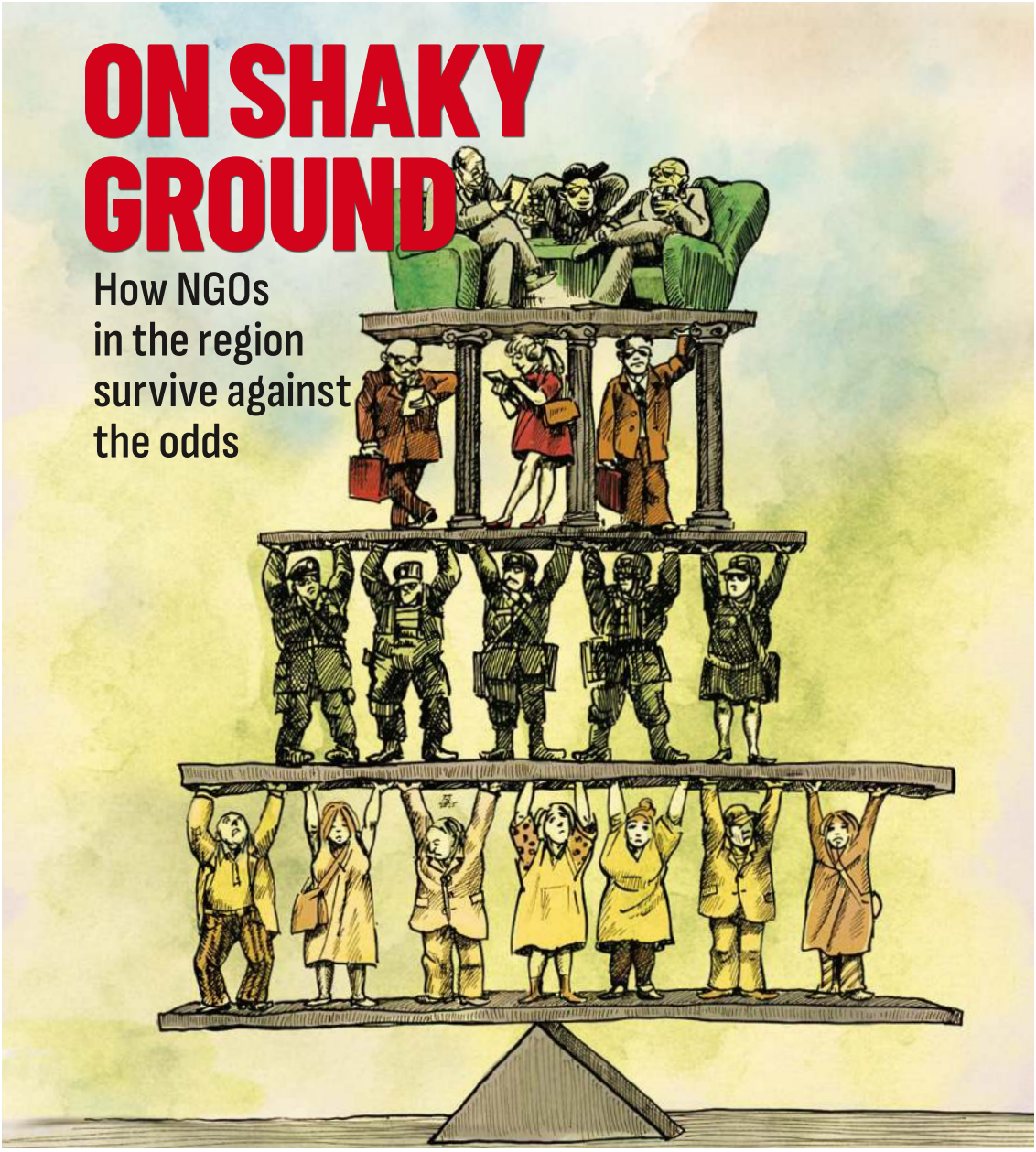
Bimonthly **September-October** **No 5 (LXVIII)/2025**
25 PLN (w tym 8% vat) | 15 EUR | 17.75 USD | 9.99 GBP
neweasterneurope.eu

New Eastern Europe

ISSN 2083-7372



ON SHAKY GROUND

How NGOs in the region survive against the odds

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DEAR READER,

More than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus continue to face the legacy of authoritarianism and fragile democratic institutions. In this context, civil society has emerged as a space where citizens negotiate power, demand accountability, and strive to shape their collective futures.

This issue brings together critical reflections on the current state of civil society and the NGO sector in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and Serbia. While each country follows its own political trajectory, the authors highlight a shared concern: democratic backsliding, repression of civic actors, and dependence on external funding. Yet, they also reveal stories of resilience, dignity, and transformative civic engagement that continue to shape the democratic aspirations of these societies.

One of the most urgent concerns is the financial vulnerability of civil society organisations. The recent cut in USAID support has intensified fears about long-term sustainability and autonomy. However, funding is only one facet of a broader struggle. Weak institutional frameworks, limited political commitment to democratic norms, and mounting external pressures, particularly from authoritarian neighbours, further constrain the ability of civil society to fulfil its watchdog role.

This reality is most acute in Belarus and Azerbaijan, where civil society faces near-total suppression. Georgia, once being a beacon of reform, now shows democratic decline. Moldova's democratic transition remains precarious. Internal governance challenges and external threats - particularly from Russia - have placed immense strain on civil society. In contrast, Ukraine stands out as a testament to civic resilience. The full-scale Russian invasion has not weakened civil society, but strengthened it. Serbia adds a compelling dimension to this narrative. Despite an entrenched authoritarian regime, student protests have reignited civic resistance, advocating for justice, academic freedom, and government accountability.

Beyond that, this issue closes with a special section dedicated to NATO after this past summer's summit in The Hague. Our authors highlight the real security challenges the region faces and what it will take to overcome them.

We hope you enjoy these texts along with the other essays and stories featured here. We also encourage you to join our community by becoming a member of *New Eastern Europe* via our new membership programme, which includes subscription and additional benefits. Learn more on our website.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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New Eastern Europe

PUBLISHER
The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław
office@kew.org.pl, www.kew.org.pl

College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław

Zamek Wojnowice
ul. Zamkowa 2, 55-330 Wojnowice, Poland

New Eastern Europe is published in partnership with the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk.

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New Eastern Europe is co-funded by the European Union, under an operating grant titled "Protecting European Values. A proactive approach to strengthening and building European democracy by countering hostile threats aimed at diminishing EU values and bridging existing divides". Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by the European Union

Texts and opinions published in *New Eastern Europe* do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders, publishers and editors.

New Eastern Europe is co-financed by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland in the framework of the "Promotion of Culture" funding programme.

