, are classified.

This suggests that the Georgian authorities are trying to find a new path towards the hearts of the Russian authorities, which is what Moscow has been trying so hard to achieve. The Kremlin suggests that Georgia accepts the occupation of 20 per cent of its territory in order to restart relations from scratch. It still remains unclear why, in the absence of diplomatic relations, after a 12 year break, the Georgian foreign minister met his Russian counterpart in an informal format in New York in September 2019. The real goal and content of this meeting has not been publically released. Yet the meeting has raised a lot of questions towards the Georgian authorities.

More Russia in Georgia?

Since 2012, a Russian presence has quietly crept into Georgia. Russian is heard more and more often in Georgia's cities. Russian tourists have flocked to the country. Before 2012 around 410,000 Russian tourists came to Georgia, in 2018 this number increased by 3.5 times – up to 1.4 million. According to official Georgian statistics, in the first quarter of 2019, 222,700 Russians visited Georgia, which is 21.4 percent of the total number of tourists. In comparison with the 2018 figure, there was a 24.3 percent increase. Since that time, thousands of Russians have also migrated to Georgia permanently. Russians have begun to purchase real estate in vast numbers. According to the National Agency of Public Registry, in the period of 2012–2016, 18,000 real estate properties were purchased by Russian nationals – 53 per cent of all real estate sales by non-Georgian nationals. Many small Russian businesses and NGOs have opened up in Georgia. Restaurants have begun to play

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Russian music and Russian signs can be found on shop windows, restaurants and hotels, not to mention souvenirs with Soviet symbols. Russian-language media have also returned to Georgia, targeting Russian speakers and promoting Russian propaganda and anti-western narratives.

Moreover, Georgia has resumed economic trade with the Russian Federation, including wine and agricultural goods. Between 2006 and 2013, there was an embargo on the sale of Georgian wine to Russia. This embargo has since been lifted, and according to the National Wine Agency, out of the 68 million bottles of wine that were exported in 2018, 62 per cent went to Russia. The Georgian authorities also signed a new agreement with Gazprom which would increase the supply of natural gas from Russia. In 2015 Georgia signed a memorandum on the creation of a unified electric grid between Georgia, Russia, Iran and Armenia, which fundamentally contradicts the declared western trajectory.

The presence of Gavrilov in the Georgian parliament sparked protests, led by a generation of young Georgians that does not want to return to the Soviet Union.

Participation in joint energy projects with Russia could lead to Georgia's participation in the formation of a so-called liberal empire under the leadership of Russia. The doctrine of a liberal empire in the former Soviet space was first invoked by Anatoly Chubais, a Russian politician. Chubais put forward this idea back in 2003 with the aim of building political influence in the region, which included the creation of a single energy space. Ironically, several years ago, the Georgian authorities (under the Georgian Dream) and NATO announced a new formula in the relationship between NATO and Georgia: "More NATO in Georgia and more Georgia in NATO". In fact, the opposite may well be happening, as the Georgians might discover there is actually more Russia in Georgia.

A cold shower

On June 20th 2019 an inter-parliamentary assembly of Orthodox states was held in the Georgian parliament. During this meeting, Sergey Gavrilov, a member of the Russian parliament, sat in the chair of the Georgian Parliament's speaker and gave a speech in Russian. This was a cold shower for many Georgians which has been steeped in economic problems, unemployment and poverty in recent years. The topic of occupation has not been a priority over the last number of years. However, the presence of Gavrilov in the Georgian parliament sparked a series of protests, led by a generation of young Georgians that does not want to return to the Soviet

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Union. These demonstrations are also a warning to Russian officials. The warning has not come from the Georgian government – the authorities are frightened by the threat of Russia, such as economic sanctions.

Nearly 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgians who have a sense of pride after they defeated the Soviet Union suddenly find themselves drifting back towards the cultural, informational and economic space of Russia. Michael Carpenter, a former adviser to US Vice President Joe Biden, after his visit to Georgia in June 2019, tweeted: "I'm not sure the government fully understands the implications of its open door policy with Russia. With so many 'tourists' (ehem FSB) and so much land being bought up by Russian businessmen, they may wake up one day and find not 20% but 100% occupied."

According to a 2019 survey by the National Democratic Institute in Georgia, the collapse of the USSR was considered by half of the respondents as a positive phenomenon, while 39 per cent see it as a negative one, and 11 per cent has no opinion. The survey also found that 77 per cent supported Georgia's accession to the EU, and 74 per cent to NATO. Yet it seems that Georgia's battle against the Soviet Union has resumed, and the main question now is: Will the Georgian ruling elite be the ally of the nation or the ally of the enemy?

There is no doubt that if the process of democratisation is weakened, it will bring Georgia closer to Russia. If authoritarian tendencies in the country intensify, Georgia will have few allies left in the West, and it will, again, be part of the club of authoritarian regimes under the leadership of the Kremlin. Strengthening democratic institutions in Georgia is therefore the only way to defeat the Soviet Union, once and for all. NEE

Beka Chedia is a Tbilisi-based researcher and an associate professor of political science.

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Rough road ahead for Belarus

MAXIM RUST

Politically, 2019 was a very important year for Belarus. It was dominated by two trends: the authorities pursuing relations with the West and pressure by the Kremlin to deepen the integration of both states.

Growing tensions between Minsk and Moscow, as well as continued attempts to normalise relations with the West, are the main reasons we can call 2019 a groundbreaking year when it comes to the level of meetings that Belarusian officials held with western politicians. On surface they may seem like routine activities of a sovereign state, but in the case of Belarus each meeting sends a signal to the Kremlin.

Breakthrough visits

The year began with Mikhail Myasnikovich's February visit to Warsaw. Myasnikovich was then the chairman of the Council of the Republic of Belarus, the upper house of parliament. It was an important event not only in bilateral Polish-Belarusian relations, but also a form of demonstration of Minsk's intention to increase contacts with the West. The high level of participants of the meetings determined the weight of this trip as did the fact that for many years Poland had not hosted any Belarusian high-level official. Myasnikovich was the head of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's first presidential administration and is considered, if not the second most important person in Belarus, then at least an influential player with direct access to the president. While some specific results of this visit may be hard to indicate, the fact that it took place suggests that the Belarusian authorities have

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become interested in attracting partners from outside the "Russian world". They need them in the political game with Moscow.

Last August the US National Security Advisor, John Bolton, visited Minsk. The announcement of his planned trip generated huge media attention in Belarus with some official outlets calling it a "breakthrough" or "historical" visit. These labels were justified, of course, considering that Bolton was the highest ranking representative of an American administration to visit Minsk over the past 25 years. The last visit of an American head of state took place in 1994. At that time, President Bill Clinton did not meet Lukashenka, but Stanislau Shushkevich, who was acting president and chairman of the Supreme Council. After 1995 came a period of cooling down and sanctions caused by the political changes within Belarus. The US reaction was to limit visits to the level of deputy advisors or Congressional delegations.

> The normalisation of relations with the United States is an important goal for Belarusian officials.

Thus, the normalisation of relations with the US is an important goal for Belarusian officials, and one that now looks achievable. Eventually, it is envisioned that this should lead to the removal of US sanctions, which were already loosened in 2015, but still play a large obstacle in the development of economic relations between the two states. With sanctions removed, Belarus could improve its economy which desperately needs cheap loans and foreign investment.

Another important step in improving relations with the US would be to build regular diplomatic ties. Since 2008 the US has had no ambassador stationed in Minsk. Following Bolton's visit, the state department announced that a US ambassador will return to Belarus and full-scale diplomatic mission will be re-established. This could, of course, become a foundation for the reactivation of relations between Belarus and the US. Such a declaration of support for Belarus's independence and sovereignty by a global player, which was issued by Bolton, are of course very desirable in Minsk, which increasingly feels pressure coming from Moscow.

Here comes NATO

By the end of last year other less obvious contacts between Belarus and NATO also intensified. In October Antonio Missiroli, NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, arrived in Minsk. Later in December a delegation of Belarusian politicians, experts and journalists paid a visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels. In the aftermath of these two events, Oleg Belokonev, a

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Belarusian general who is the chief of general staff of the armed forces of Belarus, announced that his country is ready to conduct joint military exercises with NATO. Apparently talks about the potential format of such co-operation are under way. Clearly within the Alliance some members will be against the decision to deepen co-operation with Belarus, treating it, quite justifiably, as Russia's "mole" in western military structures. At the same time, the Kremlin will not be thrilled that Minsk is strengthening military ties with Russia's greatest rival.

The last important event in last year's Belarus foreign policy was Lukashenka's visit to Vienna. This took place in mid-November and was labelled by Belarusian media as a historic event. Indeed, it has been a decade since Lukashenka set foot in the European Union. However before his trip to Austria he refused to visit Brussels and Riga which was interpreted as a decision not to irritate Moscow. The Vienna visit could have been an attempt to change his image and a demonstration of independence in foreign policy. However Austria has always been a good partner for Belarus. Thus, this visit was more symbolic than anything else. It also did not generate any spectacular change in relations between Minsk and Vienna; or Minsk and Brussels for that matter. What is significant, however, is that it took place right before the parliamentary elections.

A sterile parliament

In mid-November Belarus held parliamentary elections. The new elected parliament does not have, among its members, a single representative of the opposition. There were no mass protests nor demonstrations that would accompany the elections or their results. Regarding the latter, most analysts had no illusions about their fairness and transparency. The biggest question was whether the authorities would allow any independent candidates to enter parliament, as happened during the previous term. These elections were also a test for the Belarusian state system and whether the authorities will use the administrative apparatus and repressions against their political opponents.

Like before, the pro-government "candidates" played the roles they had been assigned. Representatives of the Belarusian opposition and democratic movements split even before the campaign began. While some of them were of the opinion that the changes that have taken place since 2014 offered them an opportunity to promote some of their ideas by participating in the campaign, others opted for boycotting what they called pseudo-elections. Out of more than 700 potential candidates to the 110-person parliament, the Central Electoral Commission registered 560. One third of them were candidates representing opposition parties and movements,

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but a majority were those who were less known. Two figures who were members of the opposition during the previous term, Alena Anisim and Hanna Kanapatskaya, were not allowed to run this time.

The voting lasted for six days. In addition to the actual voting date, November 17th, early voting took place between November 12th and 16th. It is something that has been raising a lot of questions from independent observers for many years now. Officially, the turnout was over 77 per cent with almost 36 per cent being recorded in the early voting period. Independent and international observers argued that the elections had significant breaches of international standards. There were forgeries in the counting of votes, pressure from authorities, and manipulation with turnout numbers. After the election count, the Central Election Commission announced that the elections were run in accordance with Belarusian law and international standards, and that none of the opposition candidates received a single mandate. Lukashenka later said that "he himself would like it if five to ten oppositionists would get into parliament, but it did not happen because they are too weak". Western institutions clearly did not recognise the president's sense of humour but nobody brought up an idea of new sanctions.

Despite the recent relative political thaw, the opposition parties have not managed to create a real alternative to the ruling elite.

One of the noticeable changes that came with these elections was the rise in the number of party candidates. The number of MPs who have no party affiliation dropped compared to the previous elections from 94 to 89. But this is only a cosmetic change, as the parliament is still deprived of political parties – the only "party" MPs are the ones who represent pro-government positions.

The OSCE's mission, even though they noted that the elections took place in a peaceful atmosphere, made it clear that the elections were not transparent and did not allow for fair competition between the candidates. However regardless of its composition and representation of different forces the truth is that, despite the recent relative political thaw, the opposition parties have not managed to create a real alternative to the ruling elite. Among the main problems that prevent this from happening are internal divisions and an unwillingness to compromise. While it may seem that the debate in which the opposition engages in is deep, stormy and dynamic, in reality it does not go beyond the borders of online bubbles and social media. They still have not been able to come to terms with the fact that the only possibility for their survival and wider recognition is to work out a coherent, common message and at least pretend to be a unified voice.

Nonetheless, the Belarusian parliament is sterile. This sterility means that it has no members who are either openly pro-western or pro-Russian. And this is exactly

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the kind of a political institution that the current political elite, with Lukashenka as its head, needs.

Incorporation?

Last December also saw key summits between the heads of state of Belarus and Russia. The goal of these meetings was to direct and formalise Belarus's integration with Russia within the framework of the Union State treaty which was signed in 1999, but has not been implemented. The Union State treaty foresees the eventual creation of a one-state federation of Belarus and Russia. In the weeks prior to the meetings, independent media began publishing alarmist articles suggesting that Russia will eventually devour Belarus. This narrative quickly spread across western media. Despite the noise that accompanied the two meetings between the leaders (first in Sochi and later in St Petersburg), not much happened.

> The integration of Belarus and Russia within the Union State project has gained impetus over the last year.

Yet the integration of Belarus and Russia within the framework of the Union State project, which has been dead for the last 20 years, has gained impetus over the last year. Towards the end of 2018 the Russian prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, decisively forced the Belarusian authorities to set up working groups to tackle all aspects of the integration process. At that time Medvedev announced that Russia's support of the Belarusian economy would depend on the integration process. Officials in Minsk were even talking about Russia's willingness to incorporate Belarus altogether. The Kremlin, of course, denied these accusations, but tensions between the two states deepened, leading to disputes over Belarusian gas prices. For the last year Belarus has been dealing with the so-called tax manoeuvre that was introduced by Russia. This entails a gradual elimination of customs on Russian petrol which before were not affecting Belarus, thus allowing the country to buy Russian oil at cheaper-than-market prices. According to the calculation of experts, an introduction of this would lead to a billion dollar loss to the Belarusian economy.

As the number of disputes increased, Moscow could sense the weak negotiating position of the Belarusian authorities, and systematically increased the pressure. This can explain the rise in pro-western gestures among the Belarusian authorities. Even before Bolton's visit to Minsk, there were rumours about Belarus's interest in purchasing petroleum from the US. Reports indicated that the Belarusian national oil company hired American lobbyist, David Gencarelli, to obtain support towards this process. Even though the issue of petroleum exports from the

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US is far in the future, and its purchases with the tax manoeuvre in place makes no economic sense, it nevertheless sent another signal to the Kremlin.

There is no doubt that signing a new Belarusian-Russian agreement on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Union State would have been a symbolic success for Moscow. The fact that no new integration agreement was signed is not only evidence of the failure of the integration summit in Sochi, but failure of this project as a whole. At the moment, both sides are sticking to the formal stipulations of this agreement, explaining the delays with legal reasons. Overall, both governments still have to develop and agree on 31 integration road maps, but in some areas the working out of a consensus seems impossible. This is true in regards to the unification of customs codes, which in practice would mean that Belarus would be affected by Russian sanctions that were placed on western goods.

The "integration bogeyman" has been a part of Belarusian-Russian relations for many years. By the end of last year it was more intense than ever. Yet the events that took place also illustrated that Lukashenka's position of maintaining sovereignty has paid off. At the same time, it should be noticed that the integration summit was accompanied by numerous demonstrations in Minsk against further integration with Russia. Organised by the opposition and independent NGOs, they were not dissolved in a way that was traditional for Belarusian security forces. The arrests and court trials aimed against protest participants and leaders began only in the beginning of this year, already after the "peak hour" in the Russian-Belarusian negotiations. Ironically, some state-owned media even presented them as signs of the Belarusian nation's support for the president's policy.

2020 and beyond

The results of the pro-West policy became visible already in the early days of 2020. For example, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit was planned for January. Had it taken place, it would have indeed been a historical event. It was moved because of the earlier unexpected escalation in the US-Iran conflict. Instead a telephone conversation took place between the US secretary of state and the Belarusian minister of foreign affairs. During this talk, Uladzimir Makei indirectly supported the US more than his state's traditional ally – Iran. In addition, in early January Belarus and the EU signed a visa facilitation agreement which simplifies the visa procedure and lowers the price of a Schengen visa for Belarusian citizens, something that has been over a dozen of years in the making.

Moreover, this year we will witness the most important political show in Belarus, namely, the presidential election. Yet some questions remain. What will be

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the format of this election and will the authorities allow opposition candidates to run? Will they limit the race to Lukashenka's traditional sparring partners? Looking at the results from last year's parliamentary elections, I would point to three main factors which may determine the political course in the months to come.

First, the most important trend will be the presence of unfavourable external factors (pressure from Russia and a decrease in the EU's interest in Belarus), as well as the more complicated internal situation (lower living standards and lower social trust towards authorities). Lukashenka and his closest circle will have to make real efforts to ensure that his multi-wing policies continue to be effective.

Second, the critical assessment of western institutions will not influence the impasse in relations between Minsk and the West. Most likely, there will be standard "expressions of deep concern" on the part of international institutions and calls for the introduction of democratic reforms. Lukashenka is fully aware that no matter what the election results are, they will not influence the dynamics of Belarus's relations with the West. The geopolitical change that has been taking place in Belarus since 2014 will continue to bear fruit. The power elite knew that even "bringing in" a few opposition candidates to parliament would not bring new gains to Minsk. Thus, the approach that assumes that "Lukashenka in Minsk is better than Russian tanks on the Polish border" will continue to work and the status quo will continue.

The third and most important factor is that last year's parliamentary campaign was a test for the forthcoming presidential elections. The president and his advisers are aware of the sensitivity of the situation in which Belarus finds itself. On the one hand, the economy is worsening and social discontent is on the rise, even if it does not yet translate into support for the opposition. On the other hand, the spectre of further integration with Russia will not stop hanging over the government's head. That is why the authorities will stay united, maintaining the image of Lukashenka as the sole guarantor of Belarus's independence and sovereignty.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Maxim Rust is a political analyst and researcher of political elites in post-Soviet area. He has a PhD in political science from the University of Warsaw. He is also a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe*.

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A real game changer in the region

ADAM BALCER

The economic diversification and growing relations with actors other than Russia presents both great opportunities and challenges to the Eastern Partnership states. This includes deepening economic ties with the European Union, but also with China and Turkey. Meanwhile, the outlook for Russia regaining its influence in the region, or at least halting this trend, looks bleak.

In the last few years, several countries participating in the European Union's Eastern Partnership programme have been working to deepen their economic relationship with the EU, as well as with Turkey and, to a lesser extent, China. These changes in economics will have long term geopolitical consequences. Overall, they come at the expense of Russia's interest, which remains influential but will be unable to halt the changes with its own economic tools. This is why the Kremlin will try to promote its interests by any means necessary, including force.

The rapprochement with the EU is within the framework of the Association Agreement which includes creating the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, as well as stronger economic ties with Azerbaijan (as an important producer and exporter of oil and gas). These economic processes are less spectacular than the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, the war in Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, or the Velvet Revolution in Armenia. At the same time, they will play a very crucial rule in how events over the next several years will unfold in the Black Sea region and Eastern Europe. This growing diversity in the economic sphere should be seen as unprecedented, following some 200 years of Russian domination in the region.

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European shift

Today's Russia is economically too weak to slow this process with its own initiatives. An example can be seen with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), of which two Eastern Partnership countries, Belarus and Armenia, are also members. The Kremlin pursues neo-imperial ambitions and has given itself an anti-western identity. It treats the Eastern Partnership region as its own sphere of influence where the increasing economic proximity between the region and the West has become unacceptable. As a result, preparations should be made for a determined Russia which will attempt to halt this process by any means, including the use of armed force. The deepening of economic relations between the EU and the Eastern Partnership, to a large degree, has taken place since 2014. The signing and implementation of the Association Agreement with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine played a key role in this. They were further advanced as a result of Russian aggression in Ukraine and the economic crisis rooted in Russia's own structural problems and made worse by EU and US sanctions. The greatest change can be seen in Ukraine, the largest economy among the Eastern Partnership states (45 per cent of GDP measured by purchasing power parity). It was motivated by the hope of gaining independence from Russian influence. Ukrainian trade with the EU is now nearing 45 per cent and is four and a half times larger than with Russia. If one takes into account the pace at which trade has been increasing, it will soon reach over 50 per cent. In 2015 the EU managed to obtain a "majority stake" (55 per cent) in one other Eastern Partnership country, Moldova. In 2013 this had not exceeded 45 per cent.

Only Belarus has a weaker trade relationship with the EU than Russia; nearly half of Belarusian trade is with Russia. In Armenia, the EU and Russia have a similar position. Both make up around 25 per cent each. In Azerbaijan it is the EU that is that country's main trading partner (over 40 per cent of trade, almost five times the Russian figure). In Georgia the numbers are more even (25 per cent of trade is with the EU, twice that of Russia). It is important to keep in mind that, during the early 21st century, Azerbaijan will surpass Belarus and become the second largest economy in the Eastern Partnership after Ukraine. The EU is also the largest foreign investor in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and it remains important to Armenia. In Azerbaijan and Georgia, the United States is another key investor. Russia has a secondary position as an investor in all the countries of the Eastern Partnership with the exception of Belarus and Armenia.

Official development aid plays a significant role in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova – amounting to some two-to-three per cent of their respective GDPs. The EU is the largest contributor while the Russian share in development aid remains

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relatively low. What is more, the economies of the Eastern Partnership countries rely heavily on money transfers from their numerous diaspora. This figure is around 12 per cent of GDP for Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia; and as much as 15 per cent for Moldova. Russia's remains the main direction for economic migrants for smaller Eastern Partnership countries (with the exception of Moldova). However, the Russian aggression towards Ukraine in 2014 changed the direction of Ukrainian economic migration. In recent years they have been flowing into the EU (mostly Poland). Today, more Ukrainians work in the EU than in Russia.

The belt and road through Eurasia

Another important actor in the economic reality of the Eastern Partnership region is China. It is enough to take a look at Ukraine to see its impact. Since 2012 the Chinese share of Ukraine's trade has doubled, standing close to 12 per cent. In fact, China has become Ukraine's most important trading partner, surpassing Russia and Germany. Chinese trade with Armenia is less in overall volume (10 per cent), while Georgia and Moldova trail not far behind (around eight per cent). This expansion should be viewed in the wider context of extending China's economic influence in the region of the former Soviet Union, including Russia. Beijing sees this region as the Eurasian part of its Belt and Road Initiative which aims to create trade links to Europe via land and sea routes, many of which cross through the Eastern Partnership region. Thanks to this initiative, China has the ambitions to become the main geopolitical player in Eurasia.

The Chinese share of Russian trade has also skyrocketed in the 21st century. At the beginning of the century it barely registered two per cent; today, it is close to 17 per cent. In comparison, the EU share in Russian trade has dropped to 40 per cent over that period. Moreover, close to 20 per cent of Russian-EU trade consists of trade between Russia and the Netherlands. The Netherlands plays an important role in the global energy market, where Russian raw materials are mostly sold outside of the EU.

It is likely that in the coming years we will witness a deepening imbalance between the potential and asymmetrical economic relations between Russia and China. According to forecasts made by the International Monetary Fund, China's economy will grow around six per cent between 2020 and 2024, three times faster than Russia. These forecasts confirm that the GDP growth gap between the two countries grows decade by decade. Early in the 21st century China's GDP was more than twice the size of Russia's. By the 2030s, it is estimated to be around 7.5 times larger. By 2030 China will become a wealthier country than Russia, measured in

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purchasing power parity. Paradoxically, China's role in the economic reality of the Eastern Partnership countries will grow on par with its asymmetrical economic relationship with Russia. The pace of development of China's transit infrastructure in Eurasia will have an impact on how fast it can deepen its influence over the Eastern Partnership states.

The engine of growth

Closer economic relations between Turkey and the Eastern Partnership have also developed in recent years. Turkey is second only to Russia when it comes to its economic size for the neighbouring Eastern Partnership region. Its GDP (PPP) is just behind that of Italy. Turkey's economic stature is strong especially in the South Caucasus and the northern shores of the Black Sea. Turkey has become the largest trading partner of Georgia (roughly 15 per cent) and Azerbaijan (10 per cent). On the other side of the Black Sea, Turkey is one of the most important partners of Moldova (seven per cent) and to certain degree of Ukraine (four per cent).

Turkey has increased its foreign direct investments in Georgia; between 2014 and 2019, it invested nearly 840 million US dollars, which amounts to 10 per cent of all foreign investments in the country. Turkey's investments in Georgia between 1991 and 2013 did not exceed one billion dollars in comparison. In the last few years Turkish companies have begun investing on a larger scale in Ukraine as well. In Azerbaijan they have been one of the largest foreign investors for decades. At the same time, Azeri investments in Turkey have boosted between 2015 and 2018. During this time the Azeris have invested some three billion US dollars, more than any other country.

One of the largest Turkish specialities on the international market is construction. Prior to 2019, Turkish companies have completed construction projects worth 12.5 billion US dollars in Azerbaijan, six billion in Ukraine and 4.5 billion in Georgia. Turkish companies have come to dominate the local construction markets in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Finally, Turkey is becoming an increasingly popular destination for tourism, shopping and work among citizens of the Eastern Partnership countries. This is reciprocated by Turkish visits there, especially on the Black Sea coast.

The number of Ukrainians visiting Turkey and vice versa has grown spectacularly. In 2014 more than 650,000 Ukrainians visited Turkey, while over 1.5 million chose to do so in the first 11 months of 2019. Ukraine has become a popular destination for Turkish travellers with three times more visits in 2018 than in 2014. As a result, Ukraine has become one of the most popular destinations of Turks going

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abroad. The economic relations between Turkey and Eastern Partnership countries could be much stronger if not for serious problems in the Turkish economy. It slowed down in 2018 and faces a recession towards the end of the following year.

The empire strikes back?

The economic diversification and growing relations with actors other than Russia presents both great opportunities and challenges to the Eastern Partnership states. The future of the Turkish economy, for example, is in jeopardy. It is dealing with internal structural problems which could in turn lead to a very serious crisis. This would have a strong ripple effect on both Georgia and Azerbaijan, but on Moldova and Ukraine as well. Furthermore, the increase in economic co-operation between the Eastern Partnership countries and the West is likely to be met by an aggressive response from Russia.

The outlook for Russia regaining its influence, or at least halting the diversification tendency with economic tools, looks bleak. According to the IMF, the Russian economy will grow at a snail's pace (just above 1.5 per cent). This is why the Kremlin is reluctant to spend its large currency reserves abroad. These have grown from 360 billion US dollars in mid-2015 to 550 billion at the end of 2019 (30 per cent of GDP, fourth largest in the world). The Kremlin, for example, could certainly use these funds to aid Eastern Partnership states if they are in trouble by making loans with the condition of giving up co-operation with the West. However these countries could also look for aid through international financial institutions like the EU, US, China, Japan or the Persian Gulf.

Certainly, the Kremlin will be more determined in the coming years to forge closer ties with Armenia through the Eurasian Economic Union. This will be even more evident with Belarus. The Kremlin will use a carrot and stick approach to coerce Minsk into deepening political and economic integration within the Union State, with the long term goal of creating a federation. In the case of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, Russia will attempt to halt or slow the complete implementation of the Association Agreements with the EU. It may try different carrots (forms of incentives in access to the Russian market and enticing loans) or sticks (sanctions, embargos, tariffs and closing of the job market).

Russia may go even further. It could attempt to implement a Moldovan-like scenario in Georgia and Ukraine where a power grab is made by political forces balancing between Russia and the EU, but closer to the former. It may also try to force Moldova to join the Eurasian Economic Union. And certainly, as the last resort, the Kremlin will not hesitate to heat up the already existing frozen conflicts.

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Buffer zone

The intense economic co-operation in recent years between some of the Eastern Partnership countries and the EU is looking increasingly like the Western Balkan relationship with the EU: remaining outside the bloc but economically integrated with it. The Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans are recognised by the EU as European states which gives them the opportunity to apply for candidate status. One main difference between the two regions is Russia's military presence in the Eastern Partnership, with frozen conflicts and occupied territories. This is not the case in the Western Balkans. This is also the reason why the EU has given potential candidate status to Western Balkan states but not Eastern Partnership countries, even if some of them deserve it more than certain Balkan states.

Turkey and China's growing economic influence in Eastern Europe could be a chance for Russia.

The further economic integration between the Eastern Partnership countries and the EU could face serious hurdles without some of the countries taking the next step institutionally by beginning the European accession process. This situation reflects how the economic integration of third party countries with the EU depends largely on the acceptance of the EU model of governance. Russia, being fully aware of the ambivalent attitude of the EU towards the Eastern Partnership countries, will try to come to terms with France and Germany with regards to the future of the region. This would be an attempt to find a "compromise" that would recognise it as a permanent buffer zone. Moscow would have a veto right on the region's membership in international organisations and initiatives. This is the reason why the Kremlin was encouraged by the idea of a reset in relation with Russia that was proposed by France's President Emmanuel Macron.

Turkey and China's growing economic influence in the Eastern Partnership countries could be a chance for Russia and a challenge for the EU. Moscow has, after all, grown closer to both Ankara and Beijing in recent years while these actors pose a growing problem to the West. In turn the EU faces a clash with three authoritarian powers in its Eastern neighbourhood that will promote a different model for economic and political development. NEE

Translated by Daniel Gleichgewicht

Adam Balcer is head of the foreign policy programme at WiseEuropa, an independent Polish think tank. He also works as a national researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and is a lecturer at the Centre of East European Studies (SEW) at the University of Warsaw.

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What's next for Ukraine's oligarchs?

ANTON NAYCHUK

Ukraine's oligarchs have established themselves as an independent component of the socio-political and economic system, whose lack of interests has become impossible in current times. The challenge for Volodymyr Zelesnkyy is how to confront the influence of the oligarchs. Current developments suggest three scenarios between the oligarchs, the new political elite, and civil society.

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened up opportunities for Ukraine to implement economic reform, democratise state institutions and shape the country around liberal values. The experience of post-war western democracies appeared as successful cases for Ukraine since the collapse of the USSR. However as often happens, the adaptation of best practices from other countries has undergone some transformation under the influence of specific factors inherent in the post-Soviet space. As a result, we became witness to a largely negative trend – namely, the formation of an independent class in Ukraine known as the oligarchs.

Coincidentally, privatisation, a reduction of state regulation and the liberalisation of the economy became the drivers of this development. At the initial stages of the transition, the political establishment failed to create effective legal control over the economic processes. It is believed that the starting point of this was Leonid Kuchma's presidency; he intended to develop common rules of the game and saw economic support in the oligarchs acting in accordance to these rules.

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Growing power

Kuchma was able to establish effective communication with the oligarchs and managed to co-operate with them relatively effectively. After his term in power, however, the situation began to get out of control. The most influential economic groups came to understand that their resources allowed them to play a more important role in the state-building process: instead of adapting to the political conditions, they could shape the country's policies on their own. Gradually, the term "oligarch" appeared in the Ukrainian narrative and, in accordance to Ukrainian political tradition, it meant a representative of big business and spreading its influence through integration into politics.

The new economic class concentrated its efforts on deepening control over political life in the country. The oligarchs began to fund political parties and politicians in the sphere of their influence. After receiving financial support, they were requested to represent big business interests in the corridors of the policy-making world. A side effect of this was the growing problem of corruption, which hampered the reform process and stimulated the development of a shadow economy. The oligarchs were particularly interested in this state of affairs since the unattractive business climate, lack of competition and corruption of the political system allowed them to monopolise important sectors of the economy. The entry of capital into politics has become a daily occurrence. A lot of politicians actively worked in the interests of the privileged groups, drafting legislation in favour of the oligarchs.

Although the media is not very profitable in Ukraine, business groups and oligarchs continue to fund media projects.

In terms of artificially-created favourable conditions, the oligarchs managed to gain a foothold in strategically important sectors of the Ukrainian economy – metallurgy, energy and transport. These sectors are of particular importance as they allow the oligarchs to use their resources as an element of pressure on political authorities. By ousting smaller players from the market, restricting access to foreign investors and influencing political decision-making, the oligarchs have expanded their control of the information space. Media resources have become an important attribute of big business. Access to television, the internet and print media allows the oligarchs to shape public opinion to provide a platform for popularising certain politicians, while criticising opponents.

Last but not least, it was due to the oligarchs that the media became a source of the politicisation of public consciousness and the manipulation of public opinion. Although the media is not very profitable in Ukraine, business groups and oligarchs continue to fund media projects – the main value of which is to obtain political cap-

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ital. Gradually, the information space became a platform for the economic elite to compete, broadcast their messages and consolidate the electorate around the political establishment affiliated with the oligarchs. Moreover, in the struggle for their own ratings, politicians are proactive in trying to reach out to the TV channels, especially during election campaigns, which allows the owners to dictate terms.

Confronting the oligarchs

Accumulating numerous resources, the oligarchs have established themselves as independent of the socio-political and economic system, whose neglect of interest has become impossible in current times. This is a problem facing President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his party, Servant of the People, who came to power in the wake of unprecedented popular support. Despite the formation of a majority in parliament and the gaining control of the executive branch, the dynamics of the renewed Ukrainian authorities is not high enough. Even with a convincing election victory and a 73 per cent credibility loan, Zelenskyy has to deal with numerous circumstances that hold back the reform process.

> The likelihood of a scenario that radically diminishes the oligarchs will increase if western partners are actively involved.