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
Republic of Poland

Circulation: 3500
Printing: Zakład Poligraficzny Moś i Łuczak sp.j.
International Distribution: Magazine Heaven Direct / https://www.magazineheavendirect.com
Printed in Poland | Published since 2011

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Resistance, resilience, recovery

Ukraine's civil society in wartime

LIZA BEZVERSHENKO

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine's civil society has grown into one of the most vibrant and resilient in the region, playing a central role in shaping the country's democratic path and pro-European identity. Throughout this time, citizens have mobilized in defence of human rights, sovereignty and political accountability. This civic strength became essential in responding to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 and this is still true today.

"The people shall be the sole source of power in Ukraine," declares Article 5 of the Constitution of Ukraine. Through decades of the country's historical trajectory, Ukrainian citizens have been not only embracing this constitutional right but actively exercising it to raise their voice and shape the national agenda. Located at the geopolitical crossroads between Europe and Russia, Ukraine has always faced existential threats, and its civil society has consistently served as the voice of the country's pro-European and pro-democratic choice. Through successive waves of resistance, Ukrainian civil society has become one of the most vibrant, responsive and authentic in the region.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has emerged from the post-Soviet era burdened by the legacy of weak post-communist state institutions, fragile governance structures, and political leadership still heavily influenced by Moscow.

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Having been severely suppressed under Soviet rule, many civil society leaders became more outspoken for national sovereignty, identity and autonomy. Their efforts focused on promoting the Ukrainian language and culture alongside a sovereign political strategy. As in other post-Soviet countries, Ukrainian society was marked by deep mistrust of top-down governance. Hence, a culture of grassroots mobilization and horizontal coordination was more natural and safer, laying the foundation for national unity and civic solidarity.

Dignity and a European future

These foundations proved critical during the 2004 Orange Revolution, a mass protest triggered by rigged elections influenced by Russia. Primarily initiated by the younger generation born and raised in the Soviet Union, the movement embodied a collective desire for a better life and a more democratic Ukraine. Peaceful demonstrations in Kyiv's Independence Square successfully demanded a court-ordered re-run of the election, which ultimately led to the victory of the pro-western candidate Viktor Yushchenko. This marked the first time in independent Ukraine's history that civil society successfully responded to electoral fraud and forced change through mass civic reaction. It did fall short of delivering the profound political transformation many had hoped for, and eventually much of the public trust was lost. Still, the Orange Revolution demonstrated the strong commitment of the people to human rights and a will – *volya* – to build a free, European Ukraine.

The crucial decision – or refusal – of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union in 2013 sparked the largest wave of public demonstrations in modern Ukrainian history. These later became known as the EuroMaidan, or the Revolution of Dignity. Citizens from across all regions of the country, particularly students whose future was at stake, gathered in the streets to support a European democratic path and oppose deeper ties with Russia.

The violent suppression and brutal beating of young demonstrators by the Berkut special riot police provoked national outrage. It triggered a mass reaction that united all layers of society. People travelled to join the demonstrations in Kyiv, culminating in historic crowds of up to 800,000 people on a single day. Protesters defended themselves with bricks and Molotov cocktails from armed police. More than 100 individuals were killed and are now remembered as the "Heavenly Hundred", a lasting symbol of sacrifice in the fight for dignity and a European future.

Amidst political turbulence, civil society strengthened its infrastructure and reach. Independent media outlets such as Hromadske and human rights groups

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like Euromaidan-SOS emerged as key anchors, providing fair, transparent and trustworthy voices within the civic space. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, many volunteers took up arms; helped equip the army; supported the injured and their families; and explored ways to improve army-civil society cooperation. This capacity and experience of rapid mobilization, digital activism coordination, and grassroots fundraising would later prove vital for Ukraine's survival in 2022.

Since 2014, civil society has evolved into a key factor in implementing and monitoring reforms on the path to EU integration. Unlike the 2004 Orange Revolution, the trust and motivation remained and became ingrained in the civic space. In response to Russian hybrid warfare, civil society led the growth of independent media outlets to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation. It also filled gaps left by the government by supporting social services, the military and veteran care. CSOs played a pioneering role in promoting anti-corruption reforms, including the establishment of new monitoring bodies. Through western-funded capacity building initiatives, CSOs strengthened their political engagement, drafted key legislation, advocated for its implementation, and launched policy campaigns.

The Revolution of Dignity cemented civil society's role as a key driver of European integration.

As a result, Ukrainian civil society has become a recognized equal partner to both domestic institutions and international donors, functioning not only as a watchdog but as a major policy driver. The Revolution of Dignity not only marked a turning point in Ukraine's history but also cemented civil society's role as a key driver of European integration.

Front lines of resilience

In the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, many of Ukraine's most active civil society leaders took up arms and joined the territorial defence forces or the armed forces of Ukraine. Young leaders, experts and activists who had previously worked on ecology, political participation, disinformation, education and advocacy rapidly had to switch roles to military defence or humanitarian response.

While the international community was still absorbing the shock of the invasion and formulating its reaction, Ukrainian civil society filled the critical vacuum in real time. Drawing on years of experience in rapid mobilization and emergency coordination, CSOs played a critical role in ensuring the country's survival in the first hours and weeks of the war.

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Volunteering became a way of life. According to research conducted in early 2024, over 80 per cent of Ukrainians have consistently donated or volunteered to support military and humanitarian causes. This culture of contribution has created a unique model of national resilience – a decentralized yet coordinated ecosystem of state-society solidarity, where the boundary between civil society and state institutions is fluid but responsibilities are clearly defined. This direct connection has significantly increased the credibility of civil society and volunteers, with public trust levels reaching 81 per cent, ranking in the top three together with the army and the State Emergency Service.

Well-organized and crises-tested, CSOs swiftly assumed their new responsibilities, demonstrating exceptional flexibility and adaptability. Out of necessity, many became de facto experts in military equipment, medical supplies and defence technologies. Even more NGOs and charitable foundations were registered to manage unprecedented donation flows and facilitate military procurement efforts. Since February 2022, Ukrainian citizens have donated over 2.5 billion US dollars to support local military and defence needs. This mobilization was deeply personal – often the same individuals were involved in both civil society and the armed forces.

Ukraine's culture of contribution has created a unique model of resilience – a coordinated ecosystem of state-society solidarity.

As such, Ukrainian civil society organizations have become globally known and respected. For example, "Come Back Alive", founded in 2014, has become one of the most trusted charitable foundations, providing Ukrainian defenders with essential equipment, technology and training. The Center for Civil Liberties, a well-recognized human rights organization and Nobel Peace Prize winner, advocates for the investigation of Russian war crimes and the creation of a special tribunal for the crimes of aggression. The International Centre for Ukrainian Victory is a leading voice in the worldwide campaign for the confiscation of Russia's frozen assets to defend Ukraine and Europe.

Protecting democracy

The war inevitably narrows the space for democracy. Yet, despite the limitations of martial law, such as curfews, media restrictions and constant security threats, Ukrainian civil society continues to protect democratic principles, transparency and institutional accountability. CSOs continue to expose government inefficiencies and investigate corruption cases. This role requires a delicate balance: demanding openness without compromising national security, safeguarding freedom of expres-

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Since the Russian full-scale invasion, volunteering became a way of life for Ukrainians. Over 80 per cent of Ukrainians have consistently donated or volunteered to support military and humanitarian causes.

sion without fuelling harmful narratives, and holding the government accountable without undermining international trust. The war has not diminished Ukrainians' demands for good governance; on the contrary, it has further strengthened their commitment to democratic values, which are now defended at the highest cost.