Confronting the influence of financial and industrial groups compels the new Ukrainian government to form a clear model of behaviour and to develop mechanisms for overcoming this problem. Taking into account the peculiarities of the Ukrainian socio-political system and its international experience, several scenarios are likely to be considered. There is a high probability that the government, civil society and oligarchic groups will interact in this triangle which will determine the success or failure of Ukraine's domestic and economic policy in the near future.

The most radical, and difficult to implement scenario, is one which drastically reduces the influence of the oligarchs. However this requires several components to be in place, including an independent functioning of the judicial branch, the establishment of independent and effective law enforcement agencies, support from external partners and political will.

This option will be based on the reluctance of the new Ukrainian authorities to seek compromises with the economic elite, to strengthen the state's importance as a key player in determining the political course and to offset the oligarchs' influence. A large-scale campaign to oust the oligarchs requires not only large public support but also an effective operation of law enforcement agencies. The Ukrainian experience has shown that even creating effective mechanisms for combating

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corruption will not produce practical results without defining a clear model for their application. An important role will be played by civil society, which must use all available channels of communication to articulate its own needs for change. In terms of the experts, the public needs to be constantly involved in civic oversight over the implementation of reforms. The first step for Zelenskyy is to indicate his attentive attitude to public opinion and a desire to maintain a high electoral rating.

The likelihood of a scenario that radically diminishes the oligarchs will increase if western partners are actively involved in the process and if Ukrainian authorities can gain their support. In this case, EU and US assistance will not be limited to facilitating the implementation and monitoring of economic reforms. Given the radical nature of the scenario, there will be a need to apply more point mechanisms, including the freezing of foreign oligarchs' assets. Some parallels can be drawn with the events that unfolded in Moldova over the summer of 2019, when oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc was forced to leave the country after pressure from political opponents and foreign players. Of course the implementation of such a scenario in Ukraine will require a lot more effort and it may have unforeseen consequences. However, further difficulties do not exclude this scenario, when business and industrial organisations which are under the influence of the state may be forced to limit their ambition.

An agreement with the oligarchs

Another scenario would see Zelenskyy developing new rules in the game for the oligarchs. Theoretically, a scenario like this would be aimed at overhauling the current spheres of influence, where the economic elite would be guaranteed the preservation of their assets in exchange for limiting their expansion into politics and increasing investment in the country's economy. Today, developments in this area appear to be no less difficult, although it seems like a possible compromise. But a scenario like this is problematic for several reasons, including differences in domestic policy visions held by business groups and civil society.

First, the Ukrainian leadership will have to justify a potential alliance to the public and strike a fragile balance between further liberalisation of the domestic market and taking into account the oligarchs' interest in limited business competition. The potential dissatisfaction of western partners with such solution should not be ruled out either. European and American diplomacy have repeatedly hinted at the need to distance themselves from the odious oligarch, Ihor Kolomoiskyy. The compromise between him and the authorities could provoke more negative reaction from the international community.

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Second, the state acting as an arbitrator and agreeing with the oligarchs on a limited distribution of influence could be substantially corrected if political configurations in the country change. In other words, even if Zelenskyy manages to build an effective dialogue that does not violate the "red line" of national interest and take into account the demands of big business; this could still end abruptly in the future when the authorities change. Hence, there is a high risk of failure with this conditional agreement.

Preservation of oligarchic domination?

The most destructive scenario for Ukraine's future has sufficient prerequisites for its own implementation. This is one which sees failure in attempts to effectively reform the legal system, essentially keeping the oligarchs in control of the political processes. In the short term, this would involve failure of the anti-corruption policy of the new Ukrainian leadership, the loosening of balance within the Servant of the People party, and the rise of ad-hoc alliances between critically-minded oligarchs and political opposition. In the long term, however, this would allow the oligarchs to retain a system where the political course is not formed on the basis of public expectations and the sole initiative of the governing bodies, but on the interpersonal competition of business groups.

Taking into account all possible scenarios, the further positioning of Ukraine directly depends on counteracting the expansion of big capital into the political process. The current leadership cannot postpone tackling this problem, because the oligarchs will increasingly expand their position as an alternative to the government. NEE

Anton Naychuk is the director of the Civil Diplomacy Fund, an NGO based in Kyiv.

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God, luck and Viktor Orbán

EDIT ZGUT

Over the last ten years, Hungary has become a textbook example of systemic corruption and clientelism in the heart of the European Union. Yet despite the fact that EU institutions have developed a wide range of tools, they could barely curb Viktor Orbán's regime with regards to its feudal system of corruption.

In order to understand the nature of Viktor Orbán's regime in Hungary, it is worth reading the classic Hungarian novel *Relatives* by Zsigmond Móricz. Móricz tells the story about a fictional town that is a hotbed of systemic corruption and a clientelist network of provincial nobility between the wars in Hungary. After 30 years since the democratic transition, its thesis about feudal dependency applies to contemporary Hungary more than ever: "In a certain way, everybody depends on the government."

In the last decade, we have been witnessing how formal structures went hand-in-hand with informal structures in Orbán's hybrid regime, where the state allocates its resources to individuals and groups closely related to its leader. While power is concentrated mainly in the hands of Prime Minister Orbán, which has been characterised by János Kornai as "central-vertical coordination based on a hierarchical command system". The hybrid regime could not even operate without informal institutions and practices. As a result, Hungary has become a textbook case of systemic corruption and clientelism in the heart of the European Union. It

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has tumbled down the rankings in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index to 64th in 2019 (in 2010 it was ranked 50th), which means that, within the EU, only Bulgaria and Greece were performing worse.

Instrumental tools

Although various Hungarian governments have developed their own network of wealthy businessmen linked to political parties since the democratic transition in 1989, Orbán's second cabinet has changed this dynamic in three key aspects. First, the ruling Fidesz party has achieved a monopolistic position among political parties in determining the economy's trajectory in terms of distribution of resources. Second, they have weakened the rule of law and undermined institutional checks and balances that have made the state vulnerable to systemic corruption. After Fidesz came to power for the second term in 2010, Orbán declared a new system – named a "system of national co-operation" – where the government systematically subordinated state agencies such as the state prosecution, the central bank, the media authority, and the state audit office to the executive power. The main formal institutions initially designed to control the government's endeavours, have become a tool in the hand of the ruling elite. Although the Constitutional Court had been the strongest check on the executive before 2010, given that its competences were curbed and its personal composition was altered, it also adjusted its operation to the government-dominated political system. Furthermore, as the prosecutor general is currently under the government's influence and the occupied prosecutor's office is in a position to block any investigations into cases related to the governing elite.

> The main institutions initially designed to control the government have become a tool in the hand of the ruling elite.

Thanks to these institutional conditions, politically-organised and centralised corruption has become a key feature of the Orbán regime. This is a unique model within the EU: as Transparency International in Hungary called it, a top-down system of reverse, or political state capture. In contrast to other regional systemic patterns, where strong interest groups gain hold of weak public institutional systems, a very strong administration is wilfully co-operating with business circles to establish a complex, impenetrable, centralised and legalised corruption ecosystem.

Last but not least, the third aspect is a new string of pro-government oligarchs are contributing to the construction and the long-term survival of the Hungarian illiberal regime. The governing party's main goal has been to create, at any price, a

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new national middle class. In fact, this was expressed directly in a 2015 newspaper interview with András Lánczi, who was then the head of the Századvég Foundation, the most important pro-government think tank. Lánczi claimed: "What [the critics of the Orbán regime] call corruption in practical terms is the most important policy goal of Fidesz. What do I mean? The government puts forth such goals as the creation of a domestic entrepreneurial class, or the building of the pillars of a strong Hungary in agriculture and industry."

"Smarter" than Zuckerberg

While Hungary became the most centralised country in the EU, both politically and economically, this new crony clientelist system is fixed around the prime minister. After parting ways with Fidesz's former business strongman and party cashier Lajos Simicska in 2015, Orbán purposefully created a new circle of oligarchs, dependent on him personally. One of the key figures of this ecosystem is Lőrinc Mészáros, a gas fitter and close childhood friend of Orbán's. As the former mayor of Felcsút (the village where the prime minister grew up), he not only became a billionaire in 2013, but also accumulated wealth at an unprecedented rate in global terms. In just a few years, he became the county's wealthiest person. By the beginning of 2019, Mészáros topped Forbes's list of the 50 richest Hungarians with total assets amounting to 381.3 billion Hungarian forints (over one billion euros), overtaking long-time leader Sándor Csányi, the chairman and CEO of OTP Bank Group.

Mészáros, who explicitly claimed that he owes his fortune to "God, luck and Viktor Orbán", became the biggest player in the construction market thanks to opportunities provided by Orbán's government. His companies have successfully targeted megaprojects such as the Paks II nuclear plant financed by a 10 billion euro Russian credit line, among others. While he insists that he can build his wealth faster than Mark Zuckerberg because he is "smarter" than the founder of Facebook, Mészáros lost in a case before the Budapest–Capital Regional Court of Appeals against the liberal-centrist opposition party, Együtt, which claimed that he is a proxy of the Hungarian prime minister.

Another systemic feature, according András Sajó a leading constitutional scholar, is that the Hungarian public procurement system's tailor-made criteria make it inevitable that the pre-selected bidder often wins tender. The share of tenders with a single bidder remains very high in Hungary – between 25–33 per cent during 2006–2015. In comparison during the same period, the share of tenders without competition did not exceed 12 per cent in older EU member states. Mészáros's main companies (Mészáros and Mészáros Kft. and R-Kord Kft.) together with László

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Szíjj's Duna Aszfalt have won an unprecedented number of public contracts – an equivalent of 2.1 trillion forints (6.3 bllion euros) in the last couple of years. Most importantly, these tenders come from four key state entities, mostly dealing with road and railway infrastructural development and flood prevention. On top of that, the Belgrade-Budapest railway is an additional bonus of 600 billion forints (1.8 billion euros) for RM International, one of the companies close to Mészáros. Moreover, it is important to note the growing role of László Szíjj in the ecosystem. He is a businessman close to the prime minister and another beneficiary of the conflict between Orbán and Simicska. Szíjj has managed to take over Közgép, which was one of Simicska's flagship construction companies.

Keeping the elite in check

In competitive authoritarian regimes, a clientelistic network of media ownership plays a significant role, where control over the national broadcasting regulatory agency by government appointees enables the acquisition of private media and licenses, and facilitates bias in broadcasting. Hungary became a classic example of media capture where Orbán first began with the public media and then, in cooperation with loyal government cronies, turned most independent media outlets into propaganda machines. These cronies, as noted by András Sajó, use the revenue generated in their government-supported businesses for the acquisition and operation of media outlets. These media oligarchs, including the late Andy Vajna, who was the owner of TV2, received 40 billion forints (around 130 million euro) in advertising money from the state in 2017.

The non-exhaustive list of corruption mechanisms could also include the so-called corporate tax (TAO) contributions that have become the benchmark for the new form of feudalism in Hungary. This system was established for the support of team sport organisations in 2011 and involves public funds transferred to these organisations without any transparency. According to available data highlighted by Transparency International Hungary, it is clear that sport organisations' absorption rate is strongly related to their political embeddedness. To add a cynical twist, despite the Fidesz government's widely known anti-migrant stance, more than 20,000 unidentified immigrants obtained Hungarian residency permits by paying into a government-run residence bond programme. Most of the companies selling these bonds are related to off-shore organisations, and earned 60 billion forints (over 180 million euro) from public funds since 2015.

The informal clientelist ecosystem has various practical advantages. One of them – as political scientist Kevin Koehler noted with regards to Egypt (but it is

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In the last decade, we have been witnessing how formal structures went hand-in-hand with informal structures in Viktor Orbán's hybrid regime, where the state allocates its resources to individuals and groups closely related to its leader.

applicable to Hungary as well) – is that informality not only constitutes a necessary consequence of the personalist structures of decision-making, but is also instrumental in terms of structuring intra-elite competition. It allows the one on top to pit individual members of the political elite against one another, thus securing his or her position as the sole arbiter of the elite. Meanwhile, the ironic part is that EU funds are serving the role of system-legitimising and system supporting for the regime. EU funding account for 4–5 per cent of Hungary' GDP and is often the primary target of corruption. When it comes to Mészáros and Szíjj's revenue, two-thirds was financed by EU-funded public procurement projects.

The Budapest-based CRC centre has pointed out that EU subsidies have a threefold perverse effect in Hungary: the funds help to reduce the intensity of compe-

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tition; increase the level of corruption and the weight of price distortion; and they contributed to weak competition and high corruption. The CRC conducted extensive research on public tenders awarded to companies related to Orbán's close acquaintances and family members, namely Lőrincz Mészáros, István Garancsi, István Tiborcz and Lajos Simicska. Their analysis highlighted that the intensity of competition was significantly lower in tenders won by crony firms than those won by other companies.

Mafia state

The case of 33-year old István Tiborcz, who is on the list of the 100 richest Hungarians, is indicative of the Orbán system as a whole. According to the European Anti-Fraud Office, Tiborcz, who is the son-in-law of Orbán, has been involved in the fraudulent use of 13 billion Hungarian forints (41 million euros) which came from EU funds. Although the investigation suggested that the EU Commission should withdraw the support of 43.7 million euros, concerning the tenders awarded to Tiborcz's company, Elios Innovatív Zrt, the Orbán government decided not to send the invoices connected with Elios to Brussels. In other words, no EU funds were ultimately used to pay Elios. As a result, Hungarian police have already closed down two investigations regarding Elios, while Hungarian taxpayers are footing the bill. Furthermore, the Hungarian government has recently accepted a huge fine of more than 500 billion forints (around 15.9 billion euros) received from the EU for poorly managed funds.

> The case of István Tiborcz, Orbán's son-in-law, is indicative of the system as a whole.

While the Elios scandal involving Orbán's son-in-law is only the tip of the iceberg, Bálint Magyar, a Hungarian sociologist and former minister of education, has brilliantly captured the broader phenomena by employing the theoretical framework of a post-communist mafia state. Regardless of the facts, the Hungarian government tries to create a parallel reality by blatantly claiming that there is no systemic corruption in the country simply because economic growth is the fastest in the region.

Despite the fact that EU institutions have developed a wide range of tools to which legal violations and democratic standards can be addressed, they barely restrict Orbán's regime. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that the Hungarian government rejected the offer to join to the European Prosecutors Office in order to restrict supervision. One of the most relevant doctrinal innovations that came up was the proposal to tie EU funds to respect for the rule of law. Last May the

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European Commission proposed to tie payments to certain requirements: if the independence of the judiciary or the risk of fraud involving EU funds would arise, financial sanctions would be implemented. While it seems likely to go through, there is a possibility that requirements will be weakened around the negotiations of the next EU budget, even if the conditionality proposal is not technically a part of the negotiations.

Nevertheless, Orbán is right to fear that the EU may finally be ready to cut off EU funding to governments that systematically violate EU norms. All EU institutions should also enforce current existing regulations in a systemic manner, such as Article 142 of the Common Provisions Regulation which allows the suspension of payments in case of systematic violations of the rule of law. Last but not least, the EU Commission needs to come up with better legal arguments so that the EU Court of Justice will have more space to interpret EU Treaties with regards to infringement procedures and the rule of law/democratic backsliding in a more effective manner. NEE

Edit Zgut is a political scientist and visiting lecturer at the Centre for Europe at the University of Warsaw. She is a PhD student in the Graduate School of Social Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences.

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The intervention in Kosovo revisited

Twelve lessons for the future

VISAR XHAMBAZI

The 20th anniversary of the NATO campaign in Kosovo, which led to the beginning of a long process of state-building, was recently commemorated. Yet it is worth recalling what led to the campaign and understanding the lessons of its aftermath which are very much relevant today.

In 1999, NATO launched an 11-week air-campaign to halt the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Kosovo. The intervention in Kosovo is arguably one of the most important events in contemporary history. It was the first time NATO operated outside its territory and the first sustained use of force since its establishment in 1949. Furthermore, it was the first time that force was used to enforce UN Security Council resolutions for the purpose of halting crimes against humanity.

The intervention in Kosovo remains an important case study because state-building continues to be a relevant matter. Most state-building initiatives have failed or struggled to achieve their desired outcomes. However, Kosovo is a different story: a short moment in history when the international community proved they could co-operate, set aside differences and invest time and resources for the purpose of maintaining peace, safeguarding stability and promoting democracy. As we passed the 20th anniversary of the NATO campaign in Kosovo, we see that the lessons are still relevant today. As the 21st century unfolds, new cases where international commitment is needed arise. And there is a growing fear among

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observers that similar cases of humanitarian catastrophes could take place in the future. Admittedly, no historical analogy is precise, but it is the least misleading thing we have. Mark Twain reportedly said that history does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. Thus, lessons should be drawn from past experiences. Here I offer 12 important lessons from the intervention in Kosovo and its aftermath.

1. Exhaust all diplomatic alternatives

The case of Kosovo shows that an intervention should only take place when you have exhausted all diplomatic options, including negotiations and discussions at the UN Security Council. In this way, co-operation among states will become more realistic. When countries agree on military intervention, there must be a concrete plan on how the action will unfold. In addition, humanitarian intervention cannot be initiated without considering both moral and practical factors. The moral dimension is the basis for international coordination, and legitimising the intervention means using the humanitarian argument. Often the imperative to prevent ethnic cleansing and violence will change the opinion of those who oppose humanitarian interventions.

2. Don't count on sanctions

Several rounds of international sanctions were imposed against Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The intervention in Kosovo proved that sanctions without a commitment to use force are a waste of time. Sanctions affect a country's economy, but they almost never reach the desired outcome. On the contrary, sanctions can have a boomerang effect; in other words, they could strengthen the position of the oppressor and further weaken the domestic opposition. The ones who suffer the most are the citizens and refugees whose well-being further deteriorates from bad economic conditions. Sanctions are most efficient when there is a commitment to use force.

3. Pick a side

Intervention means choosing a side, and choosing which side to support is immensely important. Loss of life is an inevitable consequence of military intervention. Therefore, it is essential to know beforehand who will govern afterwards and

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which group you are going to support. Making peace means determining how the war ends. Not taking sides will extend the war and, in the end, will cost more lives. For instance, the "safe areas" (territories set under the protection of United Nations) in Bosnia and Herzegovina created more chaos than solutions. The Bosnian Serbs took advantage of this in order to expand their conquest. As Richard Betts noted, "limited intervention may end a war… trying to have it both ways usually blocks peace by doing enough to keep either belligerent from defeating the other, but not enough to make them stop trying. And the attempt to have it both ways has brought the UN and the US to varying degrees of grief in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia and Haiti."

4. Don't limit your military options in public

Rejecting the idea of ground forces outright may create a sense of comfort for the perpetrator. NATO allies, since the very beginning, ruled out the deployment of ground forces, and, further, they did not hesitate to state their firm position publicly. The then US President Bill Clinton stated before the air campaign was launched: "I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war." This created a sense of comfort for Serb leader Slobodan Milošević in believing that he could survive a couple of weeks of bombardment. Had the West remained silent, Milošević would have probably felt more threatened and conceded defeat faster. Excluding military options, at least in public, can have consequences for the overall operation. Nevertheless, NATO prevailed, proving most of its critics wrong, that war can be waged without considering the option of ground forces.

Although relying heavily or exclusively on air power proved successful in Kosovo, this does not guarantee success in every case, especially when one deals with mountainous terrain. Operating on a desert is much easier than in towns or cities. The air campaign had a serious impact on the oppressors' thinking, especially when they were bombed by the strongest military force in the world. Historically, armies fight until they are depleted 30 to 50 per cent. The fear of losing support and being abandoned by his people brought Milošević to the bargaining table and led to his ultimate withdrawal from Kosovo.

5. Build a narrative

When the Srebrenica genocide happened in 1995, the world was shocked. Western audiences were stunned to see thousands of dead bodies appear in their

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newspapers and on their television screens. They demanded answers and many campaigned to stop the murders. By the time the situation in Kosovo had started to deteriorate, people were already filled with anger and disappointment. Hundreds of international journalists and OSCE staff were reporting daily from the ground. This made the option of international intervention a more plausible one for onlookers.

With any modern war, a public diplomacy strategy is often swept away by the tide of events.

However, the media presence also meant that mistakes had to be minimal. The bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade illustrates that one mistake can have fatal consequences and it can seriously question the mission's credibility. With any modern war, a public diplomacy strategy is often swept away (or aside) by the tide of events, particularly by media images of those events. After the Račak massacre and during the first two weeks of bombing, US public diplomacy, far from being a carefully planned strategy, was largely reactive and improvisational. At Račak, it was improvised literally on the spot. However, that did not prevent it from being successful. A crucial element of success was the sense of how westerners viewed Milošević and the forces he commanded, which enabled US spokespeople to use Milošević's atrocious actions to rally western support rather than dishearten public opinion.

6. Keep your allies together

Multilateralism is essential for successful humanitarian intervention; however, this is a difficult feat. During the air campaign in Kosovo, every decision had to go through all NATO member states and choices had to be considered. Similarly, after the intervention, European nations had different approaches when it came to determining Kosovo's final status. The European Union does not have a compatible foreign policy strategy. Each country represents its own interests. Although most EU states recognised Kosovo as an independent state, there are still five member states (i.e. Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Cyprus) who have not, and this has diminished hope of a coherent EU policy in regard to the Western Balkans.

7. Go in, go hard

A symbolic use of force does not usually achieve anything more than frustration on the opponent's side. Half-choices or half-measures (like in Bosnia and Her-

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zegovina) are not solutions, instead they may make things worse, inspire more violence, and lead to more domestic casualties between ethnic groups. The use of limited force has little or no impact. Sometimes the international community uses small amounts of force to send an important message in the hope of the oppressor backing down. However, such a strategy conveys weakness rather than strength and commitment. As Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon wrote in *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (2000): "The use of force is based more on the hope that it will be effective rather than on the certainty."

Additionally, this may send the wrong message to the oppressor: that the international community is not ready to fight a war or lacks the political will to do so. The use of force *should* ensure victory rather than simply *hoping* it will achieve it. The Powell Doctrine, applied to the use of force, remains valid. The Powell Doctrine is a term named after the former US Secretary of Defense, General Colin Powell, in the run-up to the first Gulf War which states that the US should only use military force after exhausting all other alternatives, and then only decisively to achieve clearly defined political objectives.

8. Invest time and resources in state-building

Winning the war is relatively easy, but keeping the peace is difficult. State-building is essential to maintain stability; however, restoring the rule of law and building a multi-ethnic society is difficult. After intervention, a sense of stability and peace must be maintained. This way refugees can start returning to their homes, people can start reconstructing their damaged properties, and the international community can start funding capital projects. But in order to initiate reforms, the newly-elected government has to be compatible with democratic principles. Otherwise, an undesired outcome is more likely to happen as the new cadre of leaders – full of political ambition – may undermine democracy and pursue personal interests at the expense of citizens.

> Kosovo has not yet managed to transform itself into a well-functioning, prosperous democracy.

State-building requires substantial investment. Since the end of the Cold War, Kosovo has had the second-highest level of assistance on a per capita basis, and ranks fourth in the world in terms of total assistance (800 US dollars per resident). Yet Kosovo has not managed to transform itself into a well-functioning, prosperous democracy. Nevertheless economic growth varies from three to five percent – which is progress – but not enough considering Kosovo's potential. The large-scale investments made in Kosovo

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demonstrate that the economy can be restored rapidly. Promoting the rule of law is one of the most difficult aspects of democratic reform. In comparison, designing constitutions and holding elections is comparably easy. Legislation means nothing without proper enforcement.

9. Initiate construction, not reconstruction

The transfer of knowledge and resources means that everything does not need to start from scratch. The international community knows how to organise and supply government services. What it knows much less about, however, is how to create self-sustaining, indigenous institutions. When the international community commits to state-building, it should be aware that it is not arriving with bricks, trucks, cranes and architects. They should not do all the work themselves but instead assist the locals build their own society. The Kosovars understood that they were not capable of creating their own institutions, thus they welcomed knowledge and learned everything from an amalgamation of different organisations in Kosovo.

The UN helped facilitate and construct local institutions, and provided minimal functions such as public goods, relative security, public health, fiscal policy and macroeconomic management. In addition, the international community has helped enormously by investing in infrastructure projects and human capital and conducting training courses and scholarships. The problem with the UN was that it failed to improve the quality of education, tackle poverty and inequality, guarantee environmental protection and boost sustainable economic growth and effective governance. It also did not manage to create a monitoring system for the institutions or enforce punishment for those who misused public office, thus leading to a culture of corruption and nepotism.

10. Be patient

Having functioning and efficient institutions are key features for a state. Therefore state-building requires strong institutions. However, it is important to add that institution-building requires both substance and time to be successful. While Kosovo is a parliamentary republic with a multi-party system and free elections, it falls behind in terms of substantive democracy.

Democracy is easier said than done. It requires a relatively large pool of educated people and a sizable middle class who are willing to embrace democratic ideals. Most importantly, society must have a culture of tolerance and a dose of secular

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divide. Formal democracy is a prerequisite for producing substantive democracy. Kosovo shows that uncertainty over its final status can be a motive for further democratic reforms. Democracy is the foundation of state-building, and for it to work it has to be liberal (being liberal and democratic are not one and the same). Germany, for instance, is both liberal and democratic; Iran, on the other hand, is democratic but not liberal. It is important to establish basic principles of democracy based on liberal values as elections in post-conflict states can sometimes have a counter-effect and bring authoritarians to power. Liberal democracy has proven to be the best system of governance, since it is based on individual freedom, justice, dignity and respect. As such, building a state means building a liberal democracy.

11. Have an exit strategy

Staying too long does not guarantee success, while leaving early ensures failure. After the intervention in Kosovo, the US established the Camp Bondsteel military base. The camp can hold up to 7,000 soldiers which makes it the largest military base in the Balkans. Building a military base sends an important message of security and stability. The establishment of this base and the presence of troops demonstrates an enduring US commitment to security not just in Kosovo but in the Balkans as a whole. Throughout the years the US slowly departed, reducing the number of its troops significantly, and thus paving the way for European states to take charge of various aspects.

12. Deal with the past

After the war, the West failed to eliminate Serbian nationalists from positions of power and rebuke their nationalist approach. After the Second World War, the Allies had a concrete plan for overcoming nationalism in Germany, an initiative otherwise known as "denazification". At that time, documentaries were produced to remind Germans of Nazi horror crimes; tour visits were organised to concentration camps in order to give a first-hand experience of the Nazi genocide; campaigns were launched for the purpose of developing a German sense of collective responsibility. Moreover, Nazi symbols and books were banned. As a result of years of commitment, the Holocaust memorial stands proudly in the German capital today.

However, this was not the case with Serbia. Two decades have passed and around 1,600 people remain missing with Serbia having neither apologised nor shown any empathy for what happened during the Kosovo War. Serbian politicians

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often refer to Albanians using the derogatory term, *siptari*, implying cultural and racial inferiority. When the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, visited Kosovo, he described Milošević as a great Serbian leader. The Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, recently branded Kosovo Albanians as people who emerged from the woods. There has to be a change in mentality that openly discusses the crimes and legacy of the Serbian regime in Kosovo and throughout the former Yugoslavia. The war in Kosovo illustrates that without dealing with the past, sustainable peace and reconciliation cannot be fully established.

Enduring commitment

Kosovo was a milestone in the doctrine of humanitarian intervention. It serves as a good example of when a regime topples, it takes significant amounts of energy and resources to build or rebuild the state. Sustainable peace requires local partners with the capacity to govern and the integrity to lead. State-building requires time and substance, and, most importantly, it requires an enduring commitment. International co-operation is critical in order to overcome post-conflict challenges. Providing humanitarian assistance, security and civil administration were key in establishing a peaceful environment in Kosovo. NEE

Visar Xhambazi is a policy researcher at the Democracy for Development (D4D) Institute. He has worked as a consultant, policy researcher and project manager in international relations and foreign policy analysis.

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Illegitimate election observation and conflict resolution

DARIA PAPROCKA

The observations of the illegitimate elections in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics in 2014 and 2018 by far-right and far-left European politicians serve the purpose of augmenting the number of actors and dimensions of a conflict with the aim of protracting any conflict resolution process. What is more, these elections violate the sovereignty of the state, since they take place in areas not recognised by the international community.

Politically-motivated election observation, noted in the post-Soviet region since the beginning of 21st century, aims to provide a counterbalance to assessments of international missions working on the basis of transparent methodologies and long-term observation. The political observation is also extended to elections in separatist regions of the former Soviet Union, where it is used to influence the conflict resolution processes.

Parallel systems

The role of election observation has been growing steadily since the 1990s. Over time election observation missions became more professional and methodologically

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sound. Since 2005 both international governmental and non-governmental organisations that engage in electoral observation follow the Declaration of Principles for International Observation (DoP). This document defines election observation as "the systematic, comprehensive and accurate gathering of information concerning the laws, processes and institutions related to the conduct of elections and other factors concerning the overall electoral environment; the impartial and professional analysis of such information; and the drawing of conclusions about the character of electoral processes based on the highest standards for accuracy of information and impartiality of analysis". Currently, according to the Project on International Election Monitoring, nearly 80–85 per cent of elections in non-established democracies are monitored.

Russia created a parallel system of its own election observations to question the neutrality of the OSCE's observation.

In the countries of the former Soviet Union, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the key international organisation conducting electoral observation. Over the years these activities have been recognised as a tool which can impact political change, especially in cases of the so-called colour revolutions. Elections in Georgia in 2004, Ukraine in 2004 and in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, led to the formation of pro-western governments.

However the Kremlin saw these processes as contrary to its foreign policy interests and started to become very critical towards the OSCE's observation missions. Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, claimed that these missions are "arbitrarily dividing states into 'mentors' and 'pupils', with the former taken as ideal in every respect while the latter, mistaken in everything they do". In response, the Russian Federation began creating a parallel system of its own election observations to question the neutrality of the OSCE's observation.

In 2002 the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an intergovernmental platform of post-Soviet states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, adopted the Convention on the Standards of Democratic Elections. The Convention served as the basis for establishing the first CIS parallel election monitoring organisation called the Commonwealth of the Independent States – Europe Monitoring Organisation" (CIS-EMO), which started observing elections in the post-Soviet space, both in CIS member states and the separatist republics in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

These observations in CIS countries and separatist regions merit a distinction. Their actions are politically motivated and hence practically void of any credible scientific methodology. Instead, they focus primarily, if not solely, on election days, and in the majority of cases it boils down to an endorsement of the electoral process,

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no matter how fair or unfair they are. These observations also serve the Kremlin's agenda and damage the idea of election observation as a tool of democratisation, as it dilutes the message of organisations working in accordance with the DoP. Yet since these observers are invited and accredited by state authorities, it does not violate state sovereignty – a key principle of international law.

What is more, the election observation carried out by CIS-EMO in separatist territories bears all the above features but, most importantly, it violates the sovereignty of states since it takes place in areas governed by self-proclaimed authorities which lack international recognition. This contradicts key principles of the UN Charter and the DoP which states that "elections are an expression of sovereignty, which belongs to the people of a country, the free expression of whose will provides the basis for the authority and legitimacy of government… Election observers must respect the sovereignty of the host country."

The case of eastern Ukraine

One of the main intricacies of the conflict settlement in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine is the dispute about the parties involved in the conflict. The international community recognises the involvement of Russia, while the Ukrainian government questions the political independence of the self-proclaimed authorities of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR), and seeks a conflict resolution within the framework of the Minsk Agreement.

> Russia systematically denies being directly involved in the Donbas conflict and insists that it be solved by Ukraine and the separatists.

On the other hand, the Russian Federation systematically denies being directly involved in the conflict and insists that it be solved by negotiations between Ukrainian government and the separatists. Russia's policy on the pivotal role of the so-called authorities of DNR and LNR in the negotiation process is supported by its systematic attempts to strengthen the political standing of the separatist leaders. Their alleged legitimacy to both govern the areas not controlled by Ukraine and to negotiate with the Ukrainian government is underpinned by illegitimate electoral processes organised contrary to the Minsk Agreement and is in violation of Ukraine's sovereignty.

The first elections for the heads and national councils of the DNR and LNR were organised on November 2nd 2014. Ukraine, the UN and OSCE declared they would not recognise their results. However, Russia expressed its respect for "the

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declaration of the will of the people in south-eastern Ukraine" and stated that "[i]n view of the election results, it is extremely important to take active measures to promote a sustained dialogue between the central authorities and the representatives of Donbas in accordance with the agreements reached in Minsk" .

In order to further strengthen the legitimacy of the electoral processes and the elected leaders, the elections were monitored by international electoral observers, reportedly invited by the so-called authorities of the separatist entities. Information on the number of international observers present at the 2014 elections ranges from 400 (according to the CIS-EMO) to 40 (according to some academic research).

The observers endorsed the elections as democratic, with a few isolated comments on the security situation and lack of voters' list. Some of the observers went further, however, and spoke about the legitimate right of the self-proclaimed republics to hold elections and their right to self-determination. Magdalena Tasheva, a Bulgarian MP from the nationalist Ataka party, stated that "[t]he fact that the West will not recognise these elections does not mean that the state does not have the right to exist." A couple of observers opined about the irreversibility of the separatist process and urged the Ukrainian government to embark on the peace talks with the so-called authorities of the non-government controlled areas.