While Ukraine's civil society has matured into an efficient, professionalized ecosystem with extensive experience in successful project implementation and international partnerships, it now faces a complex and increasingly volatile environment. Ongoing Russian military aggression continues to affect all regions of the country, leaving no area entirely secure for local actors to operate. At the same time, global geopolitical instability has led to funding cuts and shifting donor priorities. One notable example is the suspension of USAID support, estimated at 16 billion US dollars in 2023, resulting in widespread project suspensions, job losses, and growing uncertainty.

The cumulative toll of war, including emotional and physical exhaustion, widespread psychological stress, and an ongoing brain drain caused by displacement, has also undermined organizations' capacities to plan ahead and operate effectively. As in the past, collaboration with government institutions remains largely ad hoc, lacking the structural frameworks necessary for meaningful, transparent

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and inclusive engagement. Both independent media and CSOs require more sustainable business models with diversified funding sources to decrease dependency on external donors. This will help to safeguard their autonomy, resilience and operational stability.

Civil society abroad

Since 2022, over eight million Ukrainians have left the country in search of safety. Despite the physical distance, Ukrainians abroad have never ceased to feel Ukrainian and continue to play a vital role in supporting the nation's struggle for victory and recovery. Ukrainians abroad and within the diaspora rank among the most committed donors and vocal advocates, mobilizing international support through fundraising; facilitating partnerships; sending humanitarian aid; accommodating and integrating refugees; promoting Ukrainian culture; and advocating for increased political, military and economic support. As the war enters its fourth year, Ukrainian civil society abroad must find more creative strategies to maintain global attention amid a shifting international focus toward other global crises. Moreover, Russian propaganda remains highly active abroad, systematically spreading disinformation and fake narratives about the war and Ukraine.

Activism is not limited to street actions. Through lectures, discussions, exhibitions, film festivals, concerts and DJ sets, charity marathons, and much more, Ukrainians abroad are introducing modern Ukrainian culture and offering a narrative beyond war and suffering. These initiatives foster understanding and empathy, engaging both hearts and minds and creating long-term sympathy and connection.

Before the physical return is possible, the government, civil society and international organizations are exploring the concept of an "intellectual return", leveraging the skills and international experience of the Ukrainians abroad to support the country's resistance, recovery and reconstruction. Efforts include investment, city twinning, youth exchanges, and international networking. In this way, those abroad can stay engaged and contribute to Ukraine's victory from a safe distance.

Despite their motivation, Ukrainian CSOs abroad often operate solely on a volunteer and pro-bono basis. They are frequently left in a funding blind spot, remaining resource-limited and overlooked by Ukrainian and international donors. Military-related fundraisers are frequently regarded as "too political", limiting financial support opportunities. There is also a significant lack of platforms for dialogue between civil society abroad and domestic civil society, as well as with the government. Existing coordination mechanisms are outdated and fail to reflect the dynamic, decentralized and diverse nature of diaspora-based activism, particular-

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ly overlooking a wide range of newly created formal and informal initiatives. On top of this, burnout, remote-war experiences, refugee and integration challenges, and a lack of capacity development and institutionalization compound the already complex challenges of operating in a foreign environment.

Ukrainian civil society abroad continues the legacy of its domestic counterpart, creating a powerful yet under-recognized force in representing Ukraine's interests on the international stage. They act as "citizen ambassadors", whose potential, connections and international experience remain largely underutilized.

Architects of reconstruction

Russia's war continues to devastate lives, critical infrastructure, the economy and the environment across every region of Ukraine. Amid this destruction, Ukrainian civil society works tirelessly to sustain life for those who stayed, and those who will one day return. From the first days of the invasion, CSOs have been at the forefront of addressing and documenting damage, supporting affected communities, and launching initiatives aimed at both immediate reconstruction and long-term recovery.

> Beyond physical rebuilding, civil society also draws attention to social and mental recovery from nationwide war trauma.

Within Ukraine and abroad, civil society is not only an end recipient of aid, but an active contributor and co-architect of the reconstruction process. It plays a leading role in advocating for a people-centred, transparent, accountable and inclusive recovery process, ensuring that Ukrainian citizens are meaningfully included at the decision-making table. Thanks to decentralization reforms, civil society is able to connect local administrative units – hromadas – with international partners, helping to speed up reconstruction and increase access to opportunities.

Strategic coalitions such as RISE – Ukraine and Resilience, Reconstruction, and Relief for Ukraine (RRR4U) have emerged to advocate for the integration of EU-aligned reforms into the reconstruction efforts. Their goal is to "build back better" – greener, more innovative and benefitting Ukrainian society first and foremost. These networks work closely with government institutions and local authorities, providing legal assistance, offering insights on reform implementation, and recommending regional and local best practices. They actively monitor the use of funds, promote transparency and work to prevent corruption.

Alongside these formal coalitions, volunteer-led groups and grassroots initiatives are equally engaged at the local level in rebuilding homes, repairing essential

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infrastructure and delivering emergency materials. Smaller, less-known CSOs face chronic underfunding, lack of capacities and knowledge, insufficient coordination with government bodies, and limited access to planning data and official frameworks.

Beyond physical rebuilding, civil society also draws attention to social and mental recovery from nationwide war trauma. Daily stress, anxiety and fear weigh heavily on Ukrainian citizens. Hence, CSOs initiate rehabilitation projects, including accessible mental health services, support networks and educational resources for self-help. Thus, Ukrainian civil society is more than a responder – it represents invaluable human capital that will help create a resilient, needs-driven and inclusive reconstruction agenda that not only rebuilds but also heals and reconciles the country.

There is no doubt that civil society in Ukraine stands as a living symbol of resilience and dignity. With over 100,000 registered civil society and non-governmental organizations in 2025, it performs a wide range of roles: from raising international awareness to corruption monitoring; from combatting disinformation to advocacy for justice; from supporting the armed forces and veterans to rebuilding cities. Ukraine's civil society is the beating heart of the nation, its pulse sustaining the country through horrific war and destruction. This courage and dedication are deeply inspiring, yet they must not be romanticized. They are not gestures of bravery alone, but essential for the country's survival. EE

Liza Bezvershenko is a Ukrainian civil society expert based in Brussels, specializing in advocacy, European integration and democracy promotion.

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Georgian civil society forced into survival mode

NINO LEZHAVA

After decades of striving for independence and democratic reform, Georgia is now facing a reversal towards authoritarianism. The ruling Georgian Dream party, mimicking the Kremlin, initiated controversial laws in an accelerated manner to legalize its repressions over independent voices of society. The elimination of independent media outlets, grassroots movements, non-governmental organizations, professional unions, and activists has now become the priority for the Russian-backed government.

After 30 years of fighting for independence and sovereignty against Russian autocracy and the Soviet totalitarian legacy, Georgia has found itself trapped in a situation where a single-party parliament is mirroring the Kremlin's practice of suppressing independent voices. The Georgian Dream (GD) party has established a state grants management agency for cultivating an alternative civil society through GONGOS: a state-controlled imitation of non-governmental organizations. This is a clear throwback to Soviet times, when the so-called independent organizations, façade institutions, served as ideological instruments to reinforce the regime's power, and did not reflect genuine civic autonomy or impartiality.

The state grants management agency was swiftly established following the amendment of the law on grant making, which was recently adopted alongside the so-called "foreign agents law". This was all done with the intent of dismantling independent civil society organizations. The agency will provide funding to NGOs

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directly from the state budget and will be directly subordinate to the government. Meanwhile, the Tbilisi court froze the accounts of seven leading Georgian civil society organizations, claiming that the organizations had facilitated violence in the early phase of the ongoing anti-government demonstrations. Yet, no evidence was presented to substantiate these claims.

Georgian civil society in retrospect

Modern Georgian civil society emerged in the context of occupation, the struggle for independence, civil unrest, economic crisis, and widespread poverty. Despite these turbulent conditions, it ultimately became the true indicator of the country's democratic progress. This journey, however, was not linear; it evolved through a series of pivotal historical moments and shifting political landscapes.

For the first time in decades, when Soviet *perestroika* opened up a limited space for independent thought, Georgian nationalist and anti-communist groups, advocating for a modern, pro-western state, emerged as various civic initiatives, such as environmental or cultural heritage protection. These early expressions of civic activism laid the groundwork for what would later become a more structured civil society. Although these groups were not rooted in the classic liberal civil society concept, they nevertheless created an alternative voice distinct from the Soviet system and challenged its ideological monopoly.

In the 1990s, after regaining independence, the United States and European countries began supporting the development of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Georgia. This external support marked a transformative phase in the maturation of a civil society – the massive formation of NGOs – largely fuelled by western funds, such as those from the philanthropist George Soros. The western backing not only provided financial assistance but also introduced institutional models and democratic values that helped shape Georgia's third sector, which later played a critical role in the political transformation of the country during the Rose Revolution. CSOs provided data-based evidence and activism relating to election fraud, which was used by the Georgian Supreme Court to annul the results of the parliamentary elections. This moment signified the institutionalization of civil society as a political actor, rather than merely a watchdog. CSOs contributed to the transparency of the elections in 2012 as well, and the peaceful transition of power, when Georgian Dream won the majority of votes for the first time. In doing so,

> Georgia's civil society played a critical role in the political transformation of the country during the Rose Revolution.

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they reinforced public trust in electoral processes and demonstrated their indispensable role in the democratic transition.

Thirteen years later, the same CSOs have become an obstruction for the GD regime, providing scrutiny and monitoring of the government's unlimited misuse of resources and power. What was once considered an ally in Georgia's democratic development began to be viewed by those in power as a threat to political dominance. Thus, the elimination of independent media outlets, grassroots movements, non-governmental organizations, professional unions, and activists has become a priority for the Russian-backed regime in recent years. Thus, what was born in the shadow of the regime now faces a purge by a growing authoritarianism.

Legislative execution of CSOs

Targeting CSOs on a legislative basis follows a Russian-inspired tactic again, aiming at suppressing an independent societal voice. It took four months for the GD-controlled parliament to swiftly approve a series of restrictive laws without a single dissenting vote. This has been a brutal continuation of the course that Georgian Dream began back in 2023, with the first initiative of the so-called "foreign agents law". This was officially named as the "law on transparency of foreign influence" and still remains in place.

The government's version of the "foreign agents registration act" (FARA) went into force on June 1st this year, enabling surveillance and repression not only of CSOs, but also of private individuals pursuing civic goals without a formal organizational structure and having financial resources abroad. The formulation of the law leaves room for malicious interpretation by GD, and provides huge access to targets' private, personal or financial data and resources. Penalties for violating this law include a financial fine starting at 10,000 US dollars, imprisonment, or, in some cases, both.

In implementing the legislative changes, Georgian Dream conducted a massive disinformation campaign, claiming that their version of FARA was an exact copy of the law in the United States. However, the US Attorney General has clarified that the Georgian version of FARA was incomparable with the law on the books in the US, given the context in which it is being considered and its broad application to all NGO organizations. As a result of this bill, civil society in Georgia is destined to become extinct due to an expected unfair application of the law and court decisions favouring the ruling power.

While the FARA serves as a tool of control and repression concerning civil society actors, the "law on grants" directly targets foreign donors, empowering the

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Despite the current situation, core civil society organizations, independent media outlets, and activists persist in their work with determination. However, Georgia's civil society cannot survive without sustained and strategic external support.

Georgian government to approve or block them. It requires foreign donor governments and organizations to obtain explicit authorization from GD i controlled nstitutions before issuing funding.

In this light, the government has designated the anti-corruption bureau as the authority responsible for supervising and monitoring the issuance and receipt of grants, also taking appropriate measures to enforce the execution of FARA. The bureau neatly follows the Soviet/Russian style. For example, it created an institution for whistleblowers and took the responsibility for their protection. The very first request of the bureau, calling for CSOs to register on a list of foreign agents, has failed as a result of rejection by the majority of actors.

Another wave of suppression against independent media outlets unfolded through amendments to the "Law on Broadcasting". Broadcasters are prohibited from receiving funding from foreign individuals or entities for selling broadcasting services, except for narrowly defined categories such as commercial advertising, teleshopping, sponsorship, and product placement. Moreover, the amendments grant the Communications Commission expanded authority to interfere in journalistic content, impose financial penalties, and even suspend broadcasting licences

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based on its own subjective interpretations. This further tightens control over independent voices in the media landscape.

By passing a legislative package, the ruling government also excluded NGOs from participating in public decision-making processes. As a result, the right of NGOs to nominate candidates for key judicial and oversight bodies, including the Prosecutorial Council, the Disciplinary Board of Judges of the Common Courts, and the High Council of Justice, was revoked. In addition, civil society representatives are no longer permitted to participate in the prime minister-led selection commissions responsible for appointing the heads of the Special Investigation Service, the Personal Data Protection Service, and the above-mentioned Anti-Corruption Bureau. NGOs are also excluded from the nomination and selection processes for the Central Election Commission, the Public Broadcaster's Board of Trustees, and several other critical state institutions.

In addition to the aforementioned amendments, the Russian-backed Georgian government has taken measures to restrict freedom of expression virtually as well, targeting activists and social media influencers. Their amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences allow for punishment not only for swearing, physically offensive remarks, and other actions that disturb public order or citizens' peace in physical spaces, but also for similar conduct in virtual spaces, like on social media. Also, pursuant to another amendment, verbal insults, swearing, or offensive harassment of a political officeholder or public servant will now be punishable by a fine of 6,000 Georgian lari (about 2,200 US dollars) or imprisonment. The illustration of these measures is already in action: an activist in Zugdidi was recently sentenced to five days in detention for calling a local government representative "silly" in a social media comment.