A similar sequence of events took place on November 11th 2018 during the elections for the DNR and LNR national councils. Voters were called to the polls – as stated by the Russian Federation – in order to fill the political vacuum that appeared after the assassination of Alexander Zakharchenko, the leader of the DNR, on August 31st 2018. Ukraine, together with the EU and the OSCE, declared they would not recognise the "elections" while Russia expressed an understanding for organising the elections in "regions rejected and abandoned by Ukraine".

The November elections were monitored by some 100 international observers, invited by the DNR and LNR so-called authorities, coming from Russia, a number of European countries, the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Brazil, Chile, Canada, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Turkey and the United States. There were also observers from Palestine, Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia, which were portrayed by the local media as "states".

Creating a sense of legitimacy

The observers of the illegitimate November 2018 elections – unsurprisingly – unanimously endorsed the electoral process as democratic and in line with international standards, which was noted by local and Russian media. What is more important, however, is that they emphasised the legitimacy of the elections and

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the legitimate right of the self-proclaimed republics to hold their own elections. Many spoke about the independence of the territories and the formation of a state through the electoral process. Bogdan Bezpalko, a member of the Russian Council on Interethnic Relations, stated that "the elections should demonstrate to Kyiv that the republics are established states, aiming at securing their status". Jan Penris, an MP from the populist Vlaams Belang party in Belgium, congratulated "the Donetsk Republic on its independence". The observers were also talking about the inevitability of the Ukrainian government's negotiations with the so-called authorities. A French observer, Thierry Mariani, currently a member of the European Parliament, stated: "I hope these elections will be a step forward in the direction of an agreement. But to have an agreement it is necessary to have two parts, and unfortunately I don't see in this moment on the Kyiv side a strong will to have an agreement".

Notwithstanding the international observers' remarks on the alleged legitimacy of the elected leaders and the need for conflict resolution negotiations between Kyiv and the so-called authorities of the DNR and LNR, there is a prevailing divergence of stances about the character of the conflict in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and eligible parties of the conflict settlement process. Ukraine's foreign policy, in this regard, has not changed with the new government, as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy confirmed in July 2019 that Ukraine is not ready for direct talks with the Donbas "separatists"; but that it would act within the Minsk framework and is ready for a ceasefire. On the other hand, in the context of July 2019 parliamentary elections in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin, once again, reiterated: "a comprehensive settlement… in Donbas, is possible only in case of direct contact of the Kyiv government with representatives of the republics". Meanwhile, negotiations did take place in December last year, for the first time since 2016, within the framework of the Normandy Format; however, they yielded limited results.

Objectives of illegitimate observers

In analysing the so-called international monitors who came to eastern Ukraine to observe the illegitimate elections, it is worth looking at their political backgrounds. The initial CIS-EMO monitoring teams were composed solely of observers from the former Soviet Union and predominantly from the Russian Federation. Yet with time the CIS-EMO started co-operating with two far-right organisations: the Eurasian Observatory of Democracy and Elections (EODE) and the European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis (ECAG), the latter run by Mateusz Piskorski who, in 2016, was arrested in Poland on suspicion of spying for Russia. Both the

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EODE and ECAG's engagement in the parallel system of election monitoring is underpinned by ideologies such as Novorossiya and Russia as the counter-balance of the western world.

Russia clearly reaches out to a particular profile of political parties, politicians and activists throughout Europe as evidenced by those who participated in these pseudo-observations. Stanislav Byshok, the Executive Director of CIS-EMO, in his book, *The New Europe of Vladimir Putin: Lessons from the West for Russia* (in Russian: *Новая Европа Владимира Путина. Уроки Запада для России*), offers a full overview of right-wing, Eurosceptic and nationalist parties in Europe showing their pro-Russian affinities and "how the Russian experience of building a sovereign domestic and foreign policy is perceived and positively evaluated by the nationally-oriented political forces of the West". Nationalism is juxtaposed with liberal democracy, with the conclusion that "supporters of the national ideology, paradoxically, became the real protectors of cultural diversity, whereas the champions of tolerance and multiculturalism appeared to be committed to unification and blurring the established ethno-cultural borders".

Russia clearly reaches out to a particular profile of political parties and politicians throughout Europe as evidenced by those who participate in these pseudo-observations.

The European observers came from political parties on the extremes of the European political spectrum. Their endorsement of elections in unrecognised republics stem from the Euroscepticism and nationalist ideologies they promote in their own domestic contexts. Anton Shekhovstov, in *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, notes that the politicians observing the 2014 elections in eastern Ukraine included members of right-wing and nationalist parties, like Jobbik (in Hungary), Ataka (in Bulgaria), Forza Italia, Movement for Serbia (*Pokret za Srbiju*) and the French Marine Blue Gathering (*Rassemblement bleu Marine*). The observers often come from political parties promoting autonomy or secession of the regions they come from – for instance, *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interests) – hence they perceive elections as a step towards independence and sovereignty. Legality and quality of the process is of lesser importance.

What's next?

Nationalist and separatist political movements are on the rise in Europe and Russia capitalises on their existence, using them for its own ends. The pro-Russian, nationalist and, in some cases, separatist ideologies, make them prone to endorse

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elections held in the unrecognised, self-proclaimed republics of the post-Soviet space. The messages coming from of the international observers of these illegitimate elections are mostly aimed at Russian and local audiences, but their visit to the separatist regions are often part of a broader co-operation with Russia, which aims to legitimise the Kremlin's policy in Europe. The initiative of the Italian Northern League in 2014 to form the group "Friends of Putin" in the Italian parliament, in response to EU sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea, is one example of such co-operation.

On the eve of the 2018 elections in the DNR and LNR, Andreas Maurer, from the German left-wing populist party *Die Linke*, offered his interpretation on the legality of election observation there: "We have come, we have observed… we cannot be punished for that pursuant to European or German legislation… Maybe if I had been here alone, there would have been some doubts. But the fact that my colleagues from Holland, Finland [and] other states, have received accreditations today – 22 states – shows, that there is more and more of us. And I believe the process will not stop." The question remains how to stop (or reduce) the politically-motivated observation from having an impact on international politics in general and conflict settlement in particular.

There is no mechanism for holding European officials liable when they become involved in activities that undermine the sovereignty of states.

The parliamentary assemblies of international organisations hardly make their members, who engage in politically-motivated and/or illegitimate election observation, accountable. The Spanish parliamentarian and president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Pedro Agramunt, was stripped of his position only in 2017 after he joined Russian officials on a trip to Syria to meet with President Bashar Al-Assad. The following year he was openly involved as an "international observer" invited by Russia to monitor their presidential elections.

It often happens that the European officials involved in legitimising self-proclaimed republics return back to the official political milieu without any consequences. Paolo Grimoldi, an Italian parliamentarian with the Northern League, and who openly supports the annexation of Crimea, visited Russia-annexed Crimea together with Matteo Salvini in 2014; he was seconded as an OSCE Parliamentary Assembly observer and accredited as a member of the OSCE PA election observation mission during the early parliamentary elections in Ukraine in July 2019. There is no clear mechanism for holding such officials liable when they become involved in activities that undermine the sovereignty of states.

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The international and non-government organisations which conduct election observation missions often stress their neutrality and the soundness of their methodologies. Yet a greater emphasis needs to be put on the fact that those undertaking election observation missions, first and foremost, abide by the principle of state sovereignty. Not every exercise where the ballot box is involved can be legitimately called an election. Not every election in a disputed area is a step towards conflict settlement. As long as electoral exercises are held in opposition to national legislation, international law and peace agreements, they do not deserve recognition. Their results are neither legitimate nor binding for the conflict resolution process.

The full version of this article was presented at the 2019 Pre-APSA workshop, "Securing Elections: Foreign Meddling, Fake News, and Political Violence.", where the author represented the European Centre for Electoral Support (www.eces.eu).

Daria Paprocka, PhD, is an electoral expert with almost 20 years of international experience. She worked, among others, in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine. She works as deputy head of mission or political & campaign finance analyst in election observation missions of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, as well as provides advisory support to election management bodies. She specialises in electoral political economy analysis.

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Russia and its Tatar diaspora in Europe

ALEKSANDRA KUCZYŃSKA-ZONIK

The Tatar diaspora in Europe is not very significant in size, but it has the potential to shape the political landscape of their European homes, particularly in the promotion of heritage and lobbying their interests on the international stage. That is why the Russian-speaking Tatar diaspora in Europe could be a significant tool in Russia's compatriot policy of the "Russian world".

Tatars are Turkic-speaking people living primarily in Russia, with around 5.3 million living in the Russian Federation (according to the 2010 census). They are primarily Volga Tatars concentrated in the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, which is no more than 30 percent of all Tatars. Less numerous groups of Tatars also live in Europe. They came to Latvia and Lithuania as citizens from different parts of the Soviet Union, mostly from the Volga region. In Lithuania they arrived to rebuild the destroyed harbour and shipping industry in Klaipėda, and to the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in Visaginas. Similarly, since the 1940s there was a Tatar migration movement to Estonia from other parts of the Soviet Union, particularly from the Nizhny Novgorod region. This group arrived as construction workers, railroad workers, seamen and Soviet soldiers. Tatars and their descendants who came from the Soviet Union often speak Russian as their mother tongue and have much in common with Russian-speaking Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians, who also came to Latvia and Estonia during the Soviet period. As a result, they are recognised as part of the Russian-speaking community there.

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tatars, regardless of their origin, were granted Lithuanian citizenship. A more serious scenario faced the Tatars in Latvia and Estonia, where they have been categorised as Russian-speaking colonists and have been denied citizenship.

Diaspora in Europe

There are also small groups of Tatars living outside the former Soviet space, particularly in France, Germany, and other European countries (though fewer than 1,000). Approximately 500 Tatars live in the United Kingdom while around 150 Tatars and Bashkirs live in Switzerland. These Tatar communities in Western Europe are relatively new. They started arriving in the middle of the 20th century and, in recent years, a new wave of Tatars have emigrated for work or study. Once abroad, they seek to maintain contact with their homeland and the local Tatar community. That is why Tatarstan, and particularly Russia, make efforts to advocate for the Tatar diaspora in Europe and try to shape a common Tatar and Russian identity under the umbrella of national and international projects.

The Tatar diaspora in Europe deals with several problems such as the lack of communication and financial support and the protection of its heritage. This provides an opportunity for Russia to patronise Tatars leaders and to strengthen the Kremlin's influence in Europe. The Tatar diaspora in Europe is not relevant in size, but it has a potential to shape the political landscape of their European homes, particularly in the promotion of heritage and lobbying their interests on the international stage.

> The Tatar diaspora in Europe is not large, but it has the potential to shape the political landscape.

Tatars regularly gather, have tea parties, give master classes on Tatar cuisine and organise religious festivals. The Tatar Association in France, for example, aims to preserve their national identity and the Tatar language as well as the acquaintance of French citizens to their history, customs and traditions. Each year they organise evenings of Tatar cuisine, performances of local musicians, classes in dance and exhibitions of outstanding Tatar artists, as well as meetings with Russian poets, prose writers and bloggers.

Despite the long distance separating the communities, several projects to unite Tatars around the world have been launched. Special attention has been paid to the preservation of the Tatar language, the promotion of national and cultural, socio-economic and spiritual developments of the Tatar people, as well as the implementation of programmes in the fields of culture and heritage. Several national and

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regional organisations carry out educational projects, develop entrepreneurship, establish economic relations, and harmonise interethnic and interfaith relations among different ethnic communities.

These activities may be seen as a platform for the Tatar diaspora from different countries to communicate with each other, as well as a means of information for the international community about their needs. The organisations also provide a way of communicating with the non-Tatar world that may influence political decisions on internal matters of both their respective state and Russia, and to function as a bridge in bilateral relations between them, as well as to initiate and lobby on issues of global politics.

Tatars and the Russian world

Tatars from West European countries who are representatives of the new wave of emigration, declare cultural, political and financial attachment to Russia. They retain their Tatar identity, although they weaken their family and cultural connections with Tatarstan. Being influenced by Russia, the Tatar diaspora may lose its distinctiveness and be assimilated by Russian culture.

The government of Tatarstan has contributed to the diaspora through technical assistance and education exchanges.

The authorities in Tatarstan and Russia significantly influence the diaspora. The government of Tatarstan, which has been allowed a considerable deal of autonomy in conducting its affairs, has contributed to the development of the diaspora through technical assistance such as supporting the establishment of representative offices, and through political support and economic co-operation between Tatarstan and the country where the diaspora resides. Moreover, there are several sponsorship agreements between the government of Tatarstan and the countries where Tatars reside to support exchange programmes. At the same time, there are more political actors who seek to take responsibility for the Tatar diaspora. While Tatarstan helps Belarusian Tatars in the field of education, a mosque in Minsk (which was destroyed in the Soviet era) was rebuilt in 2016 in line with its original Tatar architectural design and opened largely with Turkey's help.

The European Alliance of Tatars (Russian: *Альянс татар Европы*; Tatar: *Aurora Tatarlari Alyansi*) was founded in 2013 as the Tatar network and structural links of the "Russian world". Among those who participate there are Russian-speaking Tatars from the Baltics and Tatars with Russian citizenship living in the European

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Union. Many of them are migrants or their descendants came to the Baltics as Soviet citizens. While many Tatar minority groups from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia joined the Alliance at first, they left largely due to political reasons.

The alliance was founded in Belgium to strengthen its international prestige and to be able to obtain European funds. However, it is an open secret that the organisation maintains close ties with the authorities in Russia. It has received funds from the Russian Fund for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad (*Rossotrudnichestvo*), like millions of other Russian compatriots living abroad. It has been responsible for organising the annual European Sabantuy Festival (each year in a different European city) with the Tatarstan delegation of the President of Tatarstan, Russian ambassadors and representatives of local government.

The Russian authorities actively support Tatar NGOs that embody the idea of the "Russian world". As a result, a few of them are said to be defenders of Russia's interest in the region. This co-operation is not welcomed by the host countries and the activities of these organisations are viewed with suspicion through the prism of disloyalty of Tatar residents in European states. The so-called foreign-domestic non-governmental organisations (FDNGO) are accused of infiltrating the culture with the purpose of weakening its democratic institutions and dividing societies. The phenomenon of the politicisation of Russian-speaking Tatar NGOs and the securitisation of the communities in general result from Russia's foreign policy towards the West, particularly after the annexation of Crimea.

Element of hybrid war

Tatar communities in Europe are heterogeneous and weakly consolidated, stemming from their diverse interests, historical roots and socio-economic status. They seek to preserve their cultural, linguistic and political ties with their kin state through a variety of local societies and international organisations. These organisations are fragmented and compete with each other. Thus, these organisations have influenced the consolidation of the Tatars population in Europe only to a small extent. Nevertheless, some organisations co-operate with others or are connected in a larger, united network of institutions or state agendas representing certain political forces. Currently the Tatar diaspora in Europe faces new challenges, including a lack of religious leaders and Tatar language education resources. The intersections resulting from different origins, traditions and political preferences seem to be the key obstacles to achieve cultural unity in Europe.

As a result of the new-generation (hybrid) warfare to state security and social stability in the region, a serious problem emerges when one state claims to speak

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on behalf of its "people" and can potentially intervene in the diaspora's host state in order to "protect" the interests of the diaspora. While Russia intensifies its power in its near abroad in order to integrate Russian-speaking diaspora communities under the aegis of the "Russian world", financing organisations and supporting its leaders, the Tatar diaspora in Russia's far abroad is not an obvious instrument for such policies. Russia's attempt to influence the Tatar diaspora, however, does not require much effort since the Tatars suffer from a lack of social cohesion, greater awareness and financial support. Furthermore, the geopolitical situation determines the Tatar diaspora's security threats and vulnerabilities to Russia's influence. As a result, the Russian-speaking Tatar diaspora in Europe could be a useful tool in Russia's compatriot policy of the "Russian world".

For several years now the Kremlin has more frequently used its soft power and public diplomacy to pursue its interests, especially via international organisations like "World without Nazism" (a Russian-led international organisation which claims to seek the "de-Nazification of Europe"). The European Alliance of Tatars, similarly, has an agenda of articulating the Tatar diaspora's need and is politicised and ideologically dependent on the Kremlin. Additionally, the alliance calls for the Tatar diaspora's protection and claims Tatarstan and Russia as the true defenders of the Tatar diaspora. In fact, it creates an opportunity for Russia to interfere with the internal affairs of states where Tatars reside. Therefore, the Tatar diaspora, as well as other Russian-speaking residents in Europe, play an important role in the confrontation between Russia and the West, as their geopolitical situation determines their security threats and vulnerabilities to Russia's influence. NEE

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik is the head of the Department of the Baltics at the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin.

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The drama of the Polish outsider

KRZYSZTOF CZYŻEWSKI

The Polish psyche is affected by the tragic conflict between what is ours and not ours. This huge dissonance stems from the fact that the outsider is a native: both come from the same country, share a nationality, live among their own people and, at times, inhabit the same person. Hence, Poles' attitude towards others, to a great extent, arises from their inner struggle with "the outsider within".

"Pretty. Shame it's not ours." This sentence is uttered by one of the characters of *Zimna wojna* (*Cold War*), a film directed by Paweł Pawlikowski. An audience unfamiliar with the intricacies of Polish culture will find it hard to recognise the drama lurking behind these seemingly innocent words. Ours, in this context, is Polish, not ours is part of the Lemko people's cultural heritage. Lemkos are an ethnic group, a majority of whom inhabit Poland, though some also live in Ukraine and Slovakia. Some consider themselves Ukrainians speaking their own dialect, others believe to be a separate nation. A considerable number live in the diaspora, as portrayed in the opening scene of the film *The Deer Hunter* showing a Lemko wedding which takes place somewhere in Pennsylvania. Yet, in the scene people are singing a Soviet military song, *Katyusha*, which presents a disconnect from reality and the tragic plight of the Lemko people fiercely persecuted under the communist regime. Still, Lemko culture is known for beautiful, polyphonic songs. It is one of those songs that is regarded as "pretty".

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Fate

Pawlikowski's film opens not long after the end of the Second World War. The audience follows Irena and Wiktor, a couple of distinguished choreographers and composers whose task is to create a folk and dance ensemble from scratch. To build a compelling repertoire, they embark on ethnographic expeditions to various regions in Poland. They are captivated by Lemko songs recorded on tape: in one of the scenes, while driving in a military car, they play one of them and relish the polyphony of voices, virtually absent from Polish songs. "Pretty. Shame it's not ours", interjects their driver, someone by the name of Kaczmarek.

This is set against the historical backdrop of fighting "Ukrainian nationalists" long before the communist authorities would announce Operation Vistula (i.e., the forced resettlement of the Ukrainian and Lemko population). They were driven from south-eastern Poland to the so-called Recovered Territories: a large swath of land in the north and west which, following the Potsdam Conference, was incorporated into Poland. The film does not depict these historical events, the story goes in a different direction. Nevertheless, the Polish audience is aware of this background and understands perfectly why it is unthinkable to include a Lemko song in the repertoire of Polish musical ensemble which, incidentally, is quickly transformed from a folk group into a state-endorsed national ensemble. During the Polish People's Republic (PRL) period, the word "Lemkos" would be censored. Only after the anti-communist movement was born in 1980–1981, was it possible for *Tygodnik Solidarność* (*Solidarity Weekly*), which was issued briefly in – approved by the authorities – circulation of half a million copies, to publish an article whose subject was the Lemko people, their history and the suffering they experienced as Polish citizens.

The fate awaiting the three people conversing in the military car is truly telling. Wiktor is not able to feel at home in post-war Poland and soon emigrates to the West. In Paris, a PRL consul tells him he is no longer Polish. The woman he loves is the reason why he decides to come back to the country where he is later imprisoned, humiliated and where, in the end, he commits suicide. Irena remains in Poland but she does not become successful. We can only assume that her uncompromising adherence to the values she holds dear and to what she considers "pretty" leads her to the circles of the democratic opposition. Both of them share an understanding that culture is not limited to the ethnic borders within which they live. Thus, they become outsiders in their own country. The person behind the wheel, Kaczmarek, in turn, is going to be deemed "one of our own". His future is bright, a brilliant career is ahead of him and within a short time he will be in charge of the national song and dance troupe.

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Kaczmarek, as bitter as it sounds, is an important figure in Polish culture. Importantly, did he enter the scene only after 1945? The communist government assured the public repeatedly that they were creating a new world and expressed disdain for Poland of the interwar period. I am convinced, though, that Kaczmarek would make an equally successful career before the Second World War by subscribing to the policies of the day: persecuting national minorities and condoning the adoption of ghetto benches. Also, I would not be surprised to see him marching side-by-side with the pro-fascist militants of the ONR (the far-right National-Radical Camp). These are the people to whom Czesław Miłosz alluded to in his narrative poem *Treatise on Morality*: "the Party is the successor to the ONR".

Cold War is not a historical film as much as it is an example of socially-engaged cinema.

Naturally, Kaczmarek belongs to the Party (i.e., the Polish United Workers' Party). He is the embodiment of the propaganda-fuelled hoax existing under the guise of the "friendship of nations" catchphrase (widespread in the socialist bloc countries) and the alleged rejection of nationalism; it can be likened to the criminal who shouts "Catch the thief!" to draw people's attention away from himself. Kaczmarek's cultural nationalism was his gateway to career success in the PRL. One wonders how would he fare in present-day Poland?

Tragic conflict

"Pretty. Shame it's not ours". The intention behind quoting this line in an essay about culture is not to go back in time, even though I deemed it necessary to give those words a historical context. Indeed, they are mentioned because they are alarmingly and strikingly relevant to the present day. In this respect, *Cold War* is not a historical film as much as it is an example of socially-engaged cinema, a fact which, I dare say, not only Polish audiences are able to acknowledge. Moreover, I believe that the decision to name it the best European feature film of 2018 was not based solely on the central love story depicted in it, which, as it turns out, is inherently burdened with the stigma of otherness carried by the protagonists.

Ultimately, these words convey something more crucial than their timeliness. I am inclined to believe that they touch upon the essence of the tragic conflict that has profoundly affected the Polish psyche and, by extension, the country's cultural, social and political life since Poland regained independence. Who is "one of us" and who is "one of them" in this young country, reborn within newly delineated borders in 1918? Kaczmarek exists in its subconscious, sometimes making his

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presence known. He can be found among the proponents of far-right and pro-fascist ideologies as well as populist politicians, whose careers are built on "our people" and who would not be able to stand on their own two feet without propping themselves against a scapegoat. He is also present among those afraid to lose their sense of Polishness in a world of open borders and tolerance, those opposed to taking in immigrants, those shouting "Poland for Poles" and among militants of the reactivated ONR.

Similarly, Kaczmarek lives among those who detest him and do not give him the right to exist; those who fail or do not want to understand where he came from, what historical and social circumstances, what kind of taboo trauma and the neglect of elites contribute to his strong presence in the Polish psyche. Kaczmarek thrives in a closed-off world, among those convinced they are on the "right" side of the river and who think that the development of human civilisation lies in building a bridge for people on the other side: lost souls who should simply join them. One way or the other, this reveals – the still hidden in shame or repressed – underdevelopment and ignorance of contemporary culture: the belief that bridges are built this way.

The Polish psyche is affected by the tragic conflict between what is ours and what is not ours.

Why is a bridge essential here? The answer is that questioning the point of its existence and more so, destroying it, constitutes the source of Kaczmarek's resilience and vitality. If there is a way to rebuild the bridge, it means not only that Kaczmarek has grown weak and that the weapon has been knocked out of his hands, but that he has essentially undergone inner transformation. The Polish psyche is affected by the tragic conflict between what is ours and not ours. This huge dissonance stems from the fact that the outsider is a native: both come from the same country, share the same nationality, live among their own people and, at times, inhabit the same person. Hence, the Poles' attitude towards others, defined as newcomers, immigrants or other "guests", to a great extent, arises from their inner struggle with "the outsider within".

It is not hard to imagine how tempting it is for political populists, religious demagogues and cultural conformists to take advantage of that. At the same time, confronting this Polish doom and going beyond the divide it imposes requires courage, a whole-hearted attempt at spiritual self-improvement and mastering the art of dialogue. As far as I am concerned, this discord has been conducive to some outstanding artistic achievements of authors who feel part of Polish culture. The sense of belonging to Polish culture is essential in this context as it crosses boundaries, redraws them and is contingent on personal choices, the political situation, and how one interprets the phrase "our culture".

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If it were otherwise, the following meaningful story about Isaac Bashevis Singer, a writer in Yiddish, would not exist. After being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, Singer gave an interview in which he was asked about books on which he was weaned. His reply was Polish literature which confounded the American interviewer. He then asked Singer to provide examples. The writer mentioned Isaac Leib Peretz, Sholem Asch, and Itzik Manger. Singer was familiar with their works since they were published in Yiddish in the Polish press and by various publishing houses in Poland; also, he could come across any of them in interwar Warsaw. He considered them part of Polish culture. However, it does not mean that the mention of Singer himself, as well as the authors he admired, can be currently found in student textbooks as far as the history of Polish literature is concerned. It is not impossible, though, that such textbooks will be written in the future.

Nativeness

Basel, the summer of 1931. Three students from Vilnius, which belonged to Poland at the time, have gone to the West for the first time ever. They dreamt about it for years. They read books in French and were fascinated with the French Revolution. They scraped some money together, got to Prague where they bought a kayak, then crossed the Alps, went across Lake Constance and down the Rhine… Finally, they reached a bridge leading from Basel to the French town of Saint-Louis: "France – our spiritual sister – welcomed us. The [inscription on a] sign prohibited Gypsies, Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians from entering the country. The scornful glances we exchanged took care of our western allies. We crossed the bridge." One of those students was Czesław Miłosz, the author of *Native Realm* and the quote is an excerpt from that book.

What Miłosz describes here is one of those moments that can shape the attitude to life of a Kaczmarek in the making. It fuels his fear of openness to the world, his national and cultural complexes deepen, which in turn makes him harbour even more resentment towards others, particularly outsiders. As a result, he starts to show proclivity to blindly defend himself and his own people, mistaking it for the expression of human and national dignity. What is more, he starts thinking about revenge and dreams about putting up similar signs at the borders of his own country, mistaking it for patriotism.

What about Miłosz? He goes on to write an autobiography, titled *Rodzinna Europa* (*Native Realm*, literally: *Native Europe*), which is unparalleled in the way it shows community-based foundations of European culture. The book was published in the 1950s, at the time when nobody wrote about Europe in a similar manner.

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Translating the title into Western European languages alone was a challenge: it became *Other Europe* in French (*Une autre Europe*) and Spanish (*Otra Europa*); *Western and Eastern Lands* in German (*West und Östliches Gelände*); *My Europe* in Italian (*Mia Europa*), *Mitt Europa* in Swedish; *Child of Europe* in Finnish (*Euroopan lapsi*), and finally, *Native Realm* in English.

Nativeness, according to Miłosz, does not belong to anyone and neither does it reinforce divisions; it is European, thereby grounded and welcoming, self-critical and open to dialogue. It provides an answer to the question "who am I?" by getting to know the other and by fostering good relations with one's neighbours. These are only some areas in which the author of *Zniewolony umysł* (*The Captive Mind*) had to grow and improve himself to render the environment which shaped him powerless and to defeat his inner-Kaczmarek. The fact is, he was not immune to his influence. As a young man, he was exposed to antisemitism at home and at school. Importantly, overcoming it resulted in something more profound than being an impartial observer of solving "the Jewish problem" – Miłosz is one of the first non-Jewish European poets who bore witness to the horrors of the Holocaust, addressed in his poems "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" and "Campo di Fiori"; both written in 1943. The death of Europe witnessed in the two world wars does not turn him into a nihilist or nationalist. On the contrary, he advocates the spiritual rebirth of Europeanness. If only the architects of post-war unity had carefully read *Native Realm*, they would have gone a step further than creating a coal and steel community, and later on launching a political project.

This speculating makes sense seeing as we are still suffering the consequences of the original sin inherited from the process of unification – the fact that the European Union has not brought culture to the core of its activity yet, or otherwise, has pushed it to its fringes. Thus, culture has been relegated to the realm of competence of each state. Viewed in this light, its focus has shifted to preserving its own legacy, defending national identity as well as expressing individual freedom. These, indisputably, are fundamental issues. However, for Miłosz, and owing to his cultural tradition, this idea of culture is wholly insufficient.

Invisible bridges

The tradition I have in mind here is associated with the notion of "borderland", which proves as difficult to translate as European nativeness. Borderland does not pertain to an area divided by a border – in fact, an external border does not cut through it; furthermore, it is not multicultural – understood as a constellation of separate cultural groups in nature. Borderland considers borders to be part of its

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own territory. It encompasses diverse communities living together – people speaking different languages and following various religious and national traditions and customs. They live according to an ethos that turns the "other" into "ours". They have the ability to combine caring for what is separate, at the risk of exclusion or extinction, with creating and regenerating a "connective tissue" that binds people together.

In practice, it translates into exploring the art of building invisible bridges. A person who is "native to borderland" poses the direst threat to Kaczmarek's mentality, most than a nationalist on the other side of the front line. The plight of people known in Sarajevo as *sarajlija* during the war in the former Yugoslavia serves as a harrowing example of that. *Sarajlia*, for whom social conscience and human rights were more important than national or any other divide, were the most loathed "other" by national extremists. Ever since the war broke out, the crisis of multiculturalism in Europe has deepened. The more widespread the crisis becomes, the more the "connective tissue" disappears. Unfortunately, the efforts to strengthen this bond in the sphere of culture appear to be one of the most underfunded initiatives in the area of European integration.

The borderland's cultural heritage found expression in remarkable phenomena of contemporary Polish culture: the poetry and essays of Czesław Miłosz; the prose and drama of Witold Gombrowicz; the poetry of Wisława Szymborska and Jerzy Ficowski; the theatre created by Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor; the films of Krzysztof Kieślowski and Tadeusz Konwicki (as well as his novels); the art of Magdalena Abakanowicz and Jerzy Nowosielski; the music of Grażyna Bacewicz and Wanda Wiłkomirska; the philosophy of Leszek Kołakowski and the priest Józef Tischner; Janusz Korczak's pedagogical thought; the psychology of Antoni Kępiński; and the sociology of Zygmunt Bauman. This cultural tradition has been kept alive by those creating today, including the new generation of artists, whose "borderland-like quality" permeates new spheres of empathy towards nature, non-human animals, sexual minorities, immigrants and other groups that have been excluded.

Futility

"Pretty", says Herszełe on hearing the Polish word *daremność* (futility) for the first time. It is Natan who explains its meaning to him: "It is when all your efforts are in vain, when you build on sand, when you draw water with a sieve, when the money you get in exchange for your hard work turns out to be fake." From now on, the young man, who has "a knack and gentleness of a woman for caring for others", adopts the word *daremoność* as his own. As a convert, he has to assume

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a Polish name as well as change his religion, which he does not mind: he believes that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are different guises of the same path leading to the one and only God. However, in his native Yiddish there is no such word describing futility.

The Polish word he considers pretty is uttered a considerable number of times during a sermon delivered by a bishop. It takes place in a cathedral, to which the body of a wise Jewish man, who "came to the cross" is brought – in an open casket, as Catholic tradition dictates – in the presence of a crowd gathered to participate in the burial of a convert in sacred ground. It was futile to believe, as Herszełe did, that Jacob Frank is the new Messiah and that death would not have dominion over those who pledge allegiance to him.

This above is a fragment of a story told by Olga Tokarczuk (recently awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2018) in *Księgi Jakubowe* (*The Books of Jacob*), a novel that delves into the history of Frankists, a heretical splinter group whose activity led many Jews who lived on the territory of Poland to convert to Catholicism. In 2015, the book won the most prestigious literary prize in Poland – the Nike. The novel, which comes to nearly a thousand pages, sold 100,000 copies within the first year after it was published. Poles read it as a story of borderland, perceived as a counter narrative to the novels of Henryk Sienkiewicz, Kaczmarek's favourite author. Kresy (the Eastern Borderlands, the territories to the east of Poland's current border which are part of modern-day Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine), to which Sienkiewicz makes constant reference, where "ours", meaning Polish, and replete with tales praising the glory of the Polish army and the assimilative power of Polish culture, irresistible to its neighbours. Tokarczuk transcends this interpretation turning *Kresy* into a rich landscape of cultural polyphony, in which otherness is ours yet deeply hurt. Kaczmarek would find it shocking to hear a Polish lady who, travelling from the central region of the country in a horse-drawn carriage, reaches *Kresy* for the first time in her life and – being completely at a loss hearing a myriad of languages (i.e., Ukrainian, Armenian, Turkish and Yiddish) – cries out frantically: "Does anybody here speak Polish?!"

The Books of Jacob has been one of the most important journeys deep inside the Polish psyche.