What comes next?

Unfortunately, Georgia is not the first country where authoritarianism has prevailed (hopefully only temporarily). Similar cases are seen in Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Turkey, China, Hungary, Serbia and others. These states offer various examples of how civil society organizations have struggled and sometimes survived under non-democratic regimes. These cases provide important lessons for how CSOs might adapt or resist in repressive contexts.

However, the new legislative repressions in Georgia leave no room for adaptation, relocation, partial co-optation, or masking of the identity of CSOs. Two major choices are left for an institutionalized civil society: full control by the Russian-backed government or liquidation. Otherwise, the risks ahead are extremely

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jeopardizing, which makes it nearly impossible in the long term for individuals or CSOs to continue operating in this environment.

The consequences of eliminating Georgia's civil society would be profound. CSOs have played an essential role not just in promoting democracy, but also in supporting socio-economic development. For decades, they have contributed to strengthening checks and balances, building accountable institutions, and defending human rights and the rule of law. Their advocacy has benefitted vulnerable groups, including women, children, victims of domestic violence, and unlawfully dismissed public servants.

CSOs have also acted as watchdogs, organizing and protecting peaceful protests, assisting victims of state violence, and investigating human rights violations. They have monitored elections, promoted Euro-Atlantic integration, and championed legal and institutional reforms. Beyond politics, civil society has been active in education, entrepreneurship, infrastructure and regional development. Thousands of young people have benefitted from non-formal education programmes, and many small businesses have received vital support. Independent media, often working in tandem with CSOs, has been key in countering disinformation and ensuring public access to reliable, fact-based information.

This is only a partial list of areas where CSO involvement has been vital to Georgia's sustainable democratic development. That is why, lacking the will for genuine dialogue, GD, holding nothing but a hammer, sees local CSOs as nails to be struck down, rather than engaged with. Ultimately, the greatest victim of the oppression of civil society will be most Georgian voters, who wish to safeguard their country's independence and sovereignty from Russian isolation and poverty.

Lessons learned: abandoning Georgia is not a viable long-term option

Despite the current situation, marked by political prisoners and over 65 individuals illegally detained for absurd reasons, non-stop protests continue in the streets. At the same time, core CSOs, independent media outlets, and activists persist in their work with determination. However, Georgia's civil society cannot survive without sustained and strategic external support.

Until now, the European Union, its member states, and the US have played an active role in supporting civic actors in Georgia. However, the introduction of repressive legislative amendments has made secure and effective cooperation more difficult. And that is precisely what the Georgian Dream regime is counting on: the gradual isolation of civil society and the exhaustion of its international partners. Offering exile is a generous and compassionate gesture as a "Plan B", but it is not a

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visionary strategy. The front line of Georgia's democratic struggle lies on Rustaveli Avenue in the capital city of Tbilisi.

This war of attrition waged by the regime against independent voices is no longer just a political tactic: it represents an existential threat to the very foundation of Georgia's democratic identity. The crackdown endangers not only formal NGOs and institutions but also informal civic networks and individuals who remain committed to European values and human rights. As history has shown, authoritarian regimes often exploit a predictable pattern: the moment repressive legal frameworks are introduced, international donors tend to retreat, fearing reputational or legal risk. That vacuum of support emboldens autocrats, validates their strategy, and accelerates democratic collapse. Georgia is on this path now. The West must not repeat the mistakes it has made elsewhere.

Not long ago, Georgia was a shining example of democratic progress in the post-Soviet space, a success demonstrated by its civil society as well. That progress was not accidental; it was hard-won through years of collaboration, investment, and a shared belief in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future. That legacy must not be forgotten or quietly surrendered to creeping authoritarianism. What is at stake is not just the fate of Georgian civil society – it is the fate of Georgia as an independent state and future European democracy in the wider Black Sea region.

Losing Georgia to authoritarian consolidation would not only damage the credibility of the West's commitments in the region but would also hand Russia, China and other non-democratic actors a symbolic and strategic victory. If the West truly aspires to a free and secure Europe, it must defend those values where they are most under siege, even if they feel vulnerable themselves these days. The Georgian protesters' resistance is remarkable and deserves recognition, as they primarily fight for a European future. The regime must face consequences, sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and a clear message that eroding democracy comes at a cost. Supporting Georgia's civil society is not only a moral imperative – it is a strategic necessity for the region and Europe as well. EE

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Can Belarusian civil society survive and even pose a threat to the dictatorship?

ZMICIER MICKIEVIČ

Since August 2020, Belarusian civil society has been experiencing a crackdown from the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime that has been unprecedented in the 21st century. After widespread peaceful protests, the authorities launched a systematic extermination of all civil initiatives and NGOs without taking into consideration their political involvement. However, this did not prevent Belarusian civil society from not only existing, but developing in various forms, sometimes in ways completely surprising.

On November 19th 2021, in an interview with the BBC anchor Steve Rosenberg, when asked about the 270 NGOs liquidated since August 2020, Belarusian dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka answered with the following: "We'll massacre all the scum that you [the West] have been financing. Oh, you're upset we've destroyed all your structures! Your NGOs, whatever they are, that you've been paying for … name the United Nations office. Name what it did. The money that was supposed to go to charity financed protests – they hired lawyers and so on. Is that their core business? Or was it partly the Red Cross and so on, name them too. And when you

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speak about animals [a protection organization – editor's note] … well, it sounds like a picture, but look at what they did? I am sure that it was a cover story that they were protecting animals, and they received money for their existence and for revolutions here. Not for revolutions, but for rebellions. So don't hide behind these words, 'we supported animals here.'"

This is a part of the regime mindset – everything not under the direct control of the authorities is considered a potential threat. However, in previous years officials mainly ignored civil society initiatives and NGO activities until they intruded into Lukashenka's clan corruption schemes or became involved in political life. But after the 2020 protests, when Lukashenka for the first time in a long time felt a real threat to his power, he decided to destroy any grounds for people to unite outside the framework of state-controlled institutions.

Adapting to repressions

It is not surprising that after the BBC interview the Lukashenka regime continued massacring the civil sector of Belarus: at this moment, in whole more than 1,000 NGOs and civil initiatives have been closed by the authorities or had to be closed by their organizers, according to the UN Human Rights Office. For example, among others, the "Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities" and "Protection of Birds of the Motherland" were closed.

At the same time, a huge number of NGOs and civil society initiatives were included in the "list of organizations, formations and individual entrepreneurs involved in extremist activities". This resulted in the criminal prosecution of their members, affiliates and donors: "financing or supporting extremist activities" can be punished by up to six years in prison. This was followed by the mass outflow of people from Belarus, which is still ongoing.

More than 300 organizations are included on the Belarusian regime's list of those "involved in extremist activities".

While the list of extremists is growing all the time, the regime enforcement agencies are adding to it various media outlets and civil initiatives not controlled by the state. At the moment, this list counts more than 300 organizations, while 5,576 people are included in another list of "persons involved in extremist activities".

Yet, despite the Lukashenka regime's aspirations, civil society has not stop existing even if there is no possibility of taking on a legal form inside Belarus. Instead, it mobilized itself to find other ways of being active. Inside Belarus, civil society has become a network of informal and underground communities built on horizontal

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connections. This process started in 2020, when people from cities, towns, districts, yards and single blocks of flats created chats in various messengers (mostly Telegram) to organize local protests and other common activities. The phenomenon was named "yard chats" and became a symbol of Belarusians' self-organization.

Cyberpartisans – a community of Belarusian hackers who sided with the people in the fight against the dictatorship in 2020 and have been successfully continuing their attacks on the regime since that time, created a special update called "Partisan Telegram". This prevents the regime enforcement agencies from getting any information from a person's chats in the messenger even in case of arrest. This is how the "yard chats" became the protected form of local organization and news exchange: people who live in a small area and know each other gather for informal activities. A lot of information is aimed at supporting the local people who are imprisoned for political reasons. While the regime tries to exterminate all organized forms of supporting the political prisoners and their families, local communities are providing this support informally and secretly: collecting and providing money, gathering packages to be sent to prisoners, etc.

That is why people and initiatives working inside Belarus will not be named in this article for security reasons – any attention from the regime enforcement agencies can be harmful both for their activities and participants. There are various fields where people are still active despite the ongoing repressions in the country. For example, studying, recording and preserving pieces of immaterial national heritage became the people's response to official anti-Belarusian policy, as the regime treats everything Belarusian (including the country's traditional red-white combination of colours in national dresses) to be "anti-government".

From underground to international solidarity

Underground political and civil roundtables and discussions are still happening in Belarusian cities. In Minsk and other regional centres, one can find local independent newspapers, printed on home printers and disseminated via post boxes in the districts with a more elderly population. This is how the nearly forgotten word *samizdat* (underground publishing during the Soviet times) has returned to the Belarusian reality.

Tik-Tok videos turned out to be another form of civil activism. Despite it being dangerous to raise any global political topics, people publish videos with criticism of local authorities for corruption, high prices, deterioration of infrastructure, etc. They sometimes appeal directly to Lukashenka in order to avoid repression for "anti-governmental activities". In such cases the authorities have to react to the

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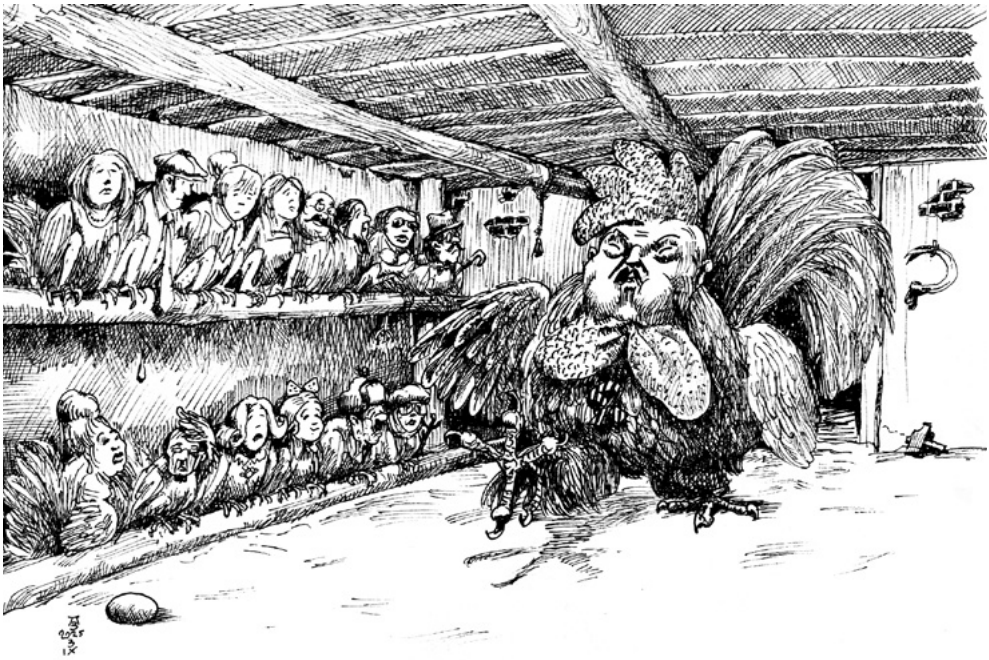

issues described in these videos, as a lack of reaction can cause a reaction from Lukashenka himself, who likes to publicly attack his own officials.

At the same time, the civil organizations in their classic form continue their work outside the country, mostly in Poland and Lithuania, where the largest Belarusian diasporas are settled at the moment. Their range of activities is extremely wide: from sport to political education. However, the main definition to describe these institutions will be "solidarity", which involves the agenda of Belarusian civil society both inside the country and abroad. This means that the largest part of their activities is aimed at either supporting the people who are inside Belarus (political prisoners and their families, partisan civil initiatives, etc.) or helping people who have left the country to integrate and return to normal life abroad (physical and psychological rehabilitation, language courses, children activities, etc.).

There are no statistics available on the total number of Belarusian civil society organizations and initiatives abroad, so it is necessary to mention a couple of the most important ones from various fields. The first is the BYSOL Solidarity Foundation, which is the largest organization to provide aid to victims of political repressions in Belarus. The initiative started in 2020 in the form of the ByCovid campaign. During the pandemic, Lukashenka and his whole system refused to acknowledge the threat of COVID-19, which resulted in the uncontrolled dissemination of the disease and unprecedented pressure on the medical system. Against

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this background, a group of civil activists headed by Andrey Stryzhak created a crowdfunding platform to collect donations from people and organizations in order to purchase necessary equipment and medicines and provide them to hospitals in critical need. This was the first time when Belarusian society understood that it was capable of coping with critical issues like a pandemic without the help of the state, which was completely ignoring the fate of its citizens.

Organizations continue their work outside Belarus, mostly in Poland and Lithuania, where the largest diasporas are settled.

During the events of 2020, the foundation provided aid to victims of political repressions in the country, which was also based on collecting donations from Belarusians. It relocated to Lithuania and is continuing its work using both crowdfunding and international aid to help. Every Belarusian in need is able to apply to the foundation and open a personal fundraiser on its platform. For example, BYSOL helped relocate Belarusians to get funds for operations in foreign hospitals. There are also special fundraisers for Belarusian volunteers who fight for Ukraine against Russia or organize summer camps for children whose parents are in prison for political reasons.

Since October 2024, BYSOL has already provided support for 273 civil society projects by Belarusians both inside and outside the country. Another task successfully carried out by BYSOL is emergency relocation – people under the threat of criminal persecution or those serving terms under home arrest or in open penitentiary colonies for political reasons can ask for help to leave Belarus. According to the financial report for 2023 (the latest data available), in that year alone, BYSOL relocated around 500 people from Belarus. However, the foundation is mainly focused on helping Belarusians who are still in the country and are active in different ways, including the ones mentioned above.