Recently, *The Books of Jacob* has been one of the most important journeys deep inside the Polish psyche that is marked by the tragic conflict between what is ours and not ours. One of the narrators is Natan, who chronicles Jacob Frank's travels across Poland. The words quoted below are his and their power to express the universal human condition arises from broader tension over what is and what cannot be ours. The funeral of the Jewish master, referred to previously, ends; Frankists

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make sure that the funeral rites are performed according to Catholic tradition. However, the moment they leave the cathedral marks a shift. Jacob told them to grab his long Turkish garb, which they mindlessly clutch; their faces are wet with tears, they resemble strange insects, and the despair born out of futility isolates them from the locals: they turn into the other all over again.

That is when Natan writes down these words: "There is something appealing about being an outsider, you can delight in its taste as there is sweetness to it. It is good not to understand the language, not to understand the customs, gliding like a ghost among people who are distant and unrecognisable. A particular wisdom awakens – an aptitude for understanding the implied and grasping the ambiguous. One becomes shrewd and perceptive. An outsider gains a new perspective and, by force of circumstance, becomes some sort of a wise man. Who convinced us that it is so great and wonderful to belong? Only an outsider will understand what the world is truly about."

Translated by Monika Ajewska

Krzysztof Czyżewski is a Polish intellectual and essayist. He is the founder and director of the Borderland of Arts, Cultures, and Nations Centre in Sejny (Poland).

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The Swedish Academy and Peter Handke

Justice for whom?

JOANNA HOSA

Austrian writer Peter Handke was awarded the 2019 Nobel Prize for Literature. The award renewed a debate surrounding this author – his ardent support for Serbia and Slobodan Milošević, who was the Serbian leader in the mid-1990s – and puts the integrity of the Swedish Academy into question.

On December 10th 2019 the well-known Austrian author Peter Handke, received the Nobel Prize for Literature. A number of ambassadors from the Western Balkans boycotted the ceremony, as did Peter Englund, a historian and former secretary of the Swedish Academy. Kosovo declared Handke persona non grata. The controversy is about Handke's position on Serbia. He is accused of supporting the regime under Slobodan Milošević or even genocide denial. This controversy surrounding Handke is not new and the debate already took place in the 1990s. He is a very prolific writer, but for many, his writings on the Balkans overshadowed everything else he has produced. His Nobel Prize came as a surprise, if not a shock.

Members of the Swedish Academy defended their choice. One argued that Handke is "radically unpolitical" in his writing, while others suggested that critics "ignored Handke's statements". It is therefore worthwhile to analyse Handke's essay, which is his most notable statement at the heart of this controversy and the debate that followed its publication. Was it radically unpolitical?

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The journey

In November 1995 Peter Handke embarks on a journey to Serbia. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Croatia is now over and the peace talks are taking place in Dayton, Ohio in the United States. Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and Bosnian-Herzegovinian President Alija Izetbegović sign the Dayton Accords in Paris on December 15th.

In January 1996, Handke publishes his first essay in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, titled "A journey to the rivers: Justice for Serbia". His intention was to look for justice and peace, but instead he causes a scandal. While Milošević is widely known as the butcher of the Balkans, Handke comes up with the title "Justice for Serbia"? It had to cause a stir.

It is interesting to explore why Handke travelled to Serbia. In 1995, it was an outcast and under an embargo. Most journalists travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the theatre of war. Handke, however, has a different approach. "What does a stranger know?" he asks. Serbia should be investigated; journalists who have not been there are partisan and not credible. So Handke travels to Serbia in search of truth and justice: "It was mainly because of the wars that I wanted to go to Serbia," he writes, "to the country of the so-called 'aggressor'… I felt the urge to go to this land, which with every article, every comment, every analysis was less known."

Handke writes again and again just how good he feels in Serbia, how he feels at home there.

Handke writes again and again just how good he feels in Serbia, how he feels at home there. He adores the landscape, the vineyards, the faraway horizons, the snow and the traffic-free Danube. There are no ships because of the embargo, but for Handke it is a positive thing. He hints that the inaccessibility of the western world might be good for the country.

While Handke is enthusiastic about the landscape, he mentions the "so noticeably distant sea". It is an interesting allusion to the breakup of Yugoslavia. Before the war, the sea was a common asset of all the republics, but now, with independent Croatia, its distance is keenly felt. Handke's tone is nostalgic and reminiscent of his earlier 1991 essay, "The dreamer's farewell to the ninth country", where he writes that he sees no reason for neither the state of Slovenia nor the state of Croatia. He recalls the informal and even enthusiastic "coming together" of the Yugoslav peoples in 1918 and regrets the collapse which he sees as an externally controlled "breach of contract".

Slovenia, for Handke, is particularly important because that is where his mother came from. He claims that Slovenians never dreamed of having their own state and

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Peter Handke's controversial writing on Serbia mixes idyllic descriptions of the landscape with an attack on newspapers, individual journalists and the international community in general.

in 1991 they left Yugoslavia "out of sheer selfishness" and betrayed their Yugoslav brothers. Although Handke does not mention Serbia at this point, it is hard to resist the impression that he is taking Serbia's side.

For some, taking Serbia's side led to Handke downplaying or even questioning the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. He mentions a woman from Bajina Bašta who "was convinced that it was true that in Srebrenica, in the summer of 1995, thousands had been killed". Handke was soon to be heavily criticised for this passage,

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for some felt that he insinuated that there was no massacre. A French translator asked him to distance himself from his words on Srebrenica, but Handke refused.

Alone against the world

Handke's writing on Serbia mixes idyllic descriptions of the landscape with an attack on newspapers, individual journalists and the international community in general. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*) is for him the "European central Serb-eating paper". *Le Monde*, once Handke's favourite, is now "demagogic". *El Pais* is the "world champion of amplification". They have one thing in common: the "self-confident hatred of everything Serbian". According to Handke, journalists are not seeking the truth and only manipulate the images of war. He notes that the Serbs are never described as victims: photos always show other nations "supposedly really suffering" (*wohl wirklich leidend*). Handke decries that there are no compassionate close-ups of Serbs; they never look into the camera, but they are shown looking down, "as guilt-conscious" (*wie Schuldbewußte*). For Handke this is a manipulation, showing the war in black and white. He believes that the international community was too quick to set the roles of the aggressor and the victims. He aims to fight against it and at the end of the essay he writes: "Mind you: this is not an '*I accuse*'. I just want justice. Or maybe just consideration".

Justice is undoubtedly a worthwhile goal, and it is important to point out that the world is never black and white. But the problem is that Handke, indeed, does accuse a lot of people, even the whole world, and looks for justice as he reverses the roles, going so far as to offend the victims. When he writes: "supposed really suffering", he puts in question not just the work of journalists, but also suggests that there was no real suffering at all.

Handke goes a step further to relativise the guilt: "So who was the aggressor? Was the one who provoked the war the same as the one who started it? And what does it mean to 'start'? Could such a provocation also be a start?" He does not clearly state it, but implies that Croatia was the real aggressor. He is immediately criticised for such insinuations.

Journalists fight back

The world of media does not hide its outrage. Marcel Ophuls, writing in the German daily *Die Tageszeitung*, calls Handke's report scandalous. Ophuls defends the work of journalists, 40 of whom lost their lives in the Balkans. He argues that

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Handke, on the other hand, travelled to Serbia without any risk and has the nerve to despise those journalists. Similarly, Gustav Seibt, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, calls Handke's reporting "scandalous", "absurd" and "outrageous". Peter Schneider, in *Der Spiegel*, does not mince his words either. He notes that any alleged bias of the press was not there from the beginning, it has its reasons. He also tackles Handke's question about the aggressor: "If I'm not mistaken, the aggressor is the one who first takes up arms to solve a fictitious or actual conflict." Schneider also notes that nearly all aggressors had responded to an alleged provocation, not least Adolf Hitler. It is interesting that Schneider compared Serbia with Nazi Germany, while Handke tries to present them as opposites.

In response to criticism, Handke retaliated by claiming that reporters were either partisan exiled Yugoslavs or young and inexperienced, but in any case, unreliable.

For Schneider, Handke's insinuations that the victims posed for photos were simply wicked. Handke may hate the media, but at least he should respect the victims. Schneider understands that Handke's goal was to change the image of war, but argues that it cannot be done by intuition alone; evidence and facts are also required. Instead, Handke overloads us with opinions, insinuations and outbursts of rage. That is why, he argues, Handke's project must fail. Finally, Schneider also wrote about the "historical stupidity of Handke's intervention". He contends that if Handke really wanted to defend the Serbs, he should not generalise but make a clear distinction between ordinary Serbs and their leaders.

Handke did not expect such a strong reaction. He wanted to write a peace text and an invitation for journalists to reconsider their methods. In response, he retaliated by claiming that the reporters were either partisan exiled Yugoslavs or young and inexperienced, but in any case, unreliable. Responses from the media only convinced him even more that he was right. It was not cowardice, not a mistake, but a jackpot. He was content with the scandal and said he "would like to be much more scandalous".

Accordingly, he went on a second trip to Serbia, as well as Bosnia; he also wrote the book *A Summer Addendum to a Winter's Journey* (published in 1996). For him, such an addition was necessary. The German media disagreed – even if he travelled to Bosnia this time around. On the whole, his views changed very little. For Hannes Hintermeier, writing in *FAZ*, the new essay was "just embarrassing". With these essays, Handke's provocations were not over. The next big controversy came when he attended Milošević's funeral in March 2006. The press was once again outraged, and reports claimed that Handke placed a red rose on the grave of Milošević.

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Handke denied these rumours, but his participation in the funeral was flagrant enough. He was named the "bard of the dictator". Soon after, in May 2006, Handke was awarded the Heinrich Heine Prize. Politicians protested, arguing that his name would discredit Heine. In the light of the bitter debate, Handke turned down the prize.

Thirteen years later, Peter Handke did not turn down the Nobel Prize. A renewed debate shook the Western Balkans, Sweden and the literary world. The integrity of the Swedish Academy was put into question. Given what Handke had written, it is impossible to make a distinction between his political position and his writings – in the case of the essays analysed above, they merged into one.

Handke himself claims he has no opinion, which is somewhat baffling. He has opinions and has every right to hold them. But the world has the right to disagree. In the era of relativism, half-truths and alternative facts, it is a shame that the Swedish Academy decided to reward such a controversial author. NEE

The quotes in English were translated by the author of this essay from their German originals and may differ from other published translations.

Joanna Hosa is the programme manager of the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

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The revolution on the periphery and the reflection of 1989 in Slovakia

SAMUEL ABRAHÁM

The developments in Slovakia leading up to 1989 can be interpreted as a belated response to momentous changes in Moscow and, more immediately, in Prague. They could be classified as a "revolution on the periphery" – a phenomenon describing how the wave of change travelled to provinces and distant cities from the centre. Nevertheless these events shaped Slovakia's development and their interpretation plays a role in politics today.

Looking back now at the precarious post-communist transformation and pondering the turbulent period that we witness today, we might ask to what extent the current condition in Central Europe in general, and Slovakia in particular, were affected by the events of 1989 – that *annus mirabilis* when the communist regimes of Central Europe fell after four decades in power. Was the current status quo somehow predetermined by the events and developments of that year? Or did the post-communist transformation contain its own dynamics, reflecting the longer-term conditions and political cultures of the countries that now form the Visegrád Group?

Both scholars and direct participants offer diverse and contentious assessments of 1989 because it has become so central to perceptions of the current political malaise. Thus, although three decades have elapsed since the fall of the communist regimes, these events still lie within the realm of politics rather than scholarly

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historical research. It is still disputed what should have been done in 1989. Some claim that it was a mistake that communists were not removed entirely from the political scene. Others claim that the intellectuals who were the first to hold power should have accepted executive positions and led governments. Václav Havel's naïve policy of embracing "truth and love" as a political method, they maintain, resulted in the removal of decent politicians by those who had no scruples. And then there are those who argue that 1989 was not a revolution at all, but rather a cynically-orchestrated act of political theatre to deceive the masses while preserving the communists' political or economic dominance.

Belated response

Whatever the interpretation, the ethos of November 1989 in Czechoslovakia was a peaceful transition of non-violence and widespread support for dissidents and intellectuals in leading the country away from the despised communist regime. Subsequent developments can be perceived as a natural evolution after a revolutionary moment. In this essay, I focus on developments in Slovakia, as it provides a case of the fall of a communist regime as a belated response to momentous changes in Moscow and, more immediately, in Prague. It could be classified as a "revolution on the periphery" – a phenomenon describing how the wave of change travelled to provinces and distant cities from the centre.

A significant consideration is the different evolution in Slovakia, as compared to the Czech Republic (then part of the federal Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) during the two decades prior to 1989. This had an impact on the outcome in both countries during November 1989. Whereas in Prague, where Havel led the Civic Forum (OF), in Slovakia another organisation, Public against Violence (VPN), emerged – a movement created by the main protagonists of change in Slovakia. In both the Czech and Slovak parts of pre-1989 Czechoslovakia, no one outside the communist party structure was trained or prepared to take over political power. Hence, as political change occurred, the political leadership had to be formed ad hoc by those willing and brave enough to enter the political arena. The events in Slovakia were much more "a revolution on the periphery" as mentioned above. This is not to denigrate the role and efforts of those who become political leaders, rather it is a concept that describes the developments in Slovakia that emerged from two decades of the so-called "normalisation".

What, then, is the centre-periphery relationship during sudden, systemic political changes? The revolution's centre gathers conspiring, brave, risk-taking, sometimes reckless revolutionaries who are able to inspire, agitate and mobilise the masses.

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But how does revolution travel to the periphery, provinces or to distant large cities? Of course, this process varies widely, is always contingent and unexpected, and is not pre-planned. It is only in retrospect that some claim to be the originators and planners of change. Analyses of the events dispute this *ex post* appropriation of revolution far from the centre.

In general, the bearers of revolution in the periphery need to possess two key ingredients: information and the courage to act. Whoever has information about what is happening in the centre, and whoever is brave enough at the moment of change to step forward – when the outcome is not yet certain and danger still looms – becomes the bearers of revolution in the provinces.

In other words, whoever spoke for the dissatisfied and disaffected, and expressed in public what others believed but were still too afraid to say, was accepted by the masses as their political leaders. This new group became the leading force that faced and eventually replaced the local elements of the *ancien régime*. That is how political legitimacy is usually gained on the periphery. However, such legitimacy is much weaker, more fragile and short-lasting than legitimacy gained in the centre by forces that possessed it prior to the revolutionary change. Slovakia was such a case where the initial leaders soon lost popularity and were marginalised and pushed out of power. The former Soviet republics, especially the Baltic republics, were also in such a position.

Two normalisations

In order to understand the different development paths in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, we have to review their distinct evolution prior to 1989. In general, Slovakia as part of Czechoslovakia should be analysed in that context rather than separately. However, the developments leading up to 1989 exposed some crucial differences in both republics.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by Warsaw Pact armies* crushed any reform process for the subsequent two decades. The Soviet Union did everything to prevent any political deviation from Soviet-bloc homogeneity. Both Czechs and Slovaks were in the same boat facing the consequences of the Brezhnev Doctrine.

* The term "Warsaw Pact invasion" is technically correct because small elements of the occupying forces were from Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and East Germany. However, it was basically an invasion by the Soviet Army that used the participation of Warsaw Pact allies to provide a veneer of international support. At the last moment before the invasion, the East German troops were asked not to enter Czechoslovakia. For one, the Soviets did not need them and, second, inviting the "German" army 30 years after occupation of Czechoslovakia was symbolically too volatile.

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The so-called normalisation period (1969–1989), was characterised by cynical maintenance of power during which even the communist leadership paid only lip service to Marxist ideology.

It was the occupation of Czechoslovakia that buried for good the belief of the Left throughout the world that Marx-Leninist system represents a viable alternative to liberal democracy. "The Biafra of Spirit" – as the conditions in Czechoslovakia in 1968 were called by French communist poet Louis Aragon – confirmed the crisis that started in 1968 in Paris, Prague and Bratislava and had an impact both on the West as well as communist bloc. The reforms of 1968 would most likely fail even without being crushed, however, the brutal intervention set the precedent or confirmed that the communist regimes have no capacity to be reformed; either they are kept alive by force or they collapse.

What differentiated the two nations was the way their elites reacted to the conditions of the normalisation period. While, among the general population, conditions and reactions were comparable, intellectuals, artists and some purged politicians reacted differently in the two republics. The strong dissident movement in the Czech Republic – politically seasoned by their struggle with the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s – was a force to be reckoned with before and during 1989. The dissident movement in Slovakia, in contrast, was marginal, and thus did not and could not affect the political outcome during and after 1989.

These different conditions during the normalisation period had an impact on the legitimacy of those who took power in November 1989 in both republics. It was quite natural for the numerous dissidents in the Czech Republic to assume power in November 1989. The population respected and recognised the dissidents, and the latter replaced compromised communist leaders with little controversy. In Slovakia, the tiny dissident movement was connected to Prague and Brno rather than to intellectuals in Bratislava or Košice. What emerged in 1988–1989, mainly in the capital Bratislava, was a mild protest movement that several sociologists have called an "archipelago of political deviance". It contained relatively young communists and non-communists who were frustrated by the suffocating communist regime and watched with envy the developments in the USSR, Poland and Hungary. There was a group of environmental activists that somewhat overlapped with the "archipelago" group, with both remaining relatively separate from the Catholic activists who predominantly demanded freedom of worship for observant Catholics. It was this scenario that set the different stages in Prague and Bratislava in November 1989.

It should be added that the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia could hardly have taken place if Gorbachev's Soviet Union had not facilitated the change. There, Gorbachev not only tried to transform the USSR but also made

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clear to his communist allies that the Brezhnev Doctrine – promising Soviet military intervention if a communist regime is threatened in a satellite – would no longer be realised. The regime in Czechoslovakia was too rigid to allow peaceful change without this external impetus. The revolution started on November 17th in Prague with a brutal assault by security forces on peaceful demonstrators, which in turn provoked mass demonstrations that brought down the government. By then, the regimes had crumbled in Poland and Hungary and were disintegrating in East Germany.

VPN

So who then, in November 1989, were the brave and informed in Slovakia who were catapulted to the position of political leadership? They assumed the name Public Against Violence (VPN) and first met on November 19th, two days after the brutal events in Prague. The name VPN was coined as a reaction to the reported killing of a student in the Czech Republic. Initially, they were popular, respected and celebrated. There was in fact no one else to fill the political vacuum.

The VPN became a partner to Havel's Civic Forum (OF). Yet it did not have the same legitimacy. The main protagonists were not dissidents who had fought the communist regime. The few dissidents in Slovakia (Miroslav Kusý, Milan Šimecka, Jozef Jablonický, Ivan Kadlečík, Hana Ponická, Juraj Špitzer) refused to become leaders, though they possessed legitimacy comparable to members of OF in Prague. Some of them, as former communists, did not feel they had the right to lead; others did not even consider a political career, wishing to resume their professional work as writers, historians and academics.*

In a few months, when it was clear that the communist regime was defeated and when the danger of repression had subsided, others showed up and wished to take part in government. Thus the VPN leaders, hampered by low legitimacy, internal division and their reluctance to take executive power, faced fierce competition and were soon swept away.

There were several groups that wished to govern at this time. Some young communists saw Gorbachev as their model, but felt they were kept at bay by President Gustáv Husák and General Secretary Miloš Jakeš. Other former communists were marginalised during the normalisation period but were prominent during 1968 and

* I devoted a whole issue of *Kritika&Kontext* to Kusý, including a long interview in which he explained why he gave up the premiership, thereby opening the door to Vladimír Mečiar, who eventually took over and became an authoritarian leader.

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they saw after 1989 Alexander Dubček as their frontman. Religious groups, especially Catholics who suffered persecution and organised a "candle demonstration" in 1988, believed that because Slovakia is predominantly Catholic, they had legitimacy and the right to lead. Finally, there were nationalists who were, or became, anti-Czech and gradually demanded the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Never gaining more than five per cent support, the nationalists were prodded and supported by wartime Slovak diaspora who wished to exonerate fascist President Jozef Tiso. These nationalists and their followers later became anti-Hungarian, anti-Roma and anti-EU as well as pro-Putin, and now inspire the neo-Nazis in Slovakia.

The question still remains: to what extent did the events of 1989 affect the present-day condition of Slovakia?

As early as June 1990, during the first free election, the VPN, which was losing popularity, felt the need to co-opt some experienced communists and persuaded Dubček to join the VPN in order to win the general election. The OF in the Czech Republic had no need of such support and won overwhelmingly itself. The dissident Petr Pithart continued as prime minister of the Czech Republic, while Havel remained president although he had initially said that he would step down once free elections were held.

A reflection on historical memory

The question still remains: to what extent did the events of 1989 affect the present-day condition of Slovakia? What caused the subsequent developments? Was it the contingencies of the post-communist transformation, the impact of individual leaders, or mistakes by VPN members who had neither the governing experience nor the desire to enter executive office, and thus handed political power to others?

VPN was first split and then its original members were pushed out by those who joined later – those with political experience, a thirst for power, and often no scruples. First came Vladimír Mečiar, splitting the VPN and dividing Czechoslovakia.* Then came Robert Fico, masquerading as a social democrat yet overseeing the most corrupt and cynical of governments for almost 15 years. A skewed historical memory of the events of 1989 has played a significant role in the perception of the

* Mečiar was not a nationalist, but as a former secret police (ŠtB) agent he was afraid of being pushed aside if Czechoslovakia was preserved and a law preventing members of the ŠtB from holding public office for five years was applied. Paradoxically, this law was never implemented – even in the Czech Republic.

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current political situation. Subsequent developments, including the break-up of Czechoslovakia, are presented differently by different political actors and traditions. It is not surprising that the younger generation remains confused and often somewhat oblivious to events during and immediately after 1989.

In fact, it is an irony that, although there is no restriction on historical research, there are still no textbooks of modern history for elementary and high school students in Slovakia. Hence, historical memory of the younger generation about 1989 is informed not by a scholarly debate among historians and intellectuals but mostly by what their family background offers them or, these days, what social media feeds them. Not surprisingly, it is among teenagers in Slovakia – ignorant of their history and fed by propaganda and fake news – that the neo-Nazis have the largest support base.

Three decades after the fall of the communist regime, interpretations of 1989 differ according to the current political leanings of individuals rather than as a result of some broad consensus. The historical memory of November 1989 is being moulded and interpreted depending on the political representation in power. It seems that the fragile "revolution on the periphery", characterised by weak legitimacy of those few who were brave enough to take political responsibility in 1989, has cast a long shadow over the political instability that still burdens Slovakia today.

Yet there are signs that the ensuing three decades of turmoil, corruption and partisan politics has become a source of frustration, especially for the younger generation, and there is a widespread desire to clean up public affairs. It is significant that the same young people who demand these changes are turning towards those who were swept away after 1989 but preserved their high moral standing and decency. It is as if the call for justice on the squares in various Slovak cities over the past two years, since the brutal murders of young journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, echoed the calls for civility and tolerance by the original VPN leaders. There is, perhaps, a continuity of decency and political good that a society returns to intermittently after decades of political turmoil and moral malaise.

This essay is based on a lecture given at Jesus College, University of Cambridge on November 2nd, 2019 at Cambridge Central European Conference 2019: Post-1989 Transformation and Historical Memory.

Samuel Abrahám is the editor in chief and publisher of the journal *Kritika&Kontext* and rector of Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts.

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No one will hear us if we scream

PHOTOS AND TEXT: OMAR MARQUES

The Donbas conflict has been taking place for over five years now. Some significant steps have been achieved since the implementation of the 2015 Minsk Agreements, and with it the official war might have reached an end. Yet, peace remains elusive.

Nataliya wears a Tryzub around her neck. It is a trident, a monogram of the Ukrainian word *воля* (*volia*) meaning liberty and known as the official Ukrainian coat of arms. The 66-year-old pink-haired Ukrainian volunteer and activist clutches it firmly as she narrates her ongoing life chapter of being a citizen of Stanytsia Luhanska. This urban settlement on the banks of the Seversky Donets River operates as a border town between Ukraine and the pro-Russian, self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic.

Nataliya compares her current life to that of her grandmother's story, who was a Polish aristocrat exiled to Siberia. "I am continuing the fate of my late grandmother, by not living in my own home. At least I am here, on the territory of Ukraine, not in a faraway land, but my destiny is the same," she says. Since she was two years old, Nataliya has lived in Luhansk, today the capital and administrative centre of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic. On May 11th 2014, when pro-Russian separatists held a referendum without the presence of international observers, 96.2 per cent of voters were allegedly in favour of separating from Ukraine and the authorities in Kyiv.

Obviously the pink-haired activist voted against independence, and she had to pay the price. "I was holding a copy of the constitution and arguing with them, stating that the referendum is in violation of it," she tells me.

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Traitor

Nataliya's strong belief in a united and strong Ukraine is impossible to hide. A wealthy, educated woman before the referendum, she now lives in a small house next to the buffer zone. Days after the referendum, her new life started: "I was forced to flee the 'country', otherwise I would have been taken to the basement. The referendum should have been nationwide, with all regions having voted," she says. For her beliefs she was labelled a traitor by the pro-Kremlin separatists. Since then, she has been forbidden to enter the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic. Days after the 2014 referendum, she fled her home, where she had lived for more than 50 years, leaving behind family pictures and most of her personal belongings. She is unable to access them or even visit family graves, which were walking distance from her former door.

The Donbas conflict has been taking place for over five years now. Some significant steps have been achieved since the implementation of the 2015 Minsk Agreements, and with it the official war might have reached an end. Yet, peace remains elusive.

"All along this street up to the borderline is a grey zone," Nataliya explains to me. "We are driving here and, show me, where are the police officers? Maybe I just can't see them?" She laughs as she speaks. Stanytsia Luhanska is possibly the first city fully controlled by the Kyiv authorities along the entire 500 kilometres of the front line dividing Ukraine from the self-proclaimed republics, but civilians still lack a sense of safety. In the last two days of June 2019, the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was notified by Ukraine's foreign ministry and the separatist authorities about a completed disengagement in the agreed disengagement area near Stanytsia Luhanska. Apart from the success of this peaceful transition, a bridge serving as the main connection between Ukraine and the Luhansk People's Republic is damaged and now under renovation. Crossing the bridge is an everyday routine for thousands of people. They pass through several military checkpoints with their belongings and supplies until they reach their destination.

Stanytsia Luhanska is possibly the first city fully controlled by the Kyiv authorities along the entire 500 kilometres of the front line.

For the government of Ukraine it is another tick off the list of achievements. On October 1st, the former comedian and current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, signed an agreement to move forward in implementation of the Minsk Agreements, ultimately ending the conflict in the region. It is colloquially called the Steinmeier Formula. The formula calls for elections to take place in the separatist-held territories under Ukrainian law and the supervision of the OSCE. The

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formula was voiced but was not put on paper until it was signed on October 1st in Minsk by representatives of Ukraine, Russia, the separatist territories of Luhansk and Donetsk, and the OSCE. However, agreeing to the Steinmeier Formula led to protests by several Ukrainian groups in Kyiv, and civilians in the eastern regions fear Ukraine was being sold to Russia in the long term.

"For the Ukrainian nationalists, this is a defeat, since although neither Donetsk nor Lugansk will be independent, they will have a victory by gaining broad autonomy with their own conditions. What will luckily be a region very similar to Transnistria in Moldova or Abkhazia or South Ossetia in Georgia.

"In short, the formula can bring peace, but at the same time creates uneasiness in Ukraine. Something that President Zelenskyy will have to deal with. If he won't move forward with the agreements and continues with the conflict, he risks having western partners turn their backs on him; if he moves forward there is a risk of rebellion. It seems that today his intention is to move towards peace despite the internal problems he may have," writes Pablo Gonzalez, a journalist specialising in international politics and military conflicts in the countries of the former Soviet Union. For Zelenskyy, these steps are a success as his electoral campaign had set a Donbas peace deal (which has left 13,000 people dead) as his number one priority.

Trapped

Ceasefires are regularly broken and heavy weaponry, which is outlawed by the Minsk agreement, is often used by both sides of the contact line, according to weekly reports from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. The buffer zone bordering the unrecognised Donetsk People's Republic is no exception when it comes to the end of war.

Chermalyk, located 35 kilometres from the sea city Mariupol, is one of the villages located inside the buffer zone. During a "road trip" towards Chermalyk from Mariupol, military checkpoints are a landscape pillar as driving through a highway toll, and the empty agricultural fields are decorated with several military bunkers from old front lines, resembling scenes from a film about the Second World War. Shepherds walk in between damaged buildings with their herds, and abandoned houses are taken by soldiers as they are stationed several kilometres from the contact line.

Elderly people who refused to leave depend on constant assistance from international and local NGOs. Public water points have been created with special filters provided by the NGO Polish Humanitarian Team (Polski Zespół Humanitarny) to diminish the possibility of a tuberculosis crisis. Public heating systems

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are another issue as most of the infrastructure has been destroyed during the last number of years and being managed by international aid with regular deliveries of coal to the locals.

"We usually pay our medical visits during the mornings since the shelling may start around 4pm," says a Caritas Ukraine worker to me during my visit. Even with "proper" support from international aid organisations, the buffer zone inhabitants continue to remain trapped in limbo. The shelling may come after 4pm, or not, and who will be there to save them?

"Stability, yes, since that would bring the end of the conflict, in the hot phase, and will begin a peaceful life. Another issue is the quality of that peace and the consequent stability. It will be years before all the displaced can return to their homes on both sides of the front. In any conflict, obtaining a stable peace is the first step in improving the quality of life of local residents," writes Gonzalez. "Normalisation unlike stability will take time to arrive. Agreements will need to be reached in many areas, something that will be difficult, but the Steinmeir Formula is the first step of a long road."

The Donbas war has killed thousands of people and displaced millions across Ukraine with more than one million Ukrainians coming to Poland to work and start a new life. However, an end to the conflict is not near, and as Nataliya said during our interview: "No one will hear us if we scream." NEE

Omar Marques is a freelance photojournalist from northwest Portugal based in Kraków, Poland. He works as a stringer for Getty Images, Anadolu Agency and collaborates with magazines on editorial and commercial assignments between Central/Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Omar's photographs have been published in *New Eastern Europe*, *The Times*, the *New York Times*, *Stern Magazine*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Guardian*, *Paris Match*, among others.

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A car drives by an inactive police station that was destroyed during the conflict between pro-Russian forces and Ukrainian forces in Mariupol.

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A former bunker which was part of the old front line just outside Stanytsia Luhanska.

A fallen bridge that Ukrainian forces blew up to stop the enemy from expanding their territory on the outskirts of Pavlopil.

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A flock of sheep grazes in a former minefield in Chernalyk.

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An elderly woman is seen in her kitchen as she waits for her weekly health check-up by Caritas Ukraine volunteers in Chermalyk.

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Herzog continues puzzling love affair with Gorbachev

KRISTIJAN FIDANOVSKI

Werner Herzog's documentary *Meeting Gorbachev* seems to be a cinematic expression of the West's love of Mikhail Gorbachev. And if there is one central theme to the film, it is Gorbachev shunning responsibility for his failures one after another.

In 2001 George Bush infamously proclaimed he had read Vladimir Putin's soul – and liked what he saw. Last year, the acclaimed German filmmaker, Werner Herzog, engaged in a similarly occult exercise with Mikhail Gorbachev, reaching an equally favourable conclusion. To call Herzog's ambitiously titled documentary *Meeting Gorbachev* occult is hardly an exaggeration, since any factual account of Gorbachev's legacy would produce a more mixed verdict. Sympathetic to Gorbachev's old age, and even more to the gradual erosion of many of Gorbachev's achievements over the last 30 years, Herzog brackets out Gorbachev's shortcomings and takes his seductively peace-loving rhetoric at face value.

By doing so, Herzog continues the puzzling love affair that the West has been pursuing with Gorbachev for more than three decades. The West sees the last Soviet leader as a nostalgic monument to a more hopeful era. But with nostalgia working as it does, Gorbachev's star is only bright in contrast to the gloom of the present. Its misremembered brightness makes an already ugly present seem even more hopeless. More ominously, it also creates unrealistic expectations and invites hawkish policies when those expectations are not met.

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New thinking, old spheres of influence

What makes Herzog's account of Gorbachev's legacy so typically western is the reaffirmation of the two biggest western myths about the last Soviet president: his alleged belief in the futility of great-power rivalries and his unwavering commitment to the democratisation of his own country. Debunking the mythology around the former is not to do injustice to Gorbachev's momentous nuclear-reduction efforts. Yet beyond all the rosy speeches, pledges signed and missiles destroyed, Gorbachev was fundamentally no different than other Cold War-era leaders in one crucial aspect: he never stopped viewing the world through spheres of influence.

Halfway through the documentary, Herzog is eager to agree with Gorbachev that the Cold War is one of a precious few wars in history that ended with a win-win outcome. Gorbachev then proudly adds that it was Moscow that first suggested burying the axe. But for these statements to be meaningful, the Soviet Union would have had to do so from a position of equal strength with its adversary. With food queues throughout the USSR growing by the day as Gorbachev's reign progressed, this was hardly the case. Gorbachev's affection for diplomacy might have also been motivated by a pacifist ideology, but it was mandated by weakness and the hope that slowing down the arms race would save the Soviet economy.