For a European future

At the same time, in Warsaw the oldest civil organization of the Belarusian diaspora has been working for 12 years already. The Belarusian House led by Alaksandr Zarembiuk was founded by people who had to flee Belarus after previous waves of political repressions in 2006 and 2010. Its main aim is working for the European future of Belarus and the development of grassroots civil society in the country. At the moment the number of alumni of educational projects organized by the Belarusian House is more than 300. It has organized more than 450 events, most of which were dedicated to civil society development in Belarus.

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In 2020, it was the first to organize a campaign of support for Belarusian political refugees in Poland. Up to now, around 6,500 people have received aid from the Belarusian House. It also continues to be the platform for different kinds of Belarusian activities in Warsaw, such as children's theatre or psychological support for women who suffered repression. In 2022, the Belarusian House became the main recruiting point for the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment – the formation of Belarusians in the Ukrainian armed forces. It gathered and sent aid for Belarusian fighters in Ukraine as well.

Warsaw is also the hometown for an amateur football club called "Pahonia", which is also the name of the Belarusian national coat of arms. It plays in the lower leagues of Poland and consists of Belarusians who left the country for different reasons. It is supported by local businesses owned by Belarusians, as well as ordinary people. For the third year in a row its members have organized an amateur football tournament to show solidarity with political prisoners in Belarus. Teams participate from various Belarusian organizations and diasporas from different states.

In Ukraine, Belarusian civil initiatives are actively engaged in supporting Belarusians, who fight in different formations of the Ukrainian army. The two most notable are the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment and the Belarusian Volunteer Corps. Belarusian communities in the biggest Ukrainian cities are gathering and providing various kinds of aid for these formations, as well as advocating for their members' timely legalization in Ukraine (as there are issues with this). Support for Belarusian veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war is also a topic dealt with by these initiatives. One particularly notable effort is the House of Free Belarus in Lviv founded by Alaksiej Franckievič. It is actively cooperating with Ukrainian civil organizations and organizes various kinds of events dedicated to the memory of Belarusian heroes who died fighting for Ukraine. It also provides aid for their families.

> The oldest civil organization of the Belarusian diaspora is the Belarusian House led by Alaksandr Zarembiuk in Warsaw.

The historical roots of solidarity

One can find the organizations and initiatives like the ones mentioned above in almost every big city of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. After 2020, Belarusians who had to leave the country for political reasons (according to the estimates of Belarusian People's Anti-Crisis Management, their number could reach one million) are still committed to the idea of democratic changes in the country, which would

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allow them to come back home. This is why solidarity with the victims of political repression; help for those who still continue to do even small things inside Belarus or fight against Russian invaders in Ukraine; and preserving national identity and traditions, are the most critical tasks for Belarusian civil society. Five years after the people's uprising in Belarus was suppressed by the regime, Belarusians still do not associate themselves with the Lukashenka system and its policy.

In order to understand the very concept of Belarusian solidarity, one has to dive into history and linguistics. The Belarusian language contains the word *talaka*, which is used to define a special act of common work by the whole village or other local community in order to rebuild a house of a family after a fire, do some seasonal work, build a road to some part of the settlement, etc. This phenomenon has deep roots in Belarusian history. The territory of modern Belarus was for a long time an arena for military action by different states and faced various invaders. As a result, locals learnt not only to fight against their enemies but to help one another without hierarchic structures. Strong horizontal connections were often a key to survival, especially under occupation by the Russian Empire and the USSR.

Thus, it should not be surprising that *talaka* became the name for one of the first Belarusian crowdfunding platforms, dedicated mainly to cultural and civil projects. Today, we see the new life of this concept, with people helping each other to overcome the brutal crackdown on civil society and keep the hope for democratic changes in Belarus alive. EE

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Democracy in Moldova

Can civil society deliver?

ALEXANDRU FORDEA

Moldova is still navigating a complex path towards democratization, shaped by political instability, economic hardship, and institutional fragility. In this process, the Moldovan civil society plays a significant role, though its influence has often been limited by a combination of internal barriers, such as corruption, weak democratic institutions, overdependence on international funding, and fragility to external threats.

In the immediate aftermath of independence, Moldova witnessed the emergence of a civil society aiming to align with democratic and European values. However, its evolution was hindered by an adverse economic environment, fragile political structures, and a Soviet legacy that discouraged active citizen participation. Like many countries in the region, Moldova underwent significant transformations during the 1990s, including the expansion of the non-profit sector and its gradual integration into public life. Initially, however, civil society organizations, or CSOs, struggled with a poor public image. Their access to foreign funds and tax-exempt status were often misunderstood, contributing to widespread mistrust. The absence of clear financial oversight mechanisms also led to several incidents of money laundering, frequently involving political figures who misused humanitarian aid for electoral purposes.

Since 2000, the number of non-governmental organizations has grown substantially. While there were fewer than 500 at the start of the millennium, by 2008 this figure had quintupled, eventually reaching nearly 15,000 in the period following the pandemic. Despite this numerical expansion, the quality of civic engage-

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ment remains largely shaped by political affiliations rather than organic, volunteer-driven participation. Additionally, many Moldovan CSOs have been heavily dependent on international funding. This has enabled their operation and growth but has also raised concerns about their independence and real capacity to influence transformative change.

Protests and their impact on reforms

A crucial aspect of Moldovan civil society is the role of protest movements, which over the years have had a significant impact on the country's policies. Events such as the 2009 youth-led protests, which followed disputed elections, saw thousands of young people take the streets, expressing a strong desire for democratic change and closer ties with the EU. While these protests did not immediately result in regime change, they marked a turning point in Moldova's political awareness and spurred certain reforms, such as improved electoral procedures and greater openness to dialogue with the West.

In the past decade as well, Moldova has experienced several periods of intense popular activism, largely driven by corruption, economic crises, and political instability. One of the most significant periods was between 2015 and 2016, when the population took to the streets in response to the so-called "billion-dollar fraud", a scandal in which roughly one billion US dollars vanished from the Moldovan banking system, an amount equivalent to about 12 per cent of the country's GDP at the time. The scandal triggered a wave of large-scale protests in Chișinău and other cities. Citizens demanded the resignation of those politically responsible, as well as judicial reforms and the recovery of the stolen funds. These demonstrations led not only to the resignation of Prime Minister Valeriu Streleț but also brought attention to the civic-driven accountability mechanism called "Dignitas", which later evolved into the Dignity and Truth Movement.

A key difference compared to major political protests in earlier years, which had required significant financial resources to mobilize participants, was that the Civic Platform for Dignity and Truth relied on genuine grassroots activism. Thanks to the Jurnal TV channel, alongside social media and word of mouth, the movement highlighted the growing role of civil society in Moldovan politics.

In subsequent years, particularly from 2020 onward, Moldova continued to see smaller but frequent protests, often driven by the polarization between pro-European and pro-Russian forces. This was seen during the constitutional referendum of October 2024, in which the population had to decide whether the country should amend the constitution to include the formal goal of joining the European

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Union. The divide was also evident during the last presidential election. A significant achievement especially during the EU referendum's campaign was the extensive mobilization of diverse stakeholders throughout the process. Civil society organizations, mass media, artists and opinion leaders joined forces to broaden outreach and raise public awareness about the advantages of Moldova's EU accession.

A grassroots initiative called "Citizens for Europe" was launched to organize on-the-ground efforts and door-to-door engagement with Moldovan citizens. Within a few months, this volunteer network, comprising individuals from various professional fields, successfully conducted face-to-face discussions in over ten per cent of the country's villages. This valuable peer-to-peer dialogue approach should be sustained and further enhanced in the coming months through increased human, logistical and financial support.

Moldova's protest movements illustrate the evolution of civil society – from reactive mobilization to reform-oriented engagement.

The post-2022 period, shaped by the geopolitical shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, added a new layer of urgency to protest dynamics. Rising inflation, energy insecurity, and fears of regional destabilization triggered renewed public demonstrations, often intersecting with Moldova's ongoing East–West political polarization. These protests revealed the tensions between socio-economic grievances and broader ideological divides, as pro-Russian actors sought to instrumentalize dissatisfaction to undermine pro-European governance efforts.

Taken together, Moldova's protest movements illustrate the evolution of civil society from reactive mobilization toward strategic, reform-oriented engagement. While challenges persist – particularly regarding sustainability, de-politicization, and inclusive representation – civic activism continues to serve as a critical pressure valve and reform driver in the country's democratization process.

External support to civil society

The role of international funding has been pivotal in shaping civil society in Moldova. External donors, particularly from the EU and USAID, have not only provided financial resources but also helped incubate democratic norms, institutional frameworks, and organizational capacity within the NGO sector. Since 2020, the EU has allocated approximately over 30 million euros to programmes aimed at strengthening civil society, focusing on civic education, transparency and anti-corruption efforts. These funds targeted local initiatives, with a particular emphasis on human rights, participatory governance, and bolstering the resilience of

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vulnerable communities. Key beneficiaries of this funding include organizations such as Promo-LEX, the Centre for Independent Journalism, and the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, which have played vital roles in election monitoring, press freedom advocacy, and public policy analysis. Looking ahead, the EU has reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening support for Moldova, recognizing the crucial role of civil society in the country's path toward European standards.

The other major patron is the United States, which has made a significant contribution too. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has implemented several programmes in recent years from 2021 onward providing over 680 million US dollars: 61 million in 2021; 130 million in 2022; 310 million in 2023; and 180 million in 2024. This upward trend was strongly influenced by the Russian war in Ukraine, which created the need for a layered support system to accommodate hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. In this context, most of the funding was directed toward economic development, peace and security projects, support for democratization, civil rights protection, and the development of an efficient governance structure.

> The Trump administration's decision to suspend most foreign aid programmes had significant repercussions on in Moldova.

However, the Donald Trump administration's decision to suspend most foreign aid programmes through USAID had significant repercussions on civil society development in Moldova. This measure directly impacted critical projects, particularly those related to democratic governance, judicial reform and energy security. Among the most affected initiatives were the evaluation of prosecutors, essential for renewing the judicial system, and the development of strategic energy infrastructure, such as electrical interconnections with Romania. Even independent media, which for years had benefitted from direct USAID support, now faces a situation of deep financial ambiguity.

This scenario risks weakening democratic oversight capacities at a crucial moment ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections of late 2025, especially considering the issues of political polarization, Russian hybrid threats, and the tendency of the government to abuse its power during elections. In response, the Moldovan government has initiated a dialogue with Washington in the hope of restoring at least part of the suspended funds, while also seeking support from other international partners, particularly the EU, to ensure the continuity of the most strategic projects.

This perilous situation also raises critical questions about the sector's maturity and resilience. Evidence suggests that many CSOs remain heavily dependent on external funding, with limited success in diversifying their financial base through

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local philanthropy, private sector engagement, or public contributions. This points to a structural fragility that is not unique to Moldova but shared by many post-Soviet states, where civil society has often developed in a donor-driven rather than citizen-driven manner. It is also known that international support is never intended to be permanent. Rather, it is envisioned as a catalyst for the emergence of autonomous, locally supported civic structures capable of sustaining themselves in the long term. In this context, Moldova's civil society appears to be at a crossroads: while it has achieved significant institutional growth, its ability to function independently, both financially and strategically, remains limited.

Challenges and potential

Cooperation between the state and civil society remains a foundational component of democratic governance. In Moldova, the CSOs have become important actors in advancing democratization, European integration, human rights, anti-corruption, and government transparency. Yet despite gradual improvements in the sector's capacity and visibility, meaningful engagement with public authorities remains constrained by both structural deficiencies and evolving political dynamics.

The CSO Sustainability Index for Moldova reached a moderately positive 3.4 in 2021, reflecting a steady improvement over the years. However, progress has been uneven. The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered a state of emergency in Moldova that introduced civil and political restrictions, creating conditions under which democratic backsliding could occur. The V-Dem 2023 report noted signs of growing autocracy starting from 2022, highlighting the risks associated with concentrated executive power, especially under external security threats. These developments have had direct implications for state–civil society relations, including a growing tendency by authorities to centralize control and limit civic participation in decision-making.

> Meaningful civic engagement with state authorities remains constrained by both structural deficiencies and evolving political dynamics.

Despite these challenges, Moldova continues to maintain a relatively favourable regulatory environment for freedom of association, with the CSO Meter scoring 5.5 out of seven consistently from 2022 to 2024. Legislative frameworks have seen incremental progress. This is particularly notable regarding the adoption of the 2024–27 CSO Development Programme and some transparency enhancements. However, these improvements have not yet translated into systematic or equitable inclusion of CSOs in policy-making. Over 80 per cent of parliamen-

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tary initiatives were passed without any public consultation, and those consultations that did occur were often symbolic, with civic input rarely integrated into final outcomes.

At the local level, civic participation is even more restricted. Only a minority of local governments comply with legal obligations to publish agendas or consult the public on draft decisions. Most local councils lack transparent procedures, and even when information is shared on the official platform, it is often after decisions have already been finalized, rendering citizen input ineffective.

These limitations are not merely technical: they reflect deeper institutional weaknesses, entrenched corruption, and political patronage, which discourage genuine cooperation with non-state actors. Many officials continue to perceive civil society as a threat or competitor, particularly when watchdog organizations expose systemic abuses or challenge vested interests. This adversarial dynamic diminishes trust and undermines the potential for constructive policy influence.

Compounding these issues is the continued prevalence of corruption, which remains a central concern for the population. According to the National Democratic Institute, 88 per cent of Moldovans believe corruption is both serious and widespread, a perception that erodes civic confidence in both public institutions and reform initiatives. In