> Herzog is eager to agree with Gorbachev that the Cold War ended with a win-win outcome.

And then there is the awkward question of why the West still finds it hard to get along with Russia if both sides scored a mutual victory all those years ago. Moscow can always blame the current tensions on the United States, whose global war on terror undoubtedly resulted in undermining mutual trust. But the US-led invasion of Iraq and even September 11th itself happened long after NATO's enlargement into Eastern Europe, which had nonetheless been vigorously denounced by Gorbachev. If the end of the Cold War was truly the end of great-power rivalry – as the notion of a mutual victory inevitably implies – then why did Gorbachev continue to view the world through spheres of influence?

By the late 1990s, the West had done very little – if anything – to undermine Moscow's faith in the shared commitment to collective security. Regrettably, Herzog does not raise the immortal issue of the so-called "gentlemen's agreement", whereby Gorbachev was allegedly promised by George H.W. Bush that NATO would never enlarge into Eastern Europe. Yet even if Gorbachev is telling the truth about the existence – and violation – of such an agreement, the burden is still on him to explain how he was planning to reconcile Russia's maintenance of an Eastern sphere of influence with his universalistic new way of thinking – famously elaborated in

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his 1988 UN address. In other words, why would he fear the enlargement of an alliance led by his fellow victor in the Cold War?

Instead of confronting Gorbachev with this contradiction, Herzog poses the same question to one of Helmut Kohl's advisers, who shrewdly remarks that of all the threats Russia faces along its remaining borders, it would be foolish to fear its western one. Of course, in hindsight, the jury has long been out on Gorbachev's (lack of) cosmopolitan credentials – given his support for Putin's annexation of Crimea, for instance. But Herzog conveniently omits this.

I'll do it my way

Apart from Gorbachev himself, none of Herzog's interlocutors are Russian. This would not be an issue in an international politics documentary, but the main focus of Herzog's project is on Gorbachev's domestic achievements. The lack of Russian/Soviet interlocutors is – inadequately – compensated by Hungarian and Polish leaders, Miklos Nemeth and Lech Wałęsa. This makes it difficult to evaluate Gorbachev's efforts to achieve what he himself terms, at the start of the documentary, as "more democracy and more socialism".

While the failed outcome of these efforts is already well-known, it is still possible to examine whether Gorbachev at least did everything in his power to succeed in them. And that verdict would be damning even if one accepted Gorbachev's premise that democracy and socialism can be reconciled to begin with.

Again, this is not to take anything away from Gorbachev's bold embrace of his two signature reforms: *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). Either of these two policies would have been wholly unimaginable under any previous Soviet leader. After all, this was a regime that had in the past invaded two of its East European satellites to prevent more democracy, not to enable it. Yet the contrast between Gorbachev and his predecessors is just as stark as the gap between what Gorbachev did and what he could have done with the near-unlimited power at his disposal. And this is the only important metric. Evaluating someone's democratic credentials on the metrics of dictators like Stalin and Brezhnev, who had the most profound disdain for democratic freedom, is futile and blatantly apologetic.

But what is it exactly that Gorbachev could have done and did not do? Take another one of Gorbachev's presumably heroic acts: his tacit permission for the overthrow of Moscow's satellite regimes across the Warsaw Pact. Popularly termed "the Sinatra doctrine" (I'll do it my way), Gorbachev's actions were yet another revolutionary act if judged by the metric of his predecessors. Yet if assessed by logical real-time metrics, Gorbachev's acceptance of the establishment of democracy in

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the Eastern bloc sits very uneasily with his persistent refusal to hold competitive elections at home. The only two elections in the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's reign took place in 1989 and 1990. One of them was only contested within the Communist Party, and the other one – Gorbachev's own election as president – did not even include other contenders. Again, these uncomfortable details are fully absent from Herzog's narration.

Gorbachev's acceptance of democracy in the Eastern bloc sits uneasily with his persistent refusal to hold competitive elections at home

Admittedly, one of the reasons Gorbachev refrained from opening the Soviet system to the public was the enormous pressure he was facing from hardliners inside his party, who felt that even his limited democratisation efforts had already been exaggerated. The Soviet people received a sombre reminder of this danger in the summer of 1991, when the hard-line camp launched a coup and detained Gorbachev in his summer house. While Herzog expectedly takes full advantage of this opportunity to portray Gorbachev as a victim, thus implicitly justifying his previous reluctance to step up his reforms, the overall takeaway from this event is the exact opposite. Even with Gorbachev detained, the coup failed miserably and immediately, thus eliminating any future vulnerabilities to Gorbachev's rule from the right. As he reassumed control in August 1991, Gorbachev finally got the perfect opportunity to prove his democratic credentials beyond any doubt and call a free election. But he did not. Four months later, he had to resign.

Victim of circumstance or maker of his own tragedy?

Towards the end of the film, Herzog asks Gorbachev the ultimate question: Did he help kill the Soviet Union or was the USSR doomed long before his time? While certainly provocative, this is still not the right question. The answer seems to be "yes" to both parts. One is left wondering how Gorbachev would have responded had Herzog asked him a much simpler question: would he do it all over again? Would he still have gone down the reform path if he had known that the price for freedom would not only be the full collapse of socialism, but of the Soviet Union itself?

Here it is worth remembering the one massive caveat to the Sinatra Doctrine. In January 1991, as the Soviet Republic of Lithuania opted to go its own way, the regime responded by sending in tanks and murdering 14 civilians. While Gorbachev never took responsibility for giving the order, he is still responsible for

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Promotional poster of the film *Meeting Gorbachev* directed by Werner Herzog / 1091 films.

losing control of Moscow's response at best and for having threatened the exact same response just days before at worst. Herzog's treatment of the Baltic states is the most glaring error in his narrative, as he takes some poignant footage of the 600 kilometre Baltic Chain freedom marches and frames them as something that happened because of Gorbachev, despite his efforts to stop it.

One thing Herzog does get right, although for the wrong reasons, is his sympathetic verdict and presenting Gorbachev as a "tragic figure". Social democrats will always despise Gorbachev for refusing to hold democratic elections as part of his misguided balancing act between "more democracy and more [one-party] socialism". Neoliberals will deride him for squandering six years on saving the unsavable.

By informing us that his tombstone will read "we tried", Gorbachev and Herzog seem to be embracing his tragedy as a celebration of some alleged relentlessness in the face of unforgiving circumstances. This brings their two-hour-long exoneration effort full circle. If there is one central theme in *Meeting Gorbachev*, it is Gorbachev shunning responsibility for his failures, one after another. He talks about how he and Reagan tried to get rid of nuclear weapons, before adding that an unknown "they" kept the two most powerful men on the planet from having their way. The same "they" return in his musings on the present, as he remarks that "they won't let us live in peace". Are they the West? Is he still mistrustful of western leaders because of his subjective sense of betrayal over the so-called "gentlemen's agreement"? or are they the world leaders of today, lumped together in one unflattering box by an

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old man, nostalgic of a bygone era that may or may not have been brighter. In this plethora of vagueness, there is only one certainty: they are not him.

The kindred spirit who never was

Where does Herzog's project leave the West's love affair with Gorbachev? Right about where it found it. Herzog's rare foray into political documentaries seems to have been motivated by his rightful outrage of "the denigrating of Russia in western media". But what is unclear is why he thought that the glorification of an already-romanticised former tenant of the Kremlin would ease the animosity towards the current one. If anything, reaffirming Gorbachev's entrenched status of a western darling who stars in Pizza Hut commercials makes the current state of relations with the Kremlin seem like a menacing anomaly, rather than a mere continuation of centuries of tumultuous great-power relations.

It is not difficult to understand the German filmmaker's infatuation with – and simple human gratitude for – the man who made his country whole again. *Meeting Gorbachev* is content-rich, pleasant to watch and free of any explicitly propagandistic tendencies – Herzog is no Oliver Stone. But by providing a simplistically flattering account of a deeply flawed historical personality, he further contributes to western nostalgia of a kindred spirit in the Kremlin that never quite existed. Love affairs have consequences. NEE

Kristijan Fidanovski is a writer and researcher focusing on his native North Macedonia, the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. He holds an MA in Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies from Georgetown University. His research focuses on bilateral disputes between East European countries, as well as fertility trends and policies within them.

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Azerbaijan

A new chapter?

ANNA ZAMEJC

Azerbaijan may not be on the cusp of a major reform, but developments of recent months have formed the most interesting socio-political dynamics this rather boringly-stable Caspian Republic has seen since 2003.

It is not the first time "reform" has become a buzz word in Azerbaijan. The authorities made several pledges in the past to overhaul and diversify the economy and uproot corruption – especially ahead of elections or in moments of social unrest. Yet apart from a few cosmetic changes, the system and its people remained largely intact. So when the 57-year old president recently announced a package of sweeping reforms and started replacing older officials with young technocrats, many shook their heads in disbelief, taking it as yet another empty promise aimed to pacify the public and create a façade of change.

However, the unexpected dismissal of Ramiz Mehdiyev, the powerful head of the presidential administration, showed that some shift – at least on the personal level – may indeed be on the horizon in the Caspian Republic. But will it matter for the country's future direction?

Exodus of the Grey Cardinal

"For years, we have heard the same tale – the president is good and he wants to reform, but Ramiz Mehdiyev keeps throwing a wrench in the works. I wonder who they will have to blame now that Ramiz is gone," says a journalist from Baku, an

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avid observer of political life in the country and who asked to remain anonymous. On October 23rd 2019 the 81-year old Mehdiyev resigned from the post he had been occupying since 1995. A few days prior, President Ilham Aliyev accepted the resignation of two other elders, deputy prime ministers, Ali Hasanov and Hajibala Abutalibov, adding that he expects officials of age to make room for the younger generation. Only then did it become clear that Mehdiyev may be next to step down.

Who is the man who stayed in power for nearly a quarter of a century? Ramiz Mehdiyev, an academic, was the shadowy force behind many decisions and policy-making not only in the government of Ilham Aliyev, but also his father's government, the late Heydar Aliyev who passed on power to his son on his deathbed in 2003. Mehdiyev was known for his close ties to Vladimir Putin's Russia and was thought to be the main architect of repressive policies against civil society and dissenting voices which began in 2013. Many observers long believed his position was permanent: after all, as rumour had it, he was reporting to Moscow, not Baku.

"Ever since I remember, Ramiz Mehdiyev was there in the office, toiling away, working tirelessly, though no one really knew what he was working on," says a 46-year old exiled Azerbaijani journalist, Ismail Jalilov, who now runs an online TV show called *Let's Talk Straight* in Washington DC. "People in my circles referred to him as the grey cardinal, someone who pulls the strings behind the scenes. I call him *Koshchei Bezsmertny* (Immortal Koshchei), after a character from a Russian fairy tale: someone who is very old but never dies. A lot of people waited for [Mehdiyev] to go away, either by death or removal from office, so that meaningful reform would finally start," Jalilov recalls. "[He] was micro-managing everything in the government, from social policy to even textbooks for children. He resisted change with every fibre in his body."

According to Natig Jafarli, a Baku-based economist and political analyst who is also a board member of the opposition REAL party, the end of the Mehdiyev era may have major implications for the political game in town: "His removal is one of the important elements of the preparations for the 2020 elections. Before, it was always Mehdiyev who played the key role in formulation of the parliament. Yes, Ilham Aliyev would still approve the final list, but 90 per cent of the parliament team was recruited by Ramiz. But now, he's gone," says Jafarli.

Without Mehdiyev, Jafarli believes all political parties should take the February parliamentary elections seriously – even though the playing field for opposition candidates is likely to remain uneven. However, not all opposition parties agree, with the Popular Front of Azerbaijan still advocating for a boycott of the vote until a transparent system is in place.

"There is a second factor: with this move, the president in fact increased his own responsibility. Before, when arrests or other repressions would take place in

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the country, it was all connected to Mehdiyev who played the role of a scapegoat. If such things happen now, it would be Aliyev who would be primarily accountable. In this way, he actually complicated his own position," Jafarli adds.

Overrated

Jalilov is more cautious. "I don't believe the mere fact of replacing one person with another greenlights reform. There are enough vile characters in the Azerbaijani government. Not everybody who is old is bad and not everybody who is young is good. The system is the problem, not individuals," he says.

"We already have the example of Anar Baghirov, head of Azerbaijan's Bar Association: a well-educated, modern man who speaks foreign languages and now stands at the helm of reform. And look what he did to the college of lawyers: he completely destroyed it," laments Jalilov, pointing to the fact that under Baghirov, the Azerbaijani Bar Association has been punishing independent lawyers for representing opposition in political trials or revealing cases of torture either by disbarring or suspending them from the structure.

> The Azerbaijani Bar Association has been punishing independent lawyers for representing opposition in political trials.

Jalilov's concerns are echoed by Leila Alieva, an Oxford-based Azerbaijani analyst and head of the Centre for National and International Studies, who believes that Mehdiyev's departure is overrated and rather proves the system is sustainable even without the Grey Cardinal. "His dismissal was not associated with the same risk which was in place 10–15 years ago. There is a generational replacement of new managers who grew up in the system; they learnt the lessons and they will be able to run it. On the other hand, Mehdiyev may preserve some of his powers and possibly maintain some influence," Alieva says.

The question though is whether the iron-hand traditions will be kept in the Presidential Administration. The official that replaced Mehdiyev could not represent a stronger anti-thesis for the powerful figure of the Grey Cardinal: 40-year old Samir Nuriyev, technocratic and US-educated; he is hardly considered a threat to anyone.

Personnel revolution

With or without Ramiz Mehdiyev, the upper echelons of power have been undergoing a real shake-up for some time; and in most cases, in a rather swift,

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unpredictable manner. In the early summer of 2019, for instance, Ramil Usubov, a powerful minister of interior since 1994, was demoted to a newly created post in the presidential security council. The move was followed by the unexpected dismissal of two vice prime ministers and the head of the Presidential Administration. Finally, in late November, President Aliyev fired another powerful and highly unpopular official, namely, Ali Hasanov, who was an assistant to the president for public and political issues since 2015 [no relation to the vice prime minister who had been dismissed earlier – editor's note]. Dubbed a "chief censor" and "father of trolls," he run his own troll factory and was believed to be behind the repressive policies against independent journalists and media outlets.

> One of the main questions is why the president decided to accelerate the reshuffle at the top.

Many in Azerbaijan are still trying to grasp the depth of changes and its implications for domestic policy-making. But one of the main questions is why the president decided to accelerate the reshuffle at the top, and what the real end goal might be.

"Ilham Aliyev is creating a new government inside the old government to strengthen Mehriban Aliyeva (the wife of President Aliyev and first vice president, editor's note) and get ready for the transfer of power," says Gubad Ibadoglu, a visiting professor at Rutgers University in the United States and Senior Researcher at the Baku-based Economic Research Centre. Ibadoglu speculates that the real long-term goal for Aliyev is to prepare his wife to replace him as president. Aliyeva's November trip to Moscow, where she met with Vladimir Putin, was seen by many analysts as consolidating her position as a key political player in Azerbaijan and a trust-building exercise towards Russia.

Apart from political incentives, the ruling family may also have a strong economic rationale to change the rules of the game within the system. Natiq Jafarli points out that the transition from the oligarchic structure to a more managerial one (with technocrats joining the government) already began in 2016. One of the reasons is money. The old elite have simply become too costly for the ruling family.

"Over the past five years, Azerbaijan's budget has decreased in dollar terms by more than two times, down by almost 12.5 billion US dollars. In 2014, it was 25.5 billion, and in 2018, 11.7 billion," Jafarli explains in a recent policy paper. With the shrinking budgetary pie, the incentive to cut loyalty costs has become more pronounced. The move also helps the ruling family kill two birds with one stone: savings are being made and at the same time, the government's image is being revamped. In 2015, the average age of government officials was 58 (with the prime minister topping the club at 80), now it is 54. The ministerial teams are also increasingly western, not Soviet-educated.

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New faces, new change?

However, can a generational change herald in new, more liberal, policy-making? There is a lot of doubt, especially from civil society organisations which look at the government with a sceptical eye since the sector was decimated by the 2014 legal changes, making it almost impossible to receive foreign grants or register as an NGO.

"Real reforms should change the system and our president does not have the political intention to do that. That's why I do not believe these changes will take our country forward," says Zaur Gurbanly, a Baku-based youth activist and former political prisoner who spent one year and nine months in jail on bogus charges between 2013 and 2014.

Leila Alieva, the Oxford-based analyst, also thinks that the rejuvenation of the cadres is not enough to be considered a reform process. "So far, I see a consolidation of power by the president and his family by appointing people who have proved to be loyal to the president. It does not mean he is prepared to do reform. Whether he's doing it to have a free hand to start diversification, it remains to be seen," she says. "If one wants to run reforms in a country like Azerbaijan, even with the help of technocrats, it would make sense to take experts from NGO circles, at least for the position of deputy ministers. And we don't see this. These are people from the same circles. The elite remain the same and they are connected to each to other."

Her views are echoed by Ibadoglu, who does not believe new faces in the government will be a major breakthrough for the country. "The current government system in Azerbaijan undermines the role of a person and that's why personnel changes do not lead to systemic change."

Ibadoglu cites the case of Mikkayil Jabbarov, a rising technocratic star in Azerbaijan. Formerly a minister of education and tax, the 43-year old Sacramento graduate has been recently appointed a minister of the economy, a new government body that absorbed the ministry of taxes, among others. Jabbarov also comes from the inner circles. As minister of education and tax, Jabbarov was fairly respected for his work. Now he is given significantly more prerogatives and is entrusted with major structural reforms.

"Why did Jabbarov become minister of the economy? This is one of the shining examples how structural change is targeted towards individuals. He is reliable and faithful to the ruling family. He's also a man of integrity and is not corrupt. But Jabbarov is not an independent decision-maker; he's a manager. And for the reform process, it is very important for someone to take on responsibility. For example, in Poland, it was Leszek Balcerowicz, in Russia it was Yegor Gaidar, in the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus. And the problem in Azerbaijan is that we don't have our own Balcerowicz, Gaidar or Klaus," Ibadoglu concludes.

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Can the economy be reformed?

Indeed, the state of Azerbaijan's economy may require a larger intervention. "After the 2015 devaluation of the currency, social conditions are getting worse year by year," Ibadoglu says. Although state statistics may not reflect the scale of the problem, inflation is believed to be on the rise, along with unemployment. That was one of the reasons why the government twice announced an increase of the minimum wage in 2019. However, an increase in social spending also means there is more of a burden on the state budget and expenditures cuts – mainly in the domestic investment.

"According to draft budget projections for this year, the deficit will be around 2.8 billion manats (1.47 billion euros): the highest in 10 years, amounting to 3.3 per cent of GDP," Ibadoglu says. According to the analyst, another major issue the domestic economy is facing is a slow-down in growth. The tax and customs reform initiated by Mikkayil Jabbarov aimed to increase transparency, tackle corruption and bring more money into the budget. Despite good intentions, not everything worked out as planned. It is one of the reasons why in the World Bank's Doing Business ranking, Azerbaijan dropped from 25th in 2019 to 34th in 2020.

From the perspective of medium-sized business owners, the main issue with the new tax regulations is a lack of communication. When asked about how the new policies affected small and medium size business owners, an entrepreneur from western Azerbaijan, who owns a few markets and a restaurant, complained that not enough information about the new rules had been provided and, as a result, many business owners were fined for failing to comply with the new requirements. The authorities eventually reversed some problematic rules, but the fines remained in place.

"Taxes have increased more than in the previous periods. For example, a businessman who has to pay up to 1,000 manat (520 euros) now is paying more tax without knowing the reason," says an entrepreneur who asked to remain anonymous. However, the major reason why the overall tax reform could not be fully implemented was because of resistance from some oligarchs.

"The tax reform failed because in Azerbaijan there is no border between the political and economic power. It creates a conflict of interest. If they are going to reform the economy, they will lose their profit from the business sectors," Ibadoglu says. He adds this factor makes a potential large-scale overhaul of the economy a very difficult task.

So if the authorities were serious about reform, where should they start? Both analysts, Gubad Ibadoglu and Natif Jafarli, immediately point out to the inefficient and corrupt courts that remain under heavy political control: "We are tired of re-

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peating that there can be no real economic reform without courts. They won't be effective," says Jafarli.

There seems to be an understanding among government officials that in order to bring foreign investment into the country, they need to guarantee property rights. However, from their perspective, providing independent courts is a politically risky move that could pave the way to the end of their rule. That is why an alternative proposal is considered: the creation of special economic courts, like in Singapore or Kazakhstan. It could work for foreign investors, though it would have little relevance for protecting the property rights of local actors.

"Economic courts would look into issues between economic actors. One firm could sue another firm. Businesses in Azerbaijan mainly have problems with state agencies and local authorities, so how would an economic court help in such cases? They would be completely ineffective in our situation. So here, we really need serious political will to reform the court system and to take away some prerogatives from ministries that can interfere in business," Jafarli argues.

Analysts point to the urgent need to provide further measures to de-monopolise the economy and decentralise power in Azerbaijan.

Analysts also point to the urgent need to provide further measures to de-monopolise the economy and decentralise power: "most of Azerbaijani business and investment is concentrated in Baku, but still, Baku remains the only capital city among the members of the Council of Europe where the mayor is appointed by the president, not elected," argues Ibadoglu, who believes that a more transparent system of electing city mayors could help increase the transparency and effectiveness of state investment.

Any hope for change?

The final question is whether the ongoing personnel changes and attempts to transform the economy will have any impact on the political processes in the country. Most observers agree that the change is not designed to open up the political landscape, but rather to cement the rule of the ruling family and prepare the authorities for the inevitable arrival of the post-oil era, in which petro-dollars will not be so easily available due to declining crude oil production and potential volatility in the oil-price market. The latter may give incentives for the government to gradually liberalise the economy, but it holds little hope for loosening the screws on government critics.

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The October demonstration of opposition in Baku's city centre (unsanctioned by the authorities) which was brutally dispersed by the police and special forces, and during which several of its members, including the Popular Front Party leader Ali Kerimli, were reportedly subject to torture, shows, once again, that despite the changing image, business as usual continues in the government's approach to political opponents.

Meanwhile, in an interesting twist of narrative, in the late autumn of 2019, President Aliyev himself started criticising his own government for… obstructing the process of change, and "casting a shadow over the reform".

"There was recently an article saying that the things president mentions now I had been writing about and got jailed for in August 2016. And here we have the head of state talk about corruption in the country, systemic problems, and officials who are working badly. So he's now becoming a leader of the opposition! A president and opposition in one," Jafarli concludes. NEE

Anna Zamejc is a Prague-based freelance journalist and writer, specialising in Azerbaijan and the politics of conflict.

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The Herculean task of saving Europe's oldest spa town

PHOTOS AND TEXT: ELIZABETH SHORT

Băile Herculane, a small town of about 5,000 in western Romania, claims to be the oldest spa town in Europe. According to legend, the Roman god Hercules once stopped in the valley to bathe, lending the town its name. Today, a statue of the hero stands proudly in the centre, but his crumbling surroundings appear to be just a few years shy of becoming a ghost town.

It is after sunset, and the sound of trumpets blare through Băile Herculane station, signalling the arrival of old trains from the communist era. The platform is lined with shell-embossed lanterns, while unkempt vines drape over the seating area. An alpine scent permeates the air, and even at night, in the green glow of the lamps, the mist that hovers around the surrounding mountains is visible. No one who departs the train is under 50 and, as is common with most places where young people are few and far between, the station has retained the feeling of being from another era.

With scriptures dating back to 153 AD, Băile Herculane, a small town of about 5,000 inhabitants in western Romania, claims to be the oldest spa town in Europe. It appears as if it is straight out of a fairy-tale – in fact mythology is part of the area's genetic make-up. According to legend, the Roman god Hercules once stopped in the valley to bathe, lending the town its name. Today, a statue of the hero stands proudly in the centre, but his crumbling surroundings appear to be just a few years shy of becoming a ghost town.

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Austrian hotspot

Although many buildings are bordering on derelict, the architecture in Băile Herculane is striking and diverse, owing to its tumultuous history. The town's historic baths were primarily developed by the Romans 2,000 years ago and can still be visited today. However it was the Austrians who invested significantly in the area, after taking administrative control of it from the Ottomans in 1718. It was not long before Băile Herculane became a hotspot for the Viennese aristocracy who developed its infrastructure and commissioned many of the baroque buildings that can be found throughout the area.

Băile Herculane became a hotspot for the Viennese aristocracy, who developed its infrastructure.

Among them is the train station – which was a replica of a Viennese hunting castle, the Rococo Elisabeth residence – built as a holiday home for Empress Sisi, and the Casino complex – an ornate arcade and pavilion embellished with hand-painted murals and decorative wrought iron.

The spa town witnessed another revival during the Romanian communist period. Labour laws introduced in the 1950s guaranteed holidays for workers and Băile Herculane rose to prominence as a place where citizens could spend their state-allotted holiday vouchers. Treatments at the communist health spas assured visitors that the medicinal springs would help cure their ailments. It was during this era that the architectural landscape was again diversified. Many modernist and brutalist structures were erected. Among them was Hotel Roman, which today is a favourite among socialist modernist architecture fans and draws in pilgrims from all over Europe.

It was also towards the end of the communist period, as funds became more and more sparse, that the old imperial buildings began to fall into a state of disrepair. After the fall of the Iron Curtain the decline escalated, as state-owned buildings were privatised only to be neglected by their new owners.

Mission to save Neptune baths

Oana Chirila, a Romanian architecture student, grew up visiting Băile Herculane as a young child. After making a nostalgic return trip to the place several years ago, she was struck by the dilapidated conditions of many of the buildings. "On the one hand, I was impressed by the beauty of the old city centre and its potential, but I was also just shocked by the state of decay most of the buildings were in," she says.

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According to legend, the Roman god Hercules once stopped in the valley to bathe here, lending the town its name. Today, a statue of the hero stands proudly in the centre.

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The Neptune Baths – a grand imperial structure that dominates the town centre. Surrounded by a moat of overgrown shrubbery, a wrought iron bridge paves the way to the regal but rusting structure.

Last winter, part of the roof collapsed, making the grade-A listed building's restoration more urgent than ever.

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The building is owned by the local administration, further complicating the legal process of gaining access to the structure to begin restoration.

Inside the Neptune Baths, an ornate golden fountain remains, and stucco detailing can be found on the walls.

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Despite the legal limbo, in October 2019, the project finally gained the permit to begin work.

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Roused by the urgency and lack of measures being taken to save the heritage site, she wrote an article to draw awareness about the area on a viral website BoredPanda. Within just three days, the article gained 20,000 views. Soon people from around the world began writing to her, asking how they could help. By 2017, the Herculane Project had fully come to life. Drawing a diverse group of people from all over the world, they have a following of over 18,000 likes on Facebook alone.

The project is mainly focused on the Neptune Baths – a grand imperial structure that dominates the town centre. Surrounded by a moat of overgrown shrubbery, a wrought iron bridge paves the way to the regal but rusting structure. Inside, an ornate golden fountain remains, and stucco detailing can be found on the walls. However, many of the rooms have been stripped bare and the floorboards are chaotically uprooted. Last winter, part of the roof collapsed, making the grade-A listed building's restoration more urgent than ever.

A sign at the end of the bridge that faces the baths warns people not to trespass. "But people enter without authorisation anyway. They graffiti the walls, break things and steal historically valuable objects", Oana explains. Nevertheless, she is on a mission to raise 100,000 euro to help with the restoration. Unfortunately however, public trespassers are not the only people she has to be concerned about – there is also the owners of the building and land.

"The management of the (former) local administration did an exchange with the estate that led to a judicial mess, where it ended up with more than one owner, and a sequester on the land", she says, elaborating on complications that prevent the project from having access to the building.

Furthermore, in Romania, owners of heritage buildings are liable to conserve them, restore them and keep them in a good state. If they open up for business without doing this to an adequate standard, then they can be fined and expropriated – meaning that the state can confiscate it from them. It is suspected that for this reason, many private owners do not open their properties for business.

Legal limbo

In 2001, much of the land in Herculane's historical centre was sold to a company owned by Romanian businessman, Iosif Armas, with the understanding that he would invest and restore the buildings. He is now on trial on an embezzlement charge linked to the deal. To add to the story, the town's former mayor, Nicușor Vasilescu, has also been charged in connection with the sell-off.

Regarding the Neptune Baths, Armas may own the land, however the building is owned by the local administration, further complicating the legal process

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of gaining access to the structure to begin restoration. Despite the legal limbo, in October the project finally gained the permit to begin work. So far 40,000 euro have been raised by Project Herculane, which will go towards an emergency intervention that would allow the partial restoration of the baths.

Regardless of political scandal, the project has been well received by the authorities. "Sometimes we don't communicate as well as we could, but they have supported us with everything," Oana says. She however warns that there needs to be a more streamlined approach when it comes to envisioning the town's future: "It requires an integrated strategy, one that encompasses the medical, touristic and cultural facets. Right now, the development is chaotic. There aren't local administrative rules in place yet to restrict the actions of certain developers."

Oana emphasises that restoration is a discipline defined by care and precision, the respect of values and the correct use of materials. "As an architect, working in such an environment means you are a doctor, a keeper of all the decades that shaped the value of a monument. Sometimes the building ends up becoming the architect, but really, history knows what's better. All we have to do is listen." With more and more damage caused each winter, the Herculean task of saving Europe's oldest spa town is now more urgent than ever. NEE

Elizabeth Short is a freelance British journalist focusing primarily on art, culture and politics in Eastern Europe.

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The poisonous apple

WOJCIECH PRZYBYLSKI

Access to information is a fundamental human right and it has helped build the sovereignty of nations. In the years to come, the concept of "information sovereignty", advocated by Moscow or Beijing, may turn the tide and damage democratic empowerment. Central and Eastern Europeans should care for their own information sovereignty, but in the first place we should get it right.

In autumn 2018 Poland was celebrating its 100 years of independence. On that occasion the European Solidarity Centre and private television station, TVN24, organised a televised discussion with historians who reflected on the significance of reinstating sovereignty. Timothy Snyder, the American historian and author of *Bloodlands*, spoke at large about the many dimensions of the concept, and invoked the notion "information sovereignty" – a collective effort to establish free media as well as developing countermeasures to push back against aggressive disinformation campaigns from Bolshevik Russia. Information warfare was as present and real a danger back then as it is today; except that wireless meant mostly long wave radio broadcast.

Idealism and sovereignty

Late October that same year, Poland's Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, picked up the idea of information sovereignty from Snyder, agonising over the disappointing performance of his party in the local elections. He directly referred to

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the media ownership by German companies in Poland, indicating that they were partly responsible for influencing electoral results – a common argument used by many who do not perform well in an electoral race. To make his case, he discussed the controversies surrounding the attempted purchases of German newspapers by American companies, and indicated that foreign capital withdrew after large scale public protests.

But he missed the point – mostly likely alluding to the 2005 purchase of the left-of-centre *Berliner Zeitung* by British and American companies. This was the first foreign takeover of a media outlet in post-1945 Germany, but the new owners decided to withdraw from the deal due to economic calculus after the purchase not because of protests. Moreover, since then the newspaper belongs to German businessman, Holger Friedrich (ironically for the Polish anti-communist prime minister), a former Stasi agent as revealed by a story in 2019 by *Spiegel*.

The resilient democracies that have been able to develop critical thinking and media literacy programmes have a public that values readership.

The trouble with finding a good case for Morawiecki's version of information sovereignty is perhaps his old-school romantic idealism. The very same principle that conceived the philosophy of nationalism in 18th century Germany; a striking thought-symmetry could be drawn to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who authored a book with a much telling title, *The Closed Commercial State*. Such a case for sovereignty – pursued now by many other inward looking politicians – comes with the ambition to limit all interference in the country they manage.

The ironic trouble with this perspective is that, over time, the circle of trusted men shrinks along with their perception, while the world perpetually pursues more and more interconnectedness. The idealism of men and women in power also stops them from referring to practical examples of how it can be implemented in political regimes that the idealism holds in despise. Morawiecki could have used the case of Viktor Orbán and the Hungarian government taking almost full control of the national media space – obviously one other policy blueprint from Budapest that has been studied in Warsaw. But he did not, likely because of rising corruption in contemporary Hungary that comes in package with illiberal policies.

Briefly after Morawiecki's speech, I called Timothy Snyder for an interview with *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* and Res Publica Nowa to clarify his position on a potentially contagious idea that he happened to inject into Polish political discourse. Snyder spoke about the future challenges to Poland's sovereignty, as well as to other countries, and that wars today are fought more in the minds than on

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actual battlefields. This view, drawn from Carl von Clausewitz and others, helped Russia develop active measures, including modern-style propaganda. Meanwhile, resilient democracies have been able to develop critical thinking and media literacy programmes, mainly thanks to a public that values readership. Snyder understands that, in the digital age, the main democratic challenge is in retaining a bottom-up approach to information sovereignty: a framework in which free, independent and pluralistic journalism can flourish.

The importance of local journalism

One of the most serious debates about potential democratic backsliding today is the collapse of local journalism. Local communities, so fundamental to democracy, are the most exposed to misinformation and deception. Back in 2015 the *New York Times*'s "The Agency" report provided compelling evidence how local America is under attack from Russian disinformation networks. Such disinformation operations were deliberately carried out where the public sphere was the weakest. The digital age and the financial crisis are far too often cited as the reasons for the decline in media and journalism, giving way to a fatalist view of the survival of the fittest. While *The Economist* and the *New York Times* thrive with millions of online subscribers, many smaller outlets have been collapsing; and professionals are abandoning the trade.

Fortunately, in Central Europe there is some hope – for instance, with success stories like *DennikN* in Slovakia. This digital daily was set up by journalists who resented the idea of a big corporate owner. It quickly grew and soon became the country's top news subscription service, breaking even in just under five years. Similar cases have followed across the region, with a digital transformation allowing some to spring up.

> Local communities, so fundamental to the functioning of democracy, are the most exposed to misinformation and deception.

People are hungry for news and analysis on how events of the day can be explained. Even in Hungary, where the government took control of a bulk of outlets, there is a degree of experimentation. In 2018 the *HVG* weekly – one of the few outlets still independent of government control – started a new online subscription service featuring long-form quality stories, and is now paving the way for quality, independent media in the country. Perhaps more innovation with digital models in Hungary would help the current situation. Current digital tools serve Orbán to not nurture plurality and independent inquiry, but as efficient government mouthpieces. The journal-

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ists lose their jobs, while the newspapers they used to work for replicate stories, headlines and even photos ridiculing the notion of citizen's right to information.

Trends

This comes in parallel with the expansion of the Kremlin's narrative through more and more information channels, thus exposing Hungary's information sovereignty. Understandably, in 2019 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) decided to resume its services in Hungarian. RFE/RL was established in 1949 by the US Agency for Global Media to provide objective information to societies subjected to mass propaganda by various communist regimes. It recently re-opened Romanian and Bulgarian branches – all of them as online platforms, rather than radio waves.

It may sound like a paradox, but multinational stakeholders in the region guaranteed more information sovereignty than do the national governments now. Although the nationalisation of the press is not the answer, neither is complete privatisation. The changes in the media landscape that we see in Central Europe may soon be a trend that we witness happening across the rest of continental European journalism.

Levels of trust in Central Europeans in established (paid) media brands are very low and there is a preference towards alternative (free) sources instead. This is striking when compared to public attitudes towards the media in Germany. Trust in journalism in Central Europe is undermined from several different angles; though the same can be said about politicians, who have a lower level of public trust. President Miloš Zeman of Czechia and the former prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, even competed to discredit the profession of journalism. The former showed a fake Kalashnikov gun tagged "for the press", while the latter called journalists prostitutes not long before one was murdered (Ján Kuciak, in Slovakia). It is hard to imagine that quality driven subscription models (based on trust) will quickly develop when those outlets are fighting against a very strong current.

Yet the press is just one flip of the coin in the battle for information sovereignty. In Slovakia cultural archetypes and cultural diplomacy led by Russia may be one of the reasons for the country's inability to set itself apart from post-imperial dependency on Moscow. Aliaksei Kazharski, a researcher at Comenius University in Bratislava, recently explained that "pro-Kremlin narratives and their promoters are also sometimes legitimised by established cultural and educational institutions that are anchored in a reputable tradition. Thus, for instance, the Slovak Matica (Matica Slovenská) is one of the oldest Slovak cultural institutions which played a key role in the 19th-century national revival movement and continues to receive subsidies from the Slovak state budget. In recent years, Matica's close ties with pro-Russian

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radicals in Slovakia as well as its controversial interpretations of the Holocaust aroused public suspicion… Similarly, the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, established in 1969 as a veteran organisation, has published a magazine which, as Slovak journalists put it, became a tool of 'Russian propaganda'. The magazine did indeed actively republish dubious material, containing anti-western conspiracy theories and Russian-inspired disinformation tropes…"

State of mind

In a contemporary democracy there is an understandable reluctance to make use of the term sovereignty. Its poisonous legacy draws from pre-democratic sources of power and the mystical authority derived from the powerful and the divine. No wonder that Hobbes puts a monster – the Leviathan – as the archetype of the liberal sovereign power that emerges from the contractual concessions of individual freedom.

It is also little surprising that contemporary authoritarian regimes are so attracted to the concept of sovereignty. By claiming the term, autocrats like Vladimir Putin suppress voices of dissent that call for democratic accountability and limited government. Russia, too large territorially to act as a functional political space, is more like a state of mind, so in order to control the physical space Moscow believes it needs to control the mindset and the information that make it up.

By declaring sovereignty over a geographic territory, the economy and even the internet, Putin has tried to claim the high ground in the struggle for the hearts and minds of his fellow citizens. In reality, he has pushed the fight back to the West. Unable to defend itself from the democratic narrative, Russia went on the offensive and today it may infest the democratic mindset if it is not properly recognised or addressed.

Governments that knowingly restrict their citizens' access to information, properly help hostile countries.

Democratic sovereignty in general, and information sovereignty in particular, must be the opposite. By advocating democratic information sovereignty Central Europeans should fight for the ability to defend themselves against domestic and foreign propaganda. And it should be recognised that governments that knowingly restrict their citizens' access to information, properly help hostile countries. Central Europe, even with its contemporary autocratic sentiments, will never be as good in exercising such control as the Russians or Chinese. Instead by trying to imitate them, Central Europeans should understand that their citizens will become more susceptible to the influence of foreign powers.

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The Chinese style of information sovereignty is incompatible with the democratic legacy and will ultimately fail in Hungary, Poland or other countries of Europe. But since the Chinese and Russian information sovereignty models are more offensive in nature, they need to be taken into account. If so then the task for our governments is to educate the public so they will be able to resist authoritarian influences, especially in the information space.

The still young Central European democracies have been reluctant to address the idea of information sovereignty. Yet, the idea is infectious and spreads regardless. Ultimately, it will take a collective effort to take back control of the media.

Wojciech Przybylski is the editor in chief of *Visegrad Insight* and chairman of the Res Publica Foundation in Warsaw.

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The role of a journalist in the age of disinformation

ADAM LELONEK

Information aggressors, especially the Russian Federation, are not "reinventing the wheel". They use existing mechanisms. Journalists and the media, regardless of the provenance, are the first on the "information front" in the war over people's hearts and minds. They have a choice: ignore or refute this fact or accept their role as a key element in state security and the information space.

The Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 introduced a new type of warfare which has proved very effective in the digital era. This new type of war is no longer aimed at taking over territories or resources, but rather influencing human behaviour. It involves non-kinetic activities, which are undertaken in cyber space and are cheaper than traditional methods, but – most importantly – more effective when applied towards western societies which are largely unprepared for this kind of hostile actions.

Surprisingly, an alarming number of people in the West still refuse to believe in the scale and impact of Russia's intervention in their states. What is more, in parallel to some partial improvements in analytical and preventive mechanisms, a series of other, negative trends have also started to emerge. Among the most dangerous are: populism, polarisation and radicalisation of public discourse. This context has given the field of journalism new problems and challenges. Yet there seems to be no agreement, or indeed an understanding, how to overcome the situation. This is true at both domestic and international levels.

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Journalist vs media worker

Limited funds and human resources are clearly some of the biggest problems that media organisations face today. Falling fees for individual writers, which are the result of other market trends, lead to lower quality journalism. Further, lower pay, to be sure, discourages smart, young people from entering the field of journalism. It is also a reflection of society's attitude towards information. In essence, we get what we pay for.

The demand for immediate information also hinders the process of verification, which explains why some journalists and media outlets publish information that is false or misleading. In short, the nature of the media in recent years, as a result of, among others, the growing influences and trends in social media, has changed. Journalists have little time for content-related work or investigative journalism while news production has been replaced by the passive repetition of press releases. Not surprisingly, the term "media worker" is becoming more and more popular and sometimes it even replaces the word "journalist".

The need to attract advertisers explains the decisions made by media owners. The search for profit can also be noticed in the selection of themes or content of many outlets. The situation of local and regional media can be considered even more worrying as, in addition to the challenges they share with national media, they are often victims of local political and business pressures. Unfortunately, insufficient attention is paid to investigative journalism, and not only the kind that focuses on financial and political matters, but also the kind that highlights disinformation, its sources, mechanisms and actors. Instead, the overall attitude to media content shared by many journalists can be paraphrased with the following statement: "articles should be short and simple". We can see that this false assumption is now backfiring and has evidently contributed to lower quality journalism.

Complex issues cannot be properly understood with short and simple accounts. The new threats require a greater understanding of psychological, informational and digital matters. Unfortunately the media world seems to be unprepared for such challenges.

Parallel phenomena

Overall the following parallel trends are now taking place in the West: information-related threats have become more popular; there are not enough experts on disinformation; state structures are unwilling to share evidence on disinformation,

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nor do they inform the public about their activities in this area; there is a lack of co-ordination of policies aimed at improving citizens' safety in information and cyber spheres, which leads to the situation where societies are insufficiently aware of the threats they face; there is too much interest in some phenomena (e.g. fake news, bots and trolls), which are in fact part of larger problems; and the emergence of profit-driven agencies that would like to take advantage of an increased interest in information threats, but which often lack knowledge and experience.

The parallel existence of the above phenomena leads to even greater chaos as well as influences the perception of the real problems and the solutions that are necessary to reduce them. Thus, journalists play an even more important role in popularising new facts, research findings, analyses or reports on information security.

Noticeably, however, there is little consensus in the media world. There is no agreed definition of the information threats nor on the methods that should be used to fight them, and most importantly, on the role that media plays in the overall process. One of the consequences of this state of affairs is that some journalists have taken on the role as analyst or expert. Yet almost simultaneously a different problem has emerged, namely, there is a very limited exchange of knowledge and experience between different professional groups. As a result, while journalists tend to stay within their own areas of expertise, so do experts and academics.

A lack of interaction and the sharing of data and knowledge between different disciplines generates some grave consequences. It limits the development of effective solutions as well as diluting the perception of the nature of information threats. Consequently, there is little overlap between the parallel information worlds, which only generates more confusion for the "average" consumer of information.

There is no agreed definition of the information threats nor on the methods that should be used to fight them.

Nonetheless, some groups, including public officials, interact with each other and influence one another in regards to information threats. Depending on the level of co-operation, they become an element in societal resilience on both the domestic and transnational level (e.g. the EU, NATO). But it is the media that have the greatest influence on society, especially when it comes to shaping people's attitudes. That is why media outlets should consider it a duty to be part of the resilience against disinformation and misinformation.

Lastly, many only limit information threats to the spreading of false information. In fact, what we should understand as information threats is part of a wider spectrum of diverse social, psychological, economic, ideological, political, cultural, linguistic, sociological, military, national security and cyber-security issues.

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Fragile status quo

In the West, apart from the Nordic and Baltic countries, there is limited co-operation between the state and civil society. There are very few analytical and research endeavours that are of an interdisciplinary nature or combine different groups and disciplines. In the West information security is treated separately from cyber-security, while in Russia it is included with state military and security policy, in which they are treated as complementary. The West also suffers from the problem of separate activities being undertaken by civilian state agencies and separate ones by the military. On top of that, there are separate activities in the third sector.

Noticeably, western countries also lack social dialogue on disinformation and strategic communication aimed at informing the public about state activities, as well as explaining the nature of information threats. Similarly, in the NGO sector there is a visible lack of co-operation between academia and civil society. The latter, although underfunded, have an impressive know-how and thus, in certain areas, are able to work faster and more effectively than highly bureaucratic state structures. There is no doubt that maintaining the status quo lowers the mechanisms of defence against disinformation in the West and only makes life easier for its enemies.

In the West information security is treated separately from cyber-security, while in Russia it is included with military and security policy.

In a large part, the work that is carried out in academia and by the NGO sector is not always respected by the media as it is not "newsy" enough. This leads to a kind of a vicious circle which impedes halting the dangerous and destructive tendencies which include downgrading the topic of information threats solely to fake news and increasing people's awareness about new threats. In other words, western societies are not completely aware of the scale of the danger that exists with disinformation, nor do they understand its nature. This is because technological changes happen faster than the implementation of new security mechanisms which at the same time are not popularised actively enough.

There is no impulse to change the status quo. The circle of the self-propelling mechanism closes up. Yet, with too much attention paid to just some aspects of information threats (such as fake news or bots), western states respond to narrowly defined problems. In other words, focusing on bots or fake news does not say enough about disinformation overall. We need to be better equipped to identify the broad spectrum of disinformation activities – who is responsible for it, what is the background and what is the aim?

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Moreover, the ways in which media is consumed by young people is still an under-researched field. However it is clear from what is out there that young people operate more outside mainstream media, getting information from different sources than previous generations – including blogs, vlogs, social media, internet memes, niche portals and quasi-media. The messages they absorb are usually presented in video or images, and not text. In other words, millions of youngsters in the West, who will soon have more and more impact on the socio-economic situation in their states, are now under the broad influence of various information threats. Even if mainstream media outlets change their approach, it will not be enough to stop the many negative trends already in play. It maybe even be too late – as is well-known, habits are easy to create, but much harder to change or eliminate.

Similar observations can be made in regards to other generations who started using the internet at an older age. In many instances, they have not developed the adequate mechanisms to filter or consume information. Nor do they have sufficient knowledge about cyber-security and online risks. The latter is actually something both groups have in common.

Bubbles

Knowing the role that Russia plays in this process, we should nonetheless remember that the Kremlin is not the sole actor which has the means, resources and political will to use it against the West. Other state and non-state actors have similar intentions to harm the West. Private players, who are harvesting big data and have information about millions of online users, may also seek (or be used indirectly) to capitalise on societies' susceptibility to disinformation, even if it means hurting fellow citizens. For this reason, there is an even greater need for interdisciplinary analytical research and preventive measures.

The way in which we filter information can be seen as a transfer of our convictions, and emotions onto the virtual world. This effect is known as "the filter bubble" and works the same for all online users. This process creates cognitively closed areas which define the way in which we consume information – the so-called "information bubbles". They also influence our perception about the world and events. One person can, of course, be part of many different information bubbles; there are thousands, if not millions of them, including those where you can find conspiracy theories, those with liberal or conservative bias, and those that provide various interpretations of historical events, and social issues. Additionally, cognitive biases are amplified online, no matter the years of professional training, practice or seniority. Among them is the blind spot bias, which explains why we recognise

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the impact of biases on the judgment of others, while failing to see the impact of biases on our own judgment. It makes us feel secure and sure of our arguments or even rightfulness, even without a basis in reason or fact.

Overall, the intention of information aggressors is to disturb, destabilise or destroy the whole information system of a state. This should not be understood just as an infrastructural or technical issue, but it should also be seen through its social, cultural and political prism. Put differently, groups and individuals can all equally be the objects of an attack. The recipients of information attacks also include the elite, journalists, academics, and public officials who operate in different social groups. Hence, we each find ourselves within our own individual information bubble, and we are all susceptible to our own cognitive limitations.

The above challenges highlight the ever greater role that journalists can play in the fight against disinformation. However, one group by itself is not enough to build real societal resilience and enhance the level of information security. Today's challenges are highly complex and the responses that are needed require a multidisciplinary approach with a strong support from the state and society. Thus, priority should be given to education (particularly critical thinking) and communication (especially strategic communication). Countering disinformation should also be undertaken in co-operation with the private sector which could offer new solutions. States such as Sweden and Finland are taking innovative approaches and should be looked at as model-like systemic solutions built on a very solid and stable social foundation.

Small steps

In this era of disinformation, journalists should first and foremost diligently work with information. Being diligent, however, is not tantamount to being objective – these are two completely different things. Moreover, there is no doubt that information security depends on us – the users. It also depends on our will, competence and determination. Thus it is impossible to ensure permanent security, just like it would be impossible to eliminate unemployment.

Declarations and assurances that we are safe in terms of information or cyber security are also a road to nowhere, or pure populism. Threats are constantly evolving, and the more advanced analytical and preventive measures undertaken in the West inspire its opponents to modify their activities. To counteract this, there needs to be more co-operation between diverse groups and disciplines, but something also needs to be done with the increasing social polarisation which is negatively affecting western societies.

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Information aggressors, especially the Russian Federation, are not "reinventing the wheel". They are using existing mechanisms. The journalists and the media, regardless of the provenance, are the first on the "information front" in the war over people's hearts and minds. They have a choice: ignore or refute this fact or accept their role as a key component in state security and the information space.

While several factors will determine whether they will effectively fulfil this role, it is also true that sometimes not much is needed. For example, as a start some western journalists could finally stop pretending that *Sputnik* and *RT* (former *Russia Today*) are serious media outlets in the western understanding of the term. It would be just enough to stop reinforcing their messaging (designed to create informational chaos in our societies) or legitimising them for the western audiences by quoting them like an objective source. Instead they should consider them as elements of an aggressive foreign policy machine which is being implemented by a state that has been waging information and psychological war against the West. Therefore, only continued and interdisciplinary efforts that involve state, social and media actors will lead to much more than revolutionary, but at the same time chaotic and imprudent, activities that make the front pages of major dailies.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Adam Lelonek, PhD, is an independent Polish expert on information threats.

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Freedom and censorship in the post-truth era

A debate during the 34th Days of Contemporary Art in Białystok with Edwin Bendyk, Alex Freiheit, Father Wojciech Lemański, Tomasz Sikora, Joanna Wichowska and Serhiy Zhadan. Moderated by: Anna Łazar

ANNA ŁAZAR: We are meeting on the day when Europeans are voting for their representatives to the European Parliament to talk about freedom and censorship in the post-truth era. While the former two concepts, truth and censorship, have long been used, the term post-truth became most popular in 2016 as something that accompanies the rapidly growing acceptance of populism in the public sphere. Ralph Keyes, in his well-known 2004 book titled *The Post-Truth Era. Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* states that post-truth emerged from the emotions of the post-war generation of Americans who collectively recognised that their emotional truth and willingness to be associated with certain events are more important than facts. The book shows that half-truths and modified interpretations of events are a common practice. Today we are in the process of shaping a new global order and that is why we should be very careful in regards to everything that this concept encompasses.

The success of post-truth is not only a result of technological progress or our emotional hunger, which has emerged as a reaction to the deepening atomisation. Neither is it a response to our need to be a part of a community. It is also to be found in the weakening of the previous institutional ways of reacting which were regulating public debate in Europe, and Poland as well. Culture is one area where experimentation has always been present. Here, artists break taboos and try to see humanity as it really is. The autonomy of culture has always been the subject of negotiations. However, now the need to defend it seems even greater than before. In our country this is especially true in regards to the activities of the ministry of culture and the attempts to take away freedom from both the artists and the institutions. Freedom is never granted indeed; people need to reach for it on their own.

EDWIN BENDYK: Let me start with a more personal experience and then

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I will move to the topic of post-truth, which leads to the questions about the future and the relationship between the institutionalised world of culture and the world which is emerging with the development of new technologies, which change the functioning of both culture and the communication process. The early days of the political career of Poland's current minister of culture overlapped with the premiere of the play based on Elfriede Jelinek stories from the collection titled *Death and the Maiden* which were directed by Ewelina Marciniak and staged in Teatr Polski in Wrocław. The artistic provocation was to take the play outside the stage. The key element in this regard was an invitation of porn actors from the Czech Republic to take part in the play, something the minister of culture was against saying that he would not support pornography in a cultural institution. He also called the marshal of the Lower Silesia Voivodship, which is an autonomous unit in the administrative division of our state and thus not subordinate to any minister, to ban the play. The public morality was also defended by a nationalistic activist, a former Catholic priest, Jacek Międlar who together with his supporters were blocking access to the theatre. But the question is: What really took place on the stage? Those of us who saw the play did not know whether the thing that was the subject of the dispute, that is the sexual act, really took place. There were strobe-lighting effects, the porn actors and… nobody knows. In the last TV programme titled "The Departure Lounge" which was anchored by Katarzyna Janowska, a journalist who after the programme lost her job with the Polish TV, we asked the director of the play, Ewa Marciniak, whether the sexual act really took place on the stage. The director said she did not know. All actors followed the script, but the porn actors were given full freedom and apart from them nobody knew what happened. We left the studio with a sense of a somewhat disturbed perception of reality.

This story added an additional dimension to the fact that a minister cannot yet say: I will not give money for this or that. The minister is not a person who distributes public money, but an office which works within a legal framework. It is the law that determines how money is distributed to public institutions and what a public institution, which is an autonomous body, can do. Yet this is how the minister started his first term and continued it by using the brutal techniques of economic censorship: he withdrew the subsidy to the Dialog Festival, the Malta Festival and those who wanted to invite Olivier Frljić, the director of *The Curse*, a play that was very critical of the Catholic Church and its role in Poland. Frljić's name was put on a "blacklist" which is a mechanism known from the communist times and which indicated an informal ban to co-operate with a person whom the authorities wanted to punish in this way. Practically, it meant cutting off state subsidies to events with blacklisted theatres, authors or direc-

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tors. Thus, we can say that traditional censorship has returned. The lack of legal justification for such activities has been already confirmed by the Polish courts. The Poznań Malta Festival, which also lost its subsidy from the state, won the case in court which ruled that they should receive their money together with the interest rate.

What I am more worried about is not that much the issue of censorship, however the determined authorities are ready to use it, but what takes place in the area of communication; namely the media. What I have in mind here is the application of hybrid war techniques to the Polish society, which was quite visible during this year's teachers strike. Using the media for warfare is an element of interstate relations at a time of conflict. However, when disinformation techniques are applied towards a society, we become powerless. An uncontrollable flow of communication on Facebook takes place because that is what we want. However, this platform is also subject to manipulation by external agents and provides space for disinformation to foreign powers in their cyber-war activities. In Poland you can clearly see Russia's influences.

The problem is more serious than our individual tendency, or lack thereof, to regard truth as an important category. The earlier mentioned definition of post-truth states that a correspondence between statements and facts is no longer of importance and the only truth that matters is the emotional truth. The latter is something we can associate with and something we feel good about. This trend is not a result of our personal experiences but of the development of new media, especially Facebook.

Facebook and Google are gathering large amounts of information about their users as they are constantly learning from our online activities, increasing the potential of their internal rationality. These are for sure logical and rationally-thinking machines. When it comes to Facebook, we have still not reached what Jurgen Habermas called "communicative rationality", that is the reaching of truth as a result of communication. Social media, instead, are profit-generating machines whose logic is based on financial gains and accumulation of capital. As a result, they are maximalising online activities to meet our psychological needs, and not those that result from the political process or the functioning of democracy. Thus, we no longer need to force ourselves to a rational dialogue, as it is the machines that tell us what best meets our needs. We stop thinking as we are given ready clues with whom to interact to avoid cognitive dissonance. This is the new price.

ALEX FREIHEIT: As a duet called Siksa, we do not have much experience with censorship because we operate in the independent sphere of art. We are outside the mainstream. Thus, when, for example, we give a punk concert in Belarus, we simply disappear right after it, as if there was no concert at all and as if we came to just visit our friends

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there. We operate outside institutions and we have chosen an independent form. However, there is also something which we call people-censors. We encounter them at our concerts when they approach me and try to take my microphone away after they had heard what I said about violence. This happened, for example, in Teatr Polski in Poznań. The form which we chose for Siksa is very much our own. It is solely vocals and bass. In the centre there is a teenager experiencing puberty, but on her own terms. Neither me, nor Siksa will sing so beautifully to be on the radio. It would not be me/Siksa anymore. But because we are not played on the radio, we have no experience with censorship.

There are times, however, when we are our own censors. We come from Gniezno, which is a medium-size town. We live and work there as culture organisers. In Gniezno we have an independent outdoor community centre. Yet, it is not entirely independent because it receives money from the city and the National Culture Centre. It is called *Latarnia na Wenei* (Lighthouse at Weneja). Nonetheless, we made a decision not to do anything that is related to Siksa in Gniezno, with the exception of children's songs. We make no concerts, no shows, no meetings promoting our book titled *Natalia ist sex. Alex ist Freiheit.*

We don't have much experience with censorship as we do with threats. When I worked for the Museum of the Beginnings of the Polish State in Gniezno, my work phone number was published on the website and I was receiving telephone threats. People were coming to our concerts to provoke. This may have happened only a few times, but it did happen. The people who came to the concert thought that this disturbance was an element of our performance and nobody reacted when somebody tried to hit me. The conventionality of performances can be a difficult thing. When we receive an invitation from a cultural institution, we want to make sure that this institution knows who we are as we do not want to cause any problems. We made a conscious decision to opt for non-mainstream believing that we have the energy and strength for that. There are also wonderful people who tackle in the mainstream the same problems we do.

ANNA ŁAZAR: People often confuse your artistic identity, Alex, with a human being. You pointed here to the separation between who you are on the stage and in everyday life.

WOJCIECH LEMAŃSKI: What I will say may sound doctrine-like, but I want to remind us one simple rule: my freedom ends where the freedom of another human being begins. We have tamed this rule and do not notice that along the way its modification has started to emerge in our space. Your freedom ends where I mark the border of mine. When I say "my freedom" I am personalising the church to which I belong. This church, however, when it talks about hurting somebody's religious feelings marks the border not for itself,

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Photo: Tomasz Plenicki

but for others – usually those who would like to make use of their freedom. This church does it in a very rigorist and aggressive way, using administrative bans and demanding criminal liability not only from some specific persons but whole institutions. It seems to me that those of us who associate themselves with the church, have their part in this change. Some part of the responsibility rests on us as well. Somebody in our name, without our objection, has marked the border of their, meaning institutional, freedom. Before the borders were marked by church doctrine and those who were deciding on being members of this institution, this community, was, in fact, accepting these borders. They were saying: yes, I am a free man, a free Christian, but these are the borders that I do not cross. In the meantime, in our quite homogenous Polish society, we have developed some elements of freedom that do not fit within these borders. For some people this was surprising, for others provocative, and for others inspiring. Yet there were also some to whom they seemed shameful and thus required introducing some limitations, or a guardian such as the minister of culture who would be marking the borders of freedom for those who would like to express their freedom. I am presenting a perspective of a person who is not cutting off from the church, who reminds others the basic and fundamental teaching which is to be found in the Gospel, the meaning of life and teaching of Jesus Christ. This teaching, however, has little to do with marking borders. It is rather aimed at crossing them and reaching out while accepting other people's freedom. That is why it seems to me that even people who are deeply integrated with the church are not doomed to this form of freedom limitation and censorship that we are witnessing right now or participating in today in Poland. This however, requires a deeper reflection from all of us and possibly calls for our discontent.

ANNA ŁAZAR: That means that being part of a community does not automatically mean that we agree to censorship, but it rather increases our responsibility and criticism.

ANDA ROTTENBERG: Without a doubt censorship is an important phenomenon. There is always somebody who marks the borders of our freedom and represses those who cross them. This is usually related with the inten-

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tion to protect the right of a certain group which convinces the majority that turning some issues into taboos lies in everybody's interests and usually gets the intuitive consent of the society to define which topics are taboo. I am not talking about taboos that characterise tribal life, from which we took the name. The area of banned concepts is usually manipulated by people who choose the criteria that fit them. Censorship was not invented in our century, nor in Poland. This is a mechanism that has been operating for many centuries now, just to remind you that even Socrates was supposed to drink the poison hemlock for corrupting the minds of the youth. During the Inquisition people could lose their lives for alleged heresy, there were indices of banned books, but these bans were limited to the territory of the authority of specific religions and denominations. What was banned by the Catholic Church could be published on Protestant-controlled territories.

Everything remains relative as long as it does not breach the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue), which – all in all – was written for all people. When it comes to the Decalogue, there is a certain collective consensus that if somebody breaches it, this person commits a crime, and the problem that Alex Freiheit was talking about emerges. People start to feel a need to cry out what agonises them and at the same time an arbitrary decision is made stating that one should not talk loud about the problems, nor shout about them, because this is unpleasant. In addition there are obscenities used. A ban gets instituted, which is a result of a wide acceptance of the idea of a common good, even when somebody disturbs this good and later defends this disturbance with censorship.

Under communism there was a codified system of preventive censorship. In other words, everybody knew what not to write. It was not nice, but at least it was clear who the censor was. In Poland censors were the people with the best knowledge of the life in culture. Censorship has yet ended with the system collapse. Now we have democracy written into our constitution and yet there is an increasing number of gestures that are made in the name of protecting the society against some kind of evil, in the name of some higher ideals, which are personally shared by the minister or a director of a museum. Thus, it is not only the church that has the reputation of being a censor as for example my exhibit was censored by the director of the National Gallery in Berlin. He did it not to hurt the feelings of the Jewish community in Berlin. Artur Żmijewski, whose work was censored then, said that it was very interesting that Germans who had built concentration camps on Poland's territory and were murdering the Jews, were now telling us what art we should have in this regard. I moved this topic to the German context on purpose. By doing it, I wanted to show that such arbitrary – and actually illegal – censorship is not limited to Poland. It exists also in Russia, France and every denomination.

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Take the bloody reaction to those who were accused of presenting blasphemous pictures of the Mohamed – as was the case with *Charile Hebdo*. In Poland it may also not end with the protests in front of the museums or theatres and toxic substances or physical fights might also take place. I lost my job at Zachęta Gallery after many people felt offended in their religious views by an epoxy sculpture…

ANNA ŁAZAR: The sculpture titled "La nona ora", authored by Mauricio Catelana, presents Pope John Paul the Second knocked over by an errant meteorite. In 2000 this sculpture was showed to Polish public at Zachęta gallery in Warsaw.

ANDA ROTTENBERG: Here a classical association mechanism was used. The same one that is applied to actors who are assigned the same role in real life as they play on the stage or on the screen. The same is true for the sculptures and man-made figures which are identified with a real person whom they are meant to represent. Such associations, which are common at a certain level, legitimise the right to ban an exposition or pre-empt an artistic gesture for the sake of protecting the public against an imaginary scandal which was also the motivation of the director of the National Museum in Warsaw when he took down the famous work of Natalia LL, portraying a young woman eating a banana. The director explained the motivation for censorship with a letter he received from a young boy who wrote to him about his discomfort after seeing the art work. Grzegorz Gauden wrote a book titled *Lviv. The End of Illusion. A Story of the 1918 November Pogrom*. It is based on materials from the Lviv archives which document its first day of freedom when the city was entered by the Polish army, and especially the Haller division. In the text we yet read that the first day of Lviv's freedom actually started with the pogrom of Jews. Gauden admits that for him, a Pole, this is very painful. He added, referring to our romantic tradition, that Tadeusz Soplica murdered Jankiel. This does not mean that today's narrative about independence will be changed, but that there will be new interpretations of it. However, before this happens I can imagine numerous polemics, acts of resistance, denial. The world of art is symbolic in nature. A public discussion that surrounds literary works or historical books which reveal some serious crimes shows that as a nation we are not a monolith.

TOMASZ SIKORA: For me culture is an area of a permanent clash. Pierre Bourdieu's theory on symbolic violence teaches us that objects can force their perspective on us. Those who are in power – politicians and institutions which represent certain ideologies, force their view of culture on people. As an artist, a musician, but also an organiser, I constantly face some kind of struggle in this area. When it is a minister who publicly censors something it is quite simple. As artists we can fight with a clear gesture against the violence we want to oppose. Things are different when gestures are

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invisible or very small but which nonetheless constitute symbolic violence and which can be found also among liberal politicians.

In large Polish cities, such as Wrocław, Warsaw or Łódź, there are culture departments that work very well. But when you look at them more closely you also see that there are many things there that limit culture. For example, we organise the Wrocław-Ukraine Festival and invite artists from Ukraine to show the art that we can do together. We invite music bands, actors with their performances and Ukrainian artists who received the Gaude Polonia scholarship. With them we wanted to organise a Polish-Ukrainian picnic at the Słodowa Island in Wrocław. Yet we were advised against it as apparently it was too dangerous. When we asked why it was dangerous to organise such a picnic and mentioned that the Ukrainians were planning to have their own picnic in the centre of the city, we were told that the nationalists will come and attack us. This is not paranoia but rather giving space to some presumed aggressors. It is better not to do anything, hide or go to the basement with something that the nationalists would not like. In Wrocław there are 100,000 Ukrainians, the same is in Kraków, and such are the reactions of the so-called liberal city authorities? We can criticise the current government for its policies towards Ukraine and the decisions that influence Ukrainian emigration and at the same time allow for such gestures? If one of us started working for the city authorities, maybe we would behave in a similar way? We don't know. People who are in power should not be opting for comfort but represent the citizens and ensure that their decisions have a social dimension.

Referring to the words of Edwin Bendyk about the hybrid war against the society, I wonder what will happen next. Whoever will come to power, what will they do with this tempting instrument? Wouldn't the information war against the society contribute to the instrumentalisation of power, no matter who holds it? When I travel to Ukraine I can see wide areas of Russian influence which can be transferred to other areas in the world. I assume that many people know which websites not to read and that they are full of fake news and that they recognise the scale of this phenomenon. I assume that people also know that we get trapped in our internet bubbles, which in fact create our reality. We know the consequences of the last Maidan in Kyiv.

In Wrocław we hold a series of Polish-Ukrainian talks where an author from Ukraine converses with an author from Poland. The first pair that we invited were: Yuri Andrukhovych and Olga Tokarczuk, then Serhiy Zhadan and Dorota Masłowska, Roman Kabachyi and Ziemowit Szczerek. Characteristically, during these discussions each of the Ukrainian guests stressed this need to seek freedom. They make these statements at the time when their freedom is threatened by Russia. We may not be experiencing this in Poland, as reality is

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very different if the frontline is not that close or the threat is not direct.

JOANNA WICHOWSKA: I have a feeling that my personal artistic experience when working with the earlier mentioned *The Curse* I could refer to everything that was said here. Many of the topics discussed directly touch upon what took place after the premiere and what is still going on in regards to this play, the ways of our work and what we wanted to achieve talking about the Catholic Church in Poland.

The premier of *The Curse* took place over two years ago, but its echo remains. The prosecutor is still conducting the investigation based on article 196 of the Polish Criminal Code which allows an accusation for offending religious feelings. Right after the premiere there was a massive attack on the Wrocław theatre, its actors, director of the play and the theatre director. This attack was the work of the clergy, some politicians, right-wing media and neo-fascist organisations. The theatre was besieged, the neo-fascists were throwing firecrackers and spilled acid in the foyer. The actors were attacked while the viewers were entering and leaving the facility with police escorts. I think we can describe this experience as traumatic. In all this, the theatre showed perfect demeanour: it did not succumb to pressure and did not apply censorship.

Oliver Frljić always works with institutions. I understand Alex who talked about avoiding mainstream and being careful while dealing with institutions, but I also think that we have public institutions so that the voices of the minorities are heard in them, also those that are considered controversial and provocative. Of course, in such cases the institutions are at risk of being accused of spending taxpayers' money on some crazy stuff, but I am also a taxpayer and I willingly agree to spending my tax money on *The Curse* or Siksa performance. It is important that such art enters public institutions to check to what extent they can defend democratic principles.

The Curse worked a bit like a catalyst and unveiled a serious social illness. Frljić, no matter where he works, always looks for collective wounds, puts his finger on them, working on a social taboo. In Poland the relationship between the society, politics and the church is such a wound and a taboo as well as the immense power of the church which is present on many different levels and which we, as the society, support and maintain. Our social illness lies in the fact that we have internalised the mechanisms of this power so deeply that we no longer notice it.

With Frljić we experienced censorship even earlier – during the work on Krasiński's *Undivine Comedy* which was staged at the National Theatre in Kraków – when Jan Klata was its director. We touched on the topic of the Holocaust and the responsibility of the Poles for what happened to the Jews in Poland. *Undivine Comedy* is – as Polish literary specialist, Maria Janion, states it – a founding text of Polish antisem-

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itism. It has been taught, without much criticism, in schools and has contributed to the raising of generations of Poles. It is rare that we ask a question what kind of hatred is accepted and positively presented in this text. Klata cancelled the play ten days before the premiere. This was a blatant act of censorship, not by a minister, not by the state, but a man who wields power on the level that is close to us. A person who, as director of the theatre, takes responsibility for the institution and artistic freedom. With the return of the mechanisms that we call self-censorship, we can change the whole area of culture. If we have internalised the bans and orders to such an extent that we lose our moral compass, which tells us that there are certain things that we cannot agree to, it means that we are awaiting death.

ANNA ŁAZAR: To sum up uncompromising art should enter public institutions to check how they defend freedom, pay attention to the mechanisms of power, which we – in the end – wield and not somebody applies towards us. Serhiy you just heard so much about the Polish problems…

SERHIY ZHADAN: In Ukraine we talk about freedom and censorship not only in the context of post-truth but – first of all – the hybrid war. We cannot ignore the context of the open military conflict which is taking place in eastern parts of our country. In this regards I would like to share three theses with you.

First, as a Ukrainian writer who is operating in independent Ukraine, I can say that Ukraine has never had systemic, real state censorship in the area of culture. This is true even though majority of our presidents are perceived as dictators. This may be very strange and says something not that much about the dictators, but about culture as such. Of course, this was also because of the culture's marginal position that it was not an object of interest of the state machine. It is also obvious that things in this regard have changed during the last five years of the military conflict with Russia. My second thesis that I would like to share is that I think a part of the Ukrainian society will not agree with my first thesis, namely the lack of censorship because starting in 2014 Ukraine limited the Russian cultural and information products on its territory. Some Ukrainians treat it as state censorship. This is for sure not a simple conflict but a very delicate and extremely sensitive issue. On the one hand, we are all talking about freedom, European choice, but – on the other hand – we have a very decisive information policy of the state which is aimed at defending our information space. The lack of clearness on this issue creates a large room for manipulation.

The third thesis is that the five years of the war has led to a situation where social censorship has emerged in Ukraine. It was born on the Maidan where the society took upon itself the responsibility of the state. As a result, people would interrupt a concert of an artist who performed in the occupied Crimea or a speech at the international book fair of a Russian

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writer who is a Kremlin propagandist. Such activities go beyond the area of culture and enter politics. Consequently, we are seeing, on the one hand, a huge impulse of the society which wants to organise itself, but – on the other hand, a danger because the purpose of artistic gestures is determined by the ideology and allows some political calculations and manipulations. Thus, we have a record of social discontent and attacks on artistic activities driven by ideology and politics. It is understandable that all these cases generate highly emotional commentaries. When social problems, related to history or the church, are not discussed, but shouted out, we have separate monologues instead of a dialogue. We can agree that freedom and responsibility go together. I understand that in the post-truth reality, which we are talking about here, this phrase can be treated in two ways. In any conflict each side has its own image of freedom and responsibility. For some people, stopping a play or an exhibit which in his/her view offends national dignity is a sign of responsibility. These are very difficult and strange times when culture and art leave their niches and become an active part of our lives. This is not always very nice, or in accordance with the law, but it usually shows us, objectively, the state of the society and this is something which we should, in one way or another, take into account in Ukraine.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Anna Łazar is an author of numerous projects focusing on contemporary Eastern European culture. For over decade she worked for Polish diplomatic service (Polish Institute in Kyiv and St Petersburg). She writes about literature and art.

Edwin Bendyk is a Polish journalist and writer. He works for the weekly *Polityka* where he is in charge of the science section.

Alex Freiheit is a Polish performance artist, founder of Siksa duo.

Wojciech Lemański is a Polish Catholic priest, a member of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews.

Anda Rottenberg is an art historian, curator of many art exhibits and essayist. In the years 1993–2001 she was the director of the Zachęta Art Gallery in Warsaw.

Tomasz Sikora is a Wrocław-based musician and producer. He is a member of Karibo, a music band which since 2004 co-operates with the Ukrainian poet, Yuri Andruchovych.

Joanna Wichowska is a theater critic, curator, performer and a dramaturge.

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Mostly annihilated…

KRISZTIÁN UNGVÁRY AND MÁRTON VÁNYAI

Recently declassified sources of Soviet Military Archives give a better insight into the attempted escape of the German-Hungarian defenders of Budapest on February 11th 1945. Estimates have put the number of Germans who attempted to escape the siege at around 20,000–22,000. Most of them ended up being captured, wounded or killed.

The siege of Budapest of 1944–1945 and its tragic finale – the so-called "breaking-out" [of Buda] – is a very popular and well-researched topic of modern Hungarian history. Several books and articles have been published not only in Hungarian, but in many other languages as well. However, the research of this period was difficult until the very recent years – as the Russian Military Archives (more precisely the CAMO) did not allow anybody to research the classified materials. Because of that, research findings were quite asymmetrical, mostly based on German and Hungarian archive sources and reminiscences, but lacked the other half: the Soviet point of view.

This changed radically as the Russian government decided to declassify an astonishing amount of documents related to what it refers to as the Great Patriotic War – and not just declassifying, but uploading and categorising the materials online (see https://pamyat-naroda.ru/). In this way, anyone can access the documents which, until recently, were considered strictly confidential. Here we aim to present a short summary of how the Red Army faced the German-Hungarian escape-attempt and how the operation can be evaluated based on these recently released documents.

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Photo courtesy of the author's personal archive.

The Hungarian Royal Palace after it was captured by the Soviet Red Army. This object was in the hands of the German-Hungarian defenders until the very last moment.

Out of options

When the Red Army totally encircled Budapest on December 25th 1944, nobody knew that the Hungarian capital was going to be the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the Second World War. The Soviet High Command planned to capture Budapest by a quick march into the city, but the German plan was to hold on to Budapest and use it as a spearhead for a future counter-attack (and by this, stop the Soviet Army). Needless to say, both parties faced disappointment. A 52-day long battle took place on the streets of Budapest, and by the very end the German defenders had run out of medicine, fuel, food and ammunition. That forced the German Commander, Karl Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, to "look for a new position" in order to fight further. He could not say that he and his men were planning to come out of the encircled Buda castle, as Adolf Hitler strictly prohibited leaving the city alive: Budapest, he said, should have been defended to the very last German soldier, the very last bullet.

However, the situation left them with no choice (at least that was what they thought). Three attempts for relieving the Budapest-garrison collapsed (operations Konrad I-II-III), and the Germans believed that capitulation to the Soviet army would mean immediate death. A tragic decision was made: to break out of the Buda Castle, cut through the Soviet lines into the woods of western Buda and

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find their way back to the frontline to meet their own troops. There is no precise number of soldiers involved in the attempt, but estimations (from both the German and Soviet sides) state that around 20,000–22,000 Germans were involved and 5,000–6,000 of them were wounded in the escape.

The majority of Hungarians, on the other hand, did not execute the commanders' order. They simply dressed into civilian clothing and deserted their posts. There is a theory which states that the plan was uncovered and the Soviets were waiting for the enemy to show up – though according to recent research this cannot be confirmed and it seems to be untrue. Of course, there were relocations of Soviet troops even on the same exact day of the escape (e.g. the 337th Rifle Division), but the decision by Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was made so late (on the morning of February 11th 1945) that the Soviets would not have had enough time to react even if they had had spies in the garrison headquarters. Documents confirm that the Soviets expected an escape attempt (e.g. on January 13th and then on January 30th) but they did not have any information regarding the exact date and time.

Massacre

The start of the operation began at 8pm (in the Soviet documents it is written as 22:00 as they used the Moscow time-zone in their reports – this applies to all time-related data in this article). The first "checkpoint" was supposed to be Széll Kálmán's Square: a wide and empty square below the Buda Castle to the West. This part of the front was the responsibility of the 180th Rifle Division on the Soviet side. In their log book they described the event as the following:

"The enemy, concentrating significant amount of infantry on the frontline of the 1st Battalion of the 42nd Rifle Regiment, at 23:00 on 11.02.1945 started to develop as an avalanche in the direction of object No. 53 [Post Palace], got divided into 2 columns; the first column of the enemy headed to the North-Western direction to the TÖRÖKVÉSZI way, while the second column to the WESTERN direction by the RETEK and OLASZ FASOR streets. Later on, these groups united in the area of the No. 258, 377 and 348 hills in the forest, where they were destroyed by other units of our army."

There was an alternative direction out of the Castle, of course – to the North. This frontline (precisely the Margit körút) was assigned to the 109th Guards Rifle Division. They registered the events as follows:

"During the night the enemy attacked the frontline of the division with 2–3 regiments-strong infantry on the 11th of February 1945 at 22:30, and later on at 01:00 AM, 03:00 AM and 05:00 AM on the following day, tried to break through

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the defence, and get the encircled German forces out in North-Western direction. The decision of the commander of the division was to strengthen the defence by dropping all reserve-units onto the frontline. The parts of the division during the night from 11.02.1945 to 12.02.1945 threw back the attacks of the enemy, destroyed the smaller groups that could infiltrate into the defence lines…"

It is known not just from the Soviet reports but from the reminiscences and archive photos that the very first hours of the fight were more like a massacre than an operation. Hundreds or maybe thousands died after the very first steps on Széll Kálmán Square. There was not any kind of leadership from the German side, and some were surging forward in panic without control. However, at least half the crowd made it through the frontline and started to look for a way out of the city. Some of them got lost in the dark and they did not have a clue where they were.

The episode below is from the diary of Fanni Gyarmati, the wife of the famous Hungarian poet, Miklós Radnóti (who was shot in a forced march together with other Hungarian-Jewish forced labourers by Nazi guard personnel), describing what she saw on the morning of February 12th 1945 in Buda:

"They got here from the Castle, by some kind of fantastic letter 'S'-shaped way through Marczibányi square, then up to the Rózsadomb, and from there climbing down; there were thousands of them, but they had got scattered by now. They asked us the name of the village they got to. They were supposed to be in Zsámbék already (a village 25 kilometres to the West of Buda – authors' note] – as the hopeless soldiers said… They started to throw away their weapons and ammunition in the yard of the house among squealing women. One lady who was a cook in the Academy on the other side of the street, at that time serving the SS, went from soldier to soldier and cut off the SS symbols from their tunics… Most of the soldiers were below the age of 20, or a little older – and now they had to face death here…"

Long escape

Getting out of the city did not mean that the soldiers were safe. They had to march about 25 kilometres, up the hills to the west, during the night, without any food and lack of ammunition, and possibly wounded. And, of course, tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers from the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts were hunting them. A tragic episode can be found in the operations log book of the 11th Guards Cavalry Division (taking place at 01:00 AM on the February 14th, when the enemy started to come out of the woods and attack Perbál):

"The 39th Cavalry Division, letting the enemy come close, opened fire from every existing weapon onto the Germans. The enemy side-tracked to the south

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and by screaming 'Hurray!' jumped on the firing positions of our artillery, defending the road TELKI-BUDAJENŐ-PERBÁL. Tanks of the 71st tank regiment advanced by the road BUDAJENŐ-PERBÁL, switching on the searchlight, firing from their machine guns in motion, their tracks trampled down the Germans who tried to run away. At 10:00 AM on the 14th of February, a group of 2,000 Germans came out of the forest and headed into the direction of Tinnye. Our artillery and infantry opened fire at full capacity. Tanks of the 71st tank regiment set forth quickly to face the out-breakers – they were shooting on the move and trampled German officers and soldiers to death. At least 800 German officers and soldiers died after this and at least 350 Germans were captured."

Heavily outnumbered by the Red Army, the chances were so low that even the German commander did not risk taking part.

One of the last obstacles to overcome for the former defenders of Buda before joining their own units was the 49th Guards Rifle Division. It is important to note that there was a support-attack advancing from the other side of the frontline by the German main forces as well. On the night of February 14th to the 15th 1945, a battalion of the German 3rd Cavalry Division with 11 recently repaired vehicles raided Anyácsapuszta from the direction of Szomor. However, the support was late. By this time the majority of the escapees had already been killed and their corpses were lying all along the fields of the Zsámbék-basin. The raid succeeded only partially as they could capture the trenches of the 4th company of the Soviet 144th Rifle Regiment. According to German reports, this operation cost them 100 dead and wounded soldiers and it helped about 50 people through the frontline from Buda. The 49th Guards Rifle Division took back its former positions by the early morning on the 15th of February.

Evaluation

When the defenders of Buda, about 20,000 people, decided to give up the fight and tried to join their own troops, they were already in very poor condition, lacking everything that could have given them a chance to fight against the Soviets. Heavily outnumbered by the Red Army, the chances were so low that even Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, the German commander, did not risk taking part in the break-through attempt. He chose to climb down to an underground canal and surrendered to the first Soviet troop he faced with his men.

It is known that fewer than 800 made it through to the German main forces side in total, and it is suspected that about one or two thousand people deserted shortly

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before the action began. Possibly 8,000–15,000 people could get out of the city and escape to the forests, but as mentioned above, barely anybody could escape in the end. In the following days, thousands of Germans were either captured or killed.

At the same time, the Soviet casualties were significantly lower. From the recently declassified sources, this information can only be accessed partially – nevertheless estimation is still possible. Around 300 Soviet soldiers died, and around 800 soldiers were wounded in total because of this event during the five-to-six days of fighting. It is also important to highlight that these were those who fought in the area from the Buda Castle to the woods in the west of Budapest – involving several rifle divisions, artillery troops and cavalry units.

From the numbers mentioned above, it is clear that the odds of the Germans winning were very low – thousands were killed because of a poor and irresponsible decision made by the German commander. On the other hand, there is another way to look at the operation: Soviet reports recorded that the Soviet troops captured enemy machine guns even in the area of Tök-Perbál (about a 30 kilometre-march from Buda, during the night, uphill, in snow). This means that even after such a long march, there were smaller German groups together who carried machine guns with accessories and ammo boxes. For some, military discipline did not collapse.

From the Soviet sources, the escape-attempt can be described as a pure manhunt. As those sources were originally for internal use only and were then declassified, there was no purpose to lie in them. Because of this it is breath-taking to realise how many people (German, Soviet, Romanian, Hungarian) died on the streets of the Hungarian capital during its siege – and its very tragic capture. The scars from the severe fights are still visible on many of houses in Budapest, but year by year many of them disappear. It looks as though the city is slowly recovering – after a war which ended 75 years ago.

This article is based on the following study of the authors, published in Hungarian: Ungváry Krisztián–Ványai Márton: „...Nagy része megsemmisült...". A német-magyar védősereg kitörési kísérlete Budapestről a szovjet hadműveleti iratok tükrében – 1945. február 11. Budapest, Clio Intézet, 2019.

Online at: https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/198ee4_222f5c389d41447881bff30ed034a86b.pdf

Krisztián Ungváry is a Hungarian historian of 20th century military and political history. He has published extensively on the Siege of Budapest as well as the secret police in communist Hungary.

Márton Ványai is a Hungarian historian also focusing on military history of the 20th century.

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EASTERN CAFÉ

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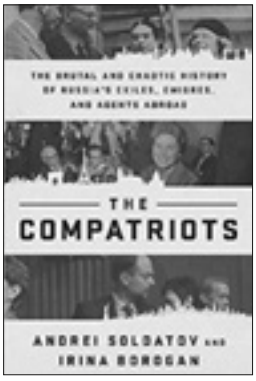
You can run, but can you hide?

LUKE HARDING

The Compatriots. The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Émigrés, and Agents Abroad. By: Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan. Publisher: Public Affairs, New York, 2019.



In July 2018 the journalist and writer Andrei Soldatov went to go and see Alexander Lebedev at his home in Rublyovka, on the outskirts of Moscow. Lebedev was a KGB agent turned banker and media tycoon. Over the years his relations with the Kremlin had ebbed and flowed. For a long time they had been good: there even were one-on-one meetings with Vladimir Putin. Then they turned bad after one of Lebedev's newspapers published a story saying that Putin was having an affair with a 24-year-old Olympic gymnast. Now they were good again.

Soldatov's description of his encounter with Lebedev is one of the highlights from his wonderful and illuminating new book on Russian émigrés, *The Compatriots*, co-written with his wife Irina Borogan. Soldatov drove to the village of Razdory, past the fortified dachas belonging to Russia's power people. He followed a pair of bodyguards in an SUV, down a winding path through pine trees to a big grey mansion. The oligarch, dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, greeted Soldatov and invited him to sit on the verandah and vanished. Twenty minutes later Lebedev had still not reappeared. Soldatov ate a biscuit on a plate in front of him. More time passed. "Andrei considered eating the second biscuit," the book records

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drolly. It started raining. Soldatov was moved inside. A man in a chef's cap flung open a door and said: "Alexander Evgenevich your lunch will be served in five minutes!" Lebedev emerged and went off to have lunch. After waiting for almost two hours, Soldatov finally got to speak to the man.

Moscow specialty

The episode described by Soldatov says something about self-importance and a lack of manners prevalent among the global rich. More than this, though, it is an interesting snapshot of where Russia's elite finds itself, after two decades of Putin, caught between the demands of a nationalist regime at home and a comfortable life in the West, where much of its money is invested. Lebedev is the owner of significant assets in "Foggy Albion" – as Russian TV likes to call Britain – including the *Evening Standard* newspaper.

Soldatov went to see Lebedev soon after two GRU assassins – Anatoly Chepiga and Alexander Mishkin – tried to murder a renegade former colleague, Sergei Skripal, in the English city of Salisbury. The operation was a disaster. Skripal and his daughter Yulia survived; the weapon – a nerve agent called novichok – was discovered and the government of the United Kingdom and its allies subsequently expelled 150-odd Russian military spies.

Still, it was clear that the bungled hit had badly spooked Lebedev and others like him. The oligarch said that the idea the Kremlin was behind Salisbury was absurd, a conspiracy theory. "There is no such practice, poisoning the opposition," he declared. As a former KGB officer, based in London, Lebedev knew better. He perfectly understood the Skripal message. It said: if you co-operate with western spies, we will most definitely crush you.

As Soldatov and Borogan relate in their book, political murder was something of a Moscow specialty. Stalin sent Nahum Eitingon – one of several talented interwar agents – to murder Trotsky at his Mexico hideout. After a bungled front-on attack, Eitingon arranged for a Spanish operative, Ramon Mercader, to whack Trostky with an icepick. The plan worked. The Soviet secret service mounted similar operations against Ukrainian nationalists abroad, using poison guns and bombs hidden in cakes.

Russia's large diaspora posed a problem for the Soviet and, later, Russian Kremlins. Political emigration was seen as a threat. White Russians, Trotskyists, Jewish refuseniks in the 1970s, troublesome oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky in the 2000s… all promised to subvert the regime back home and to stir up trouble from afar. At the same time, Moscow could use émigrés for its own purposes – to spy on other Rus-

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sian citizens, for example, and to penetrate western societies. Its best recruits stole the US's wartime atomic secrets.

KGB playbook

In *The Compatriots*, the authors point out that Russians have been fleeing their homeland for a long time. The exodus began in the late 19th century, with thousands escaping pogroms and tsarist persecution. Later generations fled the Russian revolution, Stalin and the KGB. The Politburo also expelled undesirables – the incorrigible dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, who died this past October in British exile, and the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Soldatov and Borogan aptly illustrate Putin's efforts to exploit the Russian diaspora, the third largest in the world after India and Mexico.

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the nature of Russian emigration. For a decade or so Russians left their homeland for reasons separate from politics – to make money and to enjoy a better life. Once Putin came to power, however, there was a lurch back to the old ways of selective repression and compelled exit. Meanwhile, Putin ratcheted up pressure on his compatriots abroad. He saw them as belonging to what he called the *Russky Mir* – or Russian world – a community of Russian speaking people not necessarily living in the borders of Russia or a Russian-speaking state.

Soldatov and Borogan aptly illustrate Putin's efforts to exploit this diaspora, the third largest in the world after India and Mexico. As Putin viewed it, the Russians living abroad had obligations to the state – a state that was strong again. He established Rossotrudnichestvo – a new federal body to promote Russian culture and to fund pro-Kremlin media projects. The agency's other hidden purpose was to spy on host countries – using culture as cover – and to monitor the activities of émigrés, especially the rich ones.

Under Putin, exotic killings of the KGB's heyday resumed. In 2003 Soldatov and Borogan met Alexander Litvinenko, the former FSB officer and Berezovsky aide. It was a rainy evening in Piccadilly Circus. Litvinenko had no umbrella: "I'm a warrior," he told them. "I can sleep on bare ground." The book suggests that Litvinenko was struggling to learn English and to adjust to British ways. Unbeknown to the authors, he was doing freelance jobs for MI6. Three

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years later two Kremlin killers – Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun – poisoned Litvinenko with radioactive green tea.

The murder was confirmation that Putin had reverted to the old KGB playbook, without the trappings of Marxism-Leninism. "The assassination was straight out of the early days of the Soviet Union when the operatives of Stalin's secret service had fled to the West, published revelatory books and ended up hunted down and killed by Stalin's agents," the authors write, calling the plot "textbook Nahum Eitingon". Other murders followed – notably that of Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader and former deputy PM, shot dead in 2015 outside the Kremlin.

Weak response

How has the West reacted to such rogue behaviour? Generally speaking the push back has been conventional and inadequate. The UK expelled four Russian diplomats after Litvinenko, more after Skripal. But it has done little to stop wealthy Moscow folks from buying properties in London and enjoying the high life. Soldatov and Borogan touch only briefly on today's America and the question of whether President Donald Trump – to some greater or lesser degree – is beholden to Putin.

What they report in the book is troubling. Nemtsov's close colleague and fellow activist, Vladimir Kara-Murza, was poisoned in Moscow not once but twice. Miraculously, he survived. In December 2017 Kara-Murza met with an FBI agent in Washington. Seemingly, the FBI had identified the mysterious toxin. It planned to give its report on the case to three important Russian visitors – the heads of the GRU, FSB and SVR, who were flying in for talks with the Trump administration. Three weeks later the FBI agent rang Kara-Murza. He told him – not very convincingly – that the lab tests were "inconclusive". The report was shelved.

Despite the obvious risks, the authors have chosen to stay in Moscow and to investigate the murky activities of Putin's spy agencies from there. Other talented Russians with language skills – experts, journalists, economists – have left, especially since 2012 when Putin returned as president. Soldatov and Borogan are brave. Their latest book is an essential read – carefully written and entertainingly told – about Russia's engagement with the wider world and its ever watchful eye.

Luke Harding is writer and an award-winning journalist with *The Guardian*. He is the author of many books; his latest, *Collusion: Secret Meetings, Dirty Money, and How Russia Helped Donald Trump Win*, was published in 2017.

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Devoted to the truth

PAULINA SIEGIEŃ

Mr Jones. A film directed by Agnieszka Holland, British-Polish-Ukrainian production, 2019.

The story of Gareth Jones, a Welsh journalist who in the early 1930s went to regions of Ukraine affected by the Holodomor famine, was not until recently widely known. Admittedly, there is something strange about this fact. Even though tragic, the story is also very attractive for a novel or a screenplay. And yet, it was Timothy Snyder in his famous *Bloodlands* and Anne Applebaum in her

Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine who really shed light on the story of Gareth Jones, bringing his experience into those historical works. It is from their work that the Polish film director, Agnieszka Holland, saw the potential in Gareth's story for a feature film. As a result, in 2019 a Polish-Ukrainian-British co-production was made titled *Mr Jones*.

Authentic record

Holland added a deeply artistic dimension to Jones's tragic story. By doing so, she did not lose the simplicity of the message that accompanied it. Thanks to that we have an indeed extraordinary film, both in terms of storyline but also as far as its message goes. Consequently, the movie is probably one of Holland's greatest works. She indeed did everything she could not to make the story banal nor overwhelm it with special effects. Instead she presents an authentic record of a few years of Jones's life. The film starts when the young Welsh journalist is warning the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, and his staff about

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the risks that Adolf Hitler's rise to power could bring to Europe. Jones was one of the first journalists who interviewed Hitler, whom he accompanied during a flight from Berlin to Frankfurt. At that time he noted: if this plane crashes, the whole history of Europe will take a different course.

Unfortunately, the British government did not want to believe Jones's dark prophecies. The next frustration that Jones encountered was in 1933, after he returned from his travel to the Soviet Union. Like his assessment of Hitler and the ambience in Germany, the young journalist demonstrated skills which are valuable in his profession, although still debatable whether it is something natural or something we can learn. Namely, the skill to make a proper judgement.

When Jones analysed Soviet data on the economic development of the new communist state he began to get suspicious as to what were the causes of this vivid modernisation taking place at a time of global economic crisis. He decides to travel to Moscow with a plan to interview Stalin there and learn for himself. Yet, when he reaches his destination, he begins seeing and personally experiencing the Soviet propaganda machine, which operates like the whole Soviet system – a thorough apparatus of repression and coercion. Even foreign journalists, who were also subject to the strict control of the Soviet secret service, could not leave Moscow while their work was limited to little more than quoting press releases issued by the Kremlin. However, once they fell out of the authorities' favour, they were disappearing, like the fictional character Paul Kleb (an obvious homage to Paul Klebnikov, a journalist who was murdered in Moscow in 2004). In the film, Kleb was a German journalist and an acquaintance of Jones.

During his time in Moscow, Jones begins hearing rumours that Stalin's modernisation is built on the misery of thousands of villages in the most fertile regions of the USSR, where people are literally dying from hunger while the authorities strip away all of their resources. Jones manages to get permission to make a trip to Ukraine, during which he was supposed to be carefully observed by Maxim Litvinov, a Cheka officer. However, during the train journey to Kharkiv, Jones loses his "tail", jumps off the train and heads into the depopulated Ukrainian villages on his own. There he witnesses the horrific scenes. Holland masterfully portrayed this part of the film with artistic flair. She used monochromic colours and ambient music, while the sense of what was taking place was presented through poignant images and a morbid song sung by village children. In this way, she avoided portraying the most horrid scenes of hunger and death but without losing the powerful message about the atrocities of the Holodomor. The images of the villages are indeed gruesome and distressing.

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Antagonist

In *Mr Jones* Holland is a master of light and colour. She presents Moscow as a dark and murky city; demonic in fact. Even during the day the offices that Jones visited were semi-dark. And yet, despite massive invigilation some western journalists managed to live the high life in the Soviet capital. Among them was the infamous Walter Duranty, a correspondent of the *New York Times*, winner of a Pulitzer Prize and later Jones's main antagonist. Evidently, Duranty was a huge supporter of the Soviet Union and a facilitator of good relations between the United States and the authorities in Moscow. For playing these roles the Kremlin paid him generously. In the country of the proletariat revolution, Duranty enjoyed a lavish bourgeois lifestyle.

In *Mr Jones* Holland is a master of light and colour.

Widely trusted around the world, Duranty questioned Jones's reports from Ukraine, which the journalist published upon his return from the Soviet Union. Even though Duranty admitted that there were some problems in the USSR with food provision, there was no famine or hunger at all. He accused Jones of creating a horrific and exaggerated version of events. Duranty became Jones's personal rival and engaged with him in an uneven David vs Goliath-like fight. While Jones was a freelancer whose main capital was his relationship with the British prime minister, Duranty was a widely respected journalist who worked for one of the most important media outlets in the world.

In a very explicit way the director provides the viewers with a historical reflection on topics that today seem particularly relevant, including that of post-truth, fake news and propaganda, as well as the role of journalists and the traditional media in influencing the image of the world. The context seems surprisingly familiar, as the catalyst for contemporary discussion on these topics were also the events which took place in Ukraine and which are a result of the Kremlin's policies; especially its massive propaganda machine.

In some reviews of the film one can read that *Mr Jones* does not fully explore the atrocities of the Holodomor; it does not explain Stalin's motivation to implement this hideous policy nor does it offer a more detailed picture of the Soviet Union's brutal machine. Such voices are a clear signal that there is a large need for films that would further explore Soviet history, as some viewers who saw Holland's film clearly desire knowledge on the wider context. These opinions, however, should not be treated as discrediting the film as a whole, mainly because this is not a film about the Soviet Union nor Stalin. In fact, it is not even a film about the Holodomor.

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Average man

Mr Jones is a film about seeking truth as a value of its own. The moral dimension of such a search is the main message that Holland prepared for us. And even though this topic of seeking the truth, providing evidence for it or trying to convince a wider audience to it, is one of the most explored topics in literature and cinema, in *Mr Jones* it becomes particularly important, mainly because of the historical reality in which the story is set.

The most important clue to this interpretation can in fact be found in the title where "Mr" together with a quite popular surname "Jones" gives us the impression of an everyman. This is the kind of person that Gareth Jones is – an ordinary guy. He is not a pompous character; one that would transfer from a modest journalist into a super hero to confront Stalin. That is not the story of Gareth Jones.

Jones is just an average man. We see him scared, and also terrified with what he witnesses in Ukraine. He is also driven by the need to find the truth, and even if it may sound trivial, Holland manages to depict that with grace, avoiding unnecessary pathos and banalisation. Some reviewers have noted that although the film is good, it could – nonetheless – be better. That is always true. For greater viewer satisfaction, Jones's story could have become a script for a Hollywood spy thriller with a gripping plot – one that takes place on all five continents. Perhaps the biggest problem that many viewers have with the main character is the fact that he is too average. Yet, in my view, no attempts at making him more "marketable" would change anything. On the contrary, this would completely blur the film's main message – that everyone needs to seek truth and that everyone has a right to do their work diligently and in accordance with their values. History is made not only by extraordinary individuals, but also by everyday people who can contribute to the common good.

Holland is one of those directors who has her own style and a very distinct method of depicting the world. Apart from the artistic level and the characteristic style which can also be found in *Mr Jones*, her film language can be seen in her selection of stories which are to send a message to the viewers. With the story of Gareth Jones, Holland reveals her own moral standing in two ways: first, by being on the side of the victims of the Holodomor; and second, by showing her devotion to the truth.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Paulina Siegień is a freelance journalist, writing about Polish-Russian neighbourhood and general Russian developments. She is currently working on a book about the Kaliningrad Oblast.

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Forbidden love in a patriarchal society

EVA MODEBADZE

And Then We Danced. A film written and directed by Levan Akin. Sweden, Georgia, 2019.

For Georgians, dance has never been just a cultural phenomenon, a product of specific values or aesthetics. After police raids on Tbilisi's popular nightclubs in May 2018, thousands of young Georgians went on the streets to protest. Under the beats of electronic music in front of parliament buildings, they protested by dancing. The slogan "we dance together, we fight together" went viral on social media. Raving became a political statement, a form of resistance to the oppressive system and the conservative values of society. For most of those ravers, an eclectic mixture of drum machines, synthesisers, sequences, and other instruments became a symbol of change and progress, while traditional Georgian dance epitomised conservativism, patriarchy and backwardness.

An ideological gap

At the same time, Georgia's rave revolution unveiled the increasing ideological gap between the liberal youth and traditional conservativism – deeply rooted in Georgian society, politics and culture. In the movie *And Then We Danced*, traditional Georgian dance seems to exemplify society – frozen between traditional values and progress, and in desperate need for change. Levan Akin, a

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Swedish-Georgian director, shows that Georgian dance, even though symbolising traditional values, is still compatible with improvisation and modernity since the interpretation of dance largely depends on the identities of the dancer or audience. Just like his contemporaries, the film's protagonist, Merab, has several identities: he is Georgian, gay, a brother, a son, and, most importantly, a dancer. Akin showed that in traditional Georgian ensembles, being gay and a dancer are not mutually exclusive. Merab can be a passionate traditional Georgian dancer, gay and still painfully "Georgian", with his everyday problems that are so familiar to most of the county's youth.

The movie tells a story of a young boy, Merab (Levan Gelbakhiani), who works as a waiter and dreams of becoming a member of the National Georgian Ensemble. Dancing is everything for him. It is his lifegoal, his remedy, and his hope, a way to escape his reality, which is shaped by his fear of ending up like his almost alcoholic parents, who barely make ends meet. The plot twist starts when Irakli (Bachi Valishvili) – a handsome and skilled dancer – joins the ensemble, and the two begin to practice together. Merab soon realises that he is attracted to Irakli. In a hyper-masculine society where even in dance there is no space for "softness", Merab keeps his feelings bottled up. Until, one day, they submit to their desire for each other. From that moment on, Merab starts his arduous journey from heartbreaks and fears to self-acceptance.

Seeking freedom in a traditional society

And Then We Danced is hard to classify as a genre. It is definitely not just another LGBT movie that found its way to Oscar nominations because of the sensitivity of the topic. Even though sexual exploration is one of the central themes of the film, homosexuality is not an overwrought plot point. Nor it is a coming-of-age story, although it has common teenage drama features: from first love, tears and jealousy, to fight scenes and heartbreak. Thus, this coming (out) of the age story has a perfect balance between the exploration of identity and sexuality and self-acceptance. As Akin said in an interview, the film is about self-reflection. It is about seeking freedom in a traditional society. It is about the dreams and goals of a Tbilisi teenager.

The cinema premiere of the film in Georgia cinemas could not be more timely. Amid increasing homophobia, backed by the Georgian Orthodox Church, the film, once again, sparkled a sharp divide within Georgian society and unveiled the existing polarisation. Various far-right and conservative groups tried to disrupt cinema screenings of the film. Getting into the cinema was only possible after passing through a police cordon. Thus,

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everyone was carefully searched with metal detectors. Outside the cordon, fear-mongering anti-LGBT groups were gathered, supported by the Orthodox Church – the institution desperately seeking to maintain power and control over citizen's private life. Inside the cordon there were people hoping for a more tolerant, progressive Georgia.

With the movie Akin wanted to go back to his Georgian roots and show the reality of contemporary Georgia.

According to Akin, the movie was influenced by the events which took place on May 17th 2013, when hundreds of anti-gay demonstrators, supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church, attacked a peaceful LGBT rally. In response to these events, the head of the church, Patriarch Ilia II, openly stated that the rally was "an insult" to Georgian traditions and described homosexuality as an "anomaly and a disease".

Despite fearing violent counter-demonstrations, LGBT rights groups have not been able to organise a rally to mark the International Day Against Homophobia. The pride parade scheduled in June 2019 was met with outrage from an anti-LGBT group led by the Georgian businessman, Levan Vasadze, who allegedly has close ties with Alexander Dugin, a Russian Eurasian thinker. Again, backed by the Georgian Orthodox Church, the group led by Vasadze was "patrolling'" the streets of Tbilisi, preventing LGBT activists from holding a rally.

In this light, *And Then We Danced* is Akin's "love letter to Georgia" and his heritage. With the movie Akin wanted to go back to his Georgian roots and show the reality of contemporary Georgia: not only the one where gay rights are supressed, but more broadly, those who experience the brutality of social exclusion. "With this story, I wanted to reclaim and redefine Georgian culture to include all, not just some," he wrote on Facebook.

Phobias

"Georgian dance is based on masculinity," says the younger dance instructor in the film, and the old one adds – "it is the spirit of the Georgian nation". Indeed, Georgian national identity has been strongly linked with masculinity throughout history. However, only few people mention that certain Georgian dances have never been based on masculinity. Thus, it is symbolic that Merab

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and Irakli are paired up for Kintouri – the dance of the Kintos, most of whom – according to urban rumours – were homosexual. At the same time, the Kintos, who were the 19th and early 20th century traders and entertainers in Tbilisi, were always frowned upon. They were not considered part of Georgian society; they were considered to be cunning, disrespectful and shameless practitioners of "sodomy". Most of the Kintos were of Armenian descent.

Armenophobia, also portrayed in the film, is the second phobia shared by many in Georgian society. Merab's grandmother cannot hide her dissatisfaction when she hears that her second grandson, David (Giorgi Tsereteli), is going to marry a Georgian-Armenian woman. Together, these phobias construct the image of a Georgian who is heterosexual and a practising Orthodox Christian. All "others" who fail to fit into these categories are doomed to be discriminated against and marginalised.

In his interview with *The Guardian*, Akin discussed the challenges that the LGBT community faces in Georgia; he could not hide his disappointment of the fact that the director of the Georgian National Ballet (traditional Georgian dance ensemble), Nino Sukhishvili, refused to co-operate with him on the film. To justify her refusal Sukhishvi said that "Georgian dance is masculine. Historically, in our ensemble, we have never had a man of non-traditional sexual orientation," and added: "I think that Georgian dance is a representation of Georgian identity, which shows a masculine and freedom-loving Georgian nation."

The movie, however, shows that, even in a very conservative setting, there is still space for improvisation – the rules are made to be broken. In the finale, Merab brings "softness" and femininity to his dance moves as a protest against his dyed-in-the-wool traditionalist dance instructor and the elderly ensemble director. At the same time, this scene captures his rage against patriarchy, dogma and repression. *And Then We Danced* shows that young people, like Merab, can provide a fresh interpretation to old traditions. And what are traditions if not social practices? They change with time and adapt to new realities; otherwise, they would be impossible to maintain.

Painfully Georgian

Dance, as a way of expression, is framed, moulded and dogmatised in the traditional dance. To escape those constraints, Merab seeks refuge in a flamboyant, queer community in Tbilisi. After an internal struggle of confessing his identity to himself, Merab goes to Bassiani – the nightclub which has become a symbol of the progressive Georgian youth with its gay-friendly attitude. Tired of the constraints of traditional dance and social conservatism, Merab

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fully emerges himself into techno music thus setting him free.

The movie is painfully Georgian because of the heavy socio-economic problems that lay the canvas for it. For Merab, dancing becomes a distraction from his everyday problems: his impoverished house, his alcoholic mother, his delinquent brother, and the constant whining of his grandmother. Even though Akin has never lived in Georgia, he has managed to make a socially-conscious drama.

Unfortunately, the film also slips into a few clichés. It is overloaded with cultural, social and political references. Akin tried to include everything he probably ever heard about Georgia: the Russian occupation, Armenophobia, high level of unemployment, and homophobia. Abundance is not always a virtue. From time to time, those narratives appear a little bit artificial. And yet, it can be argued that these small, artificially inserted, narratives carry out an essential message for both local and international audiences.

Nevertheless, *And Then We Danced* is a must-see for those who value engaging narratives and impressive performances, as well as those who want to get a better understanding of the brutally honest reality of gay people living in a conservative society.

This is not only one of the best LGBT films of the year; it is also the carrier of a profound, political statement. This moving drama of love in a conservative society contains a personal and powerful message, portraying a young man's exploration of queerness and identity. On top of this, the wonderful performances bring a compassionate, touching quality to the feature.

Eva Modebadze is a postgraduate student at the International Master's programme in Central and Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (CEERES) at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her particular field of interest includes gender and security studies in the post-Soviet space.

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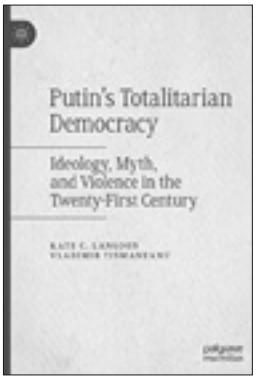
New dark times

A warning against the spread of Putinism

OSTAP KUSHNIR

Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century. By: Kate Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu. Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2019.

Thousands of books exist on Russian politics today. Slavic Studies can boast a strong tradition in Northern America, and generally in the West. The interest in Eastern Europe has also sky-rocketed since the 2014 events in Ukraine. Hence, what makes this artefact so special? On the back cover, the blurb tells you that "the authors reveal that an indoctrinating ideology and a willing population as the most crucial yet overlooked keys to analysing Putin's totalitarian democracy". For me, these lines immediately allude to



George F. Kennan's *Long Telegram*. The US ambassador stated in the late 1940s that the stark decisions of the Soviet (Russian?) authorities were never questioned as their subordinates found it appropriate to be obedient. Therefore, straight from the cover, *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century*, written by Kate Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu, manifests its focus on anthropology, realpolitik, social determinism, and neo-classical geopolitics.

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Precursor

The book further notifies the reader that it will elaborate on patterns of social dependencies and governance which are typical for the Kremlin-dominated space, regardless of the century. On top of that, the authors pay specific attention to state actors. This means two things. On the one hand, Russia is regarded as a state-wide political community which contributes to its *raison d'état*. On the other hand, the western states are portrayed as the most decisive actors from the perspective of which the relations with Russia should be assessed and constructed.

However, the doom of social determinism is not the only providing backbone to the book. Langdon and Tismaneanu do a great job introducing Russia-habitual processes into a wider contemporary context. They arrive with an updated Hannah Arendt concept: "the new dark times", defined as an epoch "in which ordinary citizens fail to illuminate the wrongdoing – or dogooding – of civilization and its leaders and hence allow for lies to degrade truth and human dignity… more and more populations across the world vote for exclusionary parties whose policies would result in economic disaster, isolationism, press censorship, and other impediments to the best interests of diversity, plurality, liberty, and human rights". The global tolerance of Putin's regime and his "totalitarian democratic" style of governance is the precursor of the new dark times, as well as one of the drivers behind them.

The anthropological focus of the book resides, above all, in scrutinising the "behavioural" values of the Russian citizenry, not the "institutional" logic of the authorities and mechanisms of a centralised state. Inspired by Robert C. Tucker and Walter Laqueur, the authors portray Vladimir Putin as a leader who emerged in an environment of specific social demand. Putin is believed to provide security to all citizens of Russia, as well as gift them with a synthetic feeling of greatness. Langdon and Tismaneanu rightfully mention that Putin, as a personality, has been over-analysed recently; many researchers have attempted to look inside his head and construct his identity, whilst the assessment of the role of Russians was downplayed. The latter leads to an incomplete understanding of the local political tradition. Moreover, research on the psychology of the Russian president will not explain the potential arrival of new Putins in the future. Therefore, one of the fundamental achievements of the book is its focus on Russian society and its vision of the representative elites.

The book puts forward the hypothesis that, in an era of a crisis in global democracy, the Russian type of governance may become fit to fill the void of legitimacy. Under Donald Trump's administration, the United States faces hardships in retaining its status as leader of the free world. The voters of Western

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Europe – in particular, the UK, Italy, Austria, France, and recently Germany – slide into sympathising with far-right and populist leaders. In light of this, the Putin-led centralised system of governance becomes attractive. It is Putin, not his democratic counterparts, who are often getting referred to as the world's most powerful figures in today's western media.

Putinism phenomenon

The Russian centralised system of governance, which gains momentum and attention, has been nurtured by the Russians and not without a reason. It converted a "local tribe" of Muscovites into a global political nation and their state into a champion of Eurasian sovereignty. Langdon and Tismaneanu argue that the citizens of Russia feel comfortable supporting their state as they believed it would perform a special *pro publico bono* mission. This feeds Russian nationalist narratives, justifies authoritarian practices and provokes collisions with the West. It also constructs the indigenous identity as benign to Putin-like leaders whose traits and activities are believed to reinforce the Russian cause.

Putin's Totalitarian Democracy touches upon many interesting aspects of Russian statecraft and ideology. A lot of attention is paid to the historical evolution of the ruling elites and their inclination towards authoritarianism. The phenomenon of Putin as a former KGB officer – a human being with political charisma and vision – has been specifically highlighted. Elaborating on his personality, the book progresses to Putinism as an ideology of contemporary times. It links Putinism to the traditions of tsarism, imperialism, Eurasianism and Orthodoxy. Finally, the book assesses contemporary foreign policies of Russia – for instance, its presence in Syria and Ukraine. These policies are portrayed through the prism of Russian popular support for the violations of international law and human rights. The authors deliver a message that the citizenry would go along with any violations as long as the latter are presented as strengths of Putin and his regime.

The book ends with a deduction that Putin's Russia has evolved into a fascist and totalitarian state intending to erode the integrity of the democratic world. This intention is implemented through challenging the essence of political representation and the culture of leadership across the globe. The authors encourage their readers to listen to the voters who sympathise with the Russian narratives. Langdon and Tismaneanu also consider the need to look at the Russians themselves and analyse their values and practices. If done properly, this would help prevent the overspill of "totalitarian democracy" to the West and combat the threat of the new dark times.

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Altar and the throne

The book, however, also provides space for criticism and future elaborations. Langdon and Tismaneanu perceive Russia as a typical "Hobbesian" nation-state, which cannot be done unconditionally. Contemporary Russians resemble a multi-layered political community much more than an ethnically homogeneous nation. Aleksandr Dugin even argues that the Russians failed to construct a "bottom-up" nation-state as they had always aligned to the "top-down" authoritarian, or even autocratic, hierarchies. In this light, the Russian state does not fully embrace the Enlightenment-originated practices of the social contract, neither has it reflected the essence of the post-Westphalian sovereignty. Therefore, from my perspective, it is much more productive to regard Russia as a post-imperial (or neo-imperial) entity, not a nation-state.

The authors seem to assess Russia's political culture from a very western perspective. They put individual human beings at the centre of their analysis and apply universalist frameworks of diversity, plurality, liberty and human rights to explain the state-bound processes. They also clearly separate the secular nature of the state from its spiritual "filling", which is perfectly fine for western societies, but does not work in the same way for Russia. The point is that, in the light of the Orthodox tradition, the mere anthropocentric focus is misleading as people are believed to arrive in this world to struggle, and fulfil their divine purposes. The state serves as a medium here. It was Patriarch Kirill who declared human rights to be a "global heresy of human worshipping" which should not be applicable in Russia without precautions. Therefore, I find it reasonable to introduce a strong focus on Orthodoxy and messianism in the analysis of contemporary Russian society and its leaders. Indeed, the book includes a sub-chapter on religion, which brings very useful insights into co-dependencies between the throne and altar; however, the impact of the Orthodoxy on Russian identity requires more consideration.

Nevertheless, the book leaves a very positive impression. It provokes deep reflections and brings a new understanding to the western reader. Langdon and Tismaneanu managed to highlight the pivotal elements and values of Russian society which make the nature of the state so specific. Last but not least, the authors warn of the threats that Putin's totalitarian democracy has on the rest of the free world. I should highlight that it is impossible to assess the whole multiversity of this book within the scope of this review. But I encourage you to have a look under the cover. NEE

Ostap Kushnir is a lecturer and researcher at Lazarski University in Warsaw. He specialises in Eastern Europe and geopolitics.

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Ukraine 101

MARGARITA NOVIKOVA

Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian Intellectuals. Edited by Volodymyr Yermolenko. Publisher: Internews Ukraine / Ukraine World, Kyiv: 2019.

For most of the time of Ukraine's independence since the fall of the Soviet Union, the country has been mostly covered by the international press as a place of revolutions (2004 and 2013–14) and war (which, of course, continues to take place in Donbas). Ukraine has also become known internationally as a state whose territory was annexed by Russia, and for having ineffective economic reforms. This is where, more or less, most western media outlets finish their coverage on Ukraine. Without attempts to go deeper, they reenforce the image of Ukraine as a failing, war-torn state.

Today, the situation is quite the opposite. The recent election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as the country's president, as well as the ongoing American political scandal, which revolves around efforts by US President Donald Trump to coerce Ukraine into providing damaging narratives about the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primary candidate, Joe Biden, has generated a lot of media coverage on Ukraine-related topics. Thus, especially in the United States, it is now hard to find a newspaper that would go to print without the word "Ukraine" at least in the lead of one article. Even though there is some deeper analysis on Ukraine coming from smaller media outlets, the question remains: how deeply Ukraine is covered by western media?

To find answers to questions that are not being asked in current discussions on Ukraine, it is recommended to search for a different kind of read, one that has been provided to us by Ukrainians themselves. Such materi-

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al can be found in a collection of essays, published recently by Internews Ukraine and Ukraine World, tellingly titled *Ukraine in Histories and Stories*. Given all of the above, its publication is very timely.

A roadmap

As the title suggests the book mainly focuses on Ukrainian history and presents subjective stories by writers who often include narratives of their close relatives. Andriy Kulakov, in the introduction, calls the publication a "road map". It is targeted at non-Ukrainians who are referred to here as travellers desiring to understand Ukraine through the lenses – or glasses – of Ukrainian writers, poets, historians, philosophers, journalists and political analysts. Indeed, the book offers a "package of glasses" as all the contributors depict Ukraine from very different angles. This book can serve as a theoretical introduction to Ukraine, which later can be enriched by practical encounters with Ukrainian people, places and stories.

The book starts with a comprehensive historical overview, which enables us to understand the context from which certain contemporary developments evolve, especially in the realms of nationhood and national identity. For many Ukrainian historians, the starting point for what we today call Ukraine begins with Kyivan Rus'. This idea is however challenged by other nations, in particular Russia and Belarus, who claim Rus' to be their antecedent. In his contribution, Yaroslav Hrytsak, a Ukrainian history professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv and member of *New Eastern Europe*'s editorial board, rightly argues about the futility of the debate surrounding the true foremother of Kyivan Rus'. Hrytsak points out that the concept of a nation-state emerged only in the late 19th century, making it senseless to place the people of Rus' into a notion that did not exist at that time. Additionally, we may decide that a nation is more of a cultural construct, or as Benedict Anderson framed it, an imagined political community. It is imagined in the sense that the majority of the population of a state will never meet each other, while there still is a created connection that brings the people together.

The latter idea of an imagined community can be seen in Ukraine in its choice to focus on the Cossack revolts of the 17th century in order to construct its contemporary national identity. Cossacks, in many ways, are seen as the Ukrainians who stood up against the imperial powers and fought for "Ukraine". This perception is widespread in spite of the fact that the Cossacks were not a strictly ethnic community. They were rather, as Andrew Wilson points out in his book *The Ukrainians: An Unexpected Nation*, "defined by their Orthodoxy

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and their democratic/demotic political culture and welcomed… Moldovans, Poles, Jews, Greeks and even renegade Tatars". This is not something surprising and confirms the words of French philosopher, Ernest Renan, who famously said: "Getting histories wrong is part of being a nation." It would, nonetheless, be interesting to enquire into how much the identification with the Zaporozhian Cossacks has affected present-day Ukrainians to fight for Ukraine today.

A blessing and a curse

Going back to late 18th century, Ukraine was "the breadbasket of Europe", which was both a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing in a sense that good soil provided people with abundance of food at a time when other regions faced shortages. It was a curse because Ukraine's natural resources attracted neighbouring powers and increased their desire to bring the fabled *chornozem* (black soil) territories under their control, a disparaging tactic undertaken by the Russian Empire (they referred to Ukraine as "Little Russia" (*Mala Rus*). Significantly, imperial Russia refused to recognise the Ukrainians as separate people and maintained that the Ukrainian territories to the east were nothing more than a province of Russia. This approximation and denial of national identity has left a deep mark on the identity of the Ukrainian people, specifically in the country's eastern parts. While those living in the western territories were recognised by the Polish Kingdom as separate peoples with their own Ruthenian language, their national sentiments were still often suppressed in the fight for the agricultural breadbasket. This, however, took place to a lesser extent than in the east and therefore allowed for the development of a distinct Ukrainian culture and identity. The relationship of language and national identity must be discussed further as without it any analysis of Ukraine cannot be complete.

As Hrytsak explains, the growing emergence of Russian-speaking Ukrainians persisted due to different political and economic factors. One of them is Soviet Russification and education reforms, such as the 1938 decree that mandated the study of Russian in schools, the 1958 reform that proclaimed education in the native language as non-compulsory and as a consequence significantly undermined the status of mother tongues in the Soviet Union. Russification policies also included the printing of Russian-Ukrainian dictionaries that attempted to eliminate all Polish-Galician origins in the Ukrainian language. Thus, the majority of Polish sounding words were replaced by their Russian equivalents, pushing Ukrainian much closer to Russian. Recently, however, an interesting development has been taking place, as there are now more than a million Ukrainians

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working or studying in Poland, leading to Polish vocabulary slowly finding its way back into Ukrainian.

Russification policies included the printing of Russian-Ukrainian dictionaries that attempted to eliminate all Polish-Galician origins in the Ukrainian language.

The other important factor is that in Soviet Ukraine, knowledge of Russian language was equated with "vocational opportunity", as Jacob Ornstein points out in his essay on Soviet language policy. Hence, Russian became the dominant language of Ukraine until at least the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even after, it was hard to find cities where people were speaking predominantly Ukrainian. Again, it was mainly the western parts of the country that were using Ukrainian. The industrial cities to the east and most of central and southern Ukraine used and continue to use Russian in everyday communication, even if Ukrainian is the official language of the state. This is mainly due to the fact, as Anne Applebaum points out in her book *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*, that the Soviet Union established a solid system that privileged Russian language and assured that "the path to higher social status was a Russian-speaking one". Hence, it was natural that parents were inclined to choose Russian-speaking schools to ensure a brighter future for their children which – in turn – resulted in Russian language domination.

This phenomenon is eloquently discussed in a beautifully written essay by Volodymyr Rafeenko, a writer and poet who lived in Donetsk until the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. He recalls how in his family they spoke only Russian, as it was considered "the language of the city, the language of education," and if you had any ambition you had to forsake any national sentiments and accept the Soviet identity, for which the language of communication was strictly Russian. The villages however retained Ukrainian as their primary language even in the Eastern parts, even though, as Rafeenko explains, Ukrainian in the East was significantly influenced by Russian. Nonetheless, the opposition between the peasant Ukrainian-speaking village and educated Russian-speaking city still existed in whole of Ukraine.

Revival of the Ukrainian language

The village-city contrast, as Hrytsak points out, was more flexible due to the emergence of a group of "assimilated Russian-speaking Ukrainians". These people were less exposed to Ukrainian traditions and customs, yet maintained

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"an emotional connection" with Ukrainian village life through their childhood memories of visiting their Ukrainian-speaking grandparents. This identification is especially rekindled in the light of the intensification of Russian aggression. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 by the Russian Federation, and their unofficial endorsement of the separatist movement in the Donbas region, has produced a change in attitude towards Russia and the Russian language. Ukrainian is once again being used as a form of political resistance, similar to the time of Taras Shevchenko, who was Ukraine's most famous romantic poet and national hero for some. Shevchenko attempted to create a Ukrainian language that could express complex ideas and thoughts, including nationalism and opposition to social and political "enslavement" of the Ukrainian people by the Russian Empire.

Today, Ukrainian is used by many out of principle and solidarity with those who have died in the conflict in Donbas and at the Maidan. Nonetheless, Yuri Andrukhovych, a Ukrainian contemporary writer, in his interview for the book presents a different view. He describes Russian as the dominant language which becomes even more dominant as the Galician region in western Ukraine "is swinging towards opportunism". Andrukhovych sees a bleak future for the Ukrainian language as he states that, realistically, in 30–40 years Ukraine will be "a unilingual Russian-speaking country". Could he be right?

It depends, of course, on what course Ukraine will decide to take. The current conflict with Russia plays an important role in the (re)construction of Ukrainian identity and will continue to shape it long after it is resolved. The manner by which it will be resolved is in the hands of the current government and will be of immense importance for defining what kind of Ukraine there will be. NEE

Margarita Novikova is an editorial intern with *New Eastern Europe* and currently an MA student of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

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Discovering Paraska Horytsvit

MARIIA KASHCHENKO

Overcoming Gravity. Exhibition of the artist Paraska Plytka-Horytsvit. Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv, October 17th 2019–January 19th 2020.

Most countries have their own heroes in the arts and culture. These are the old masters, artists of the 19th–20th centuries, as well as the contemporary generation of artists. The Ukrainian case, however, is somewhat different. They are suffering from a crisis sparked by the country's traumatic history and embedded in the very essence of a totalitarian-imperial regime.

There is a group of artists from the past that is generally celebrated by state museums and the nation as a whole, such as Maria Prymachenko and Oleksandr Murashko. Then there are contemporary artists who are loved by both independent galleries and national museums, such as Anatoliy Kryvolap and Alexander Roytburd. They were the ones who helped Ukraine enter the international cultural scene in the 1990s. Finally, there is the new generation of contemporary artists who are giving Ukrainian culture a chance to gain wider international recognition. The problem is, no one really knows the extent of Ukrainian art history; there is not much in between the celebrated artists of the past and heroes of the contemporary scene. Moreover, the list of the former is surprisingly short for a country with such a rich history like Ukraine. Naturally, that is due to the country's history: in the Russian Empire, many aspiring artists would travel to St Petersburg – the cultural capital – in order to gain recog-

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nition from the authorities and people of the country. Similarly, the majority of artists of the 20th century are generalised by the term "Soviet", while most of them moved to Moscow and St Petersburg to achieve success in the wider Soviet Union.

Beyond the names

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has made an attempt to return those cultural objects lying within the framework of the interstate mechanism of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Yet this initiative was not met with much excitement from Russia. So the newly independent Ukraine was left with a very limited number of museum archives and even a more limited collection of objects. The country was also poor at that moment that trying to seek its cultural heritage within its borders was not on the agenda, which is why many artists were overlooked by the government. It is only now, in the late 2010s, that the state is trying to gather and piece together a cultural heritage for the country. That is why the exhibition *Overcoming Gravity* in Mystetskiy Arsenal in Kyiv, dedicated to Paraska Plytka-Gorytsvit, is important for the Ukrainian cultural scene. It explores an artist previously unknown to the general public and even for some of those working in the cultural sphere. Moreover, it explores much more than that: it is a thorough study on what, and most importantly who, is hiding behind those big names of Ukrainian art history.

Paraska Plytka-Gorytsvit was a true revival of her generation. She was what can be called a multifaceted artist: as a photographer, she practised applied art, wrote books and published them herself. On top of all that, she also guided tours in the mountains and sang in a choir. Despite the extensive legacy of her work, she is nowhere as famous as her "colleagues," Maria Prymachenko and Kateryna Bilokur, whom children study in primary school as crucial figures of Ukrainian history. Plytka-Gorytsvit may be compared to Vivian Maier, an American self-taught photographer who was unknown during her life. Maier took more than 150,000 photographs capturing how people used to live in cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Of course, Paraska Gorytsvit did not have an

Overcoming Gravity explores an artist previously unknown to the general public and even for some of those working in the cultural sphere.

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opportunity to travel as much as Maier did, yet there is something interestingly similar between the two women.

The exhibition *Overcoming Gravity* is vital for Ukrainian art for a number of reasons. First of all, it is the first attempt to house such a collection in a museum context. Secondly, it acts as the start of a debate on how much freedom one person can have and be so much ahead of the zeitgeist. Lastly, it is a response to the societal circumstances and public expectations. It must be said that the exhibition curation is superb; the curatorial team did thorough research of Paraska Gorytsvit in order to convey the fullest picture possible in the given context. Moreover, Mystetskiy Arsenal was a perfect choice to accommodate such a vast collection.

Life story

The exhibition is divided into several parts. The first section features photographs by Plytka-Horytsvit accompanied by the story of her life. She was born in 1927 and grew up in the village of Kryvorivnia, in the Carpathian Mountains. At age 16, Plytka-Horytsvit travelled to Germany on her own in order to attend school. Yet her dreams of obtaining a proper education were not fulfilled and instead she went to work for a family where she was essentially a servant. Upon her return home, Plytka-Horytsvit became a liaison to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which was the reason why, in 1945, the Soviet authorities arrested and sent her off to Siberia. Plytka-Horytsvit returned home nine years later, at the age of 27. When she returned to Kryvorivnia, her native village treated her with caution; they kept their relationship with her at a distance, all of this due to fear of the reaction of the Soviet authorities.

> The curators were able to convey the atmosphere and character of Plytka-Horytsvit. Objects vary from her handmade embroidery to self-published books and collages.

The second section of the exhibition is dedicated to Plytka-Horytsvit's art. The curators were able to convey the atmosphere and character of the artist. Here, the objects vary from the handmade embroidery to self-published books and collages. The collages are fascinating; Plytka-Horytsvit was interested in Indian culture and she expressed that vividly by placing a man dressed in a traditional Western Ukrainian costume with a woman in a traditional Indian dress. She mixed cultures in a way that it did

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not feel fake or too pretentious. She had admired Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophical works, which she expressed in her books and illustrations. Despite her asceticism, Plytka-Horytsvit was in an active correspondence with many people around the world, including Indira Gandhi and Soviet political prisoners.

The subsequent room is dedicated to Plytka-Horytsvit's hometown and, more importantly, her home. With the aid of VR glasses, people can "visit" her house and its surroundings. This section also features Plytka-Horytsvit's personal belongings, like a hat that she made by recycling plastic and other handmade objects, essentially predicting fashion for sustainability. The exhibit also shows Plytka-Horytsvit's passion for photography; there is a remake of her studio where she would develop the film. Naturally, this section is followed by a room dedicated fully to her photographs, filled with pictures depicting Plytka-Horytsvit vision of life.

"I believe that Paraska's photographs are a wonderful and powerful material for future research," says Kateryna Radchenko, the curator of the exhibition. "We face three major problems when talking about female photographers in Ukraine. First, there were women photographers, but their archives are not accessible so if you are lucky, you can find a couple pictures held in private collections. Second, the works of women who photographed in western Ukraine, in particular in Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk, now belong to the artistic heritage of Poland. Last but not least, many female photographers were born and worked in Ukraine, but at a certain point they emigrated, so today their work becomes part of the legacy of Austria, Australia, United Kingdom or France. Unfortunately, the list of women working in photography is incredibly limited. Now Plytka-Horytsvit's name will be among them, so the fact that the archive was found is incredibly useful in a more global sense."

Origins

Julia Vaganova, the deputy director at Mystetskiy Arsenal said that academic research on Paraska started back in the 1990s. Yet the research never reached the point of becoming widely known in Ukraine. After Plytka-Horytsvit's death in 1998, Oleksandr Chaika, who was studying her life, passed his research on to Maxim Rudenko. Rudenko later became one of the initiators of the exhibition and directed the film *Portrait against the Mountains*, which explores Plytka-Horytsvit's life and art. The year 2015 was also the starting point of this exhibition, as it was when the curating team went to Plytka-Horytsvit's house and found a large archive of photographs. The photos were in a very poor condition due to poor storage, so the curating team began to restore them. They were able

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to see the versatility of Plytka-Horytsvit's ideas and execution, how without a proper education she was able to convey a story through photographs and how she mixed and matched different cultures in her books and illustrations.

It is important to think about the fate and legacy of artists like Paraska Gorytsvit. What is going to happen with the archive after the show ends? Will they be preserved and kept safe or will they return to the house of Plytka-Gorytsvit and continue to deteriorate? Most importantly, how many more unique artists does Ukraine have to offer that no one really knows about yet?

Of course, the country is going through a complex transformation at the moment. It is vital, however, to remember about culture and its legacy, as it tells the history of a country in a much more explicit way than any book. Hopefully, this exhibition is a bright start for more discoveries like this.

Mariia Kashchenko is a co-founder of an online platform for emerging artists called *The Art Unit*. She is a graduate of Christie's Education and University of Glasgow where she studied History of Art and Art World Practice. She is currently completing an MA in Arts and Cultural Management at King's College London. She has experience in working at various art institutions in the UK and Ukraine.

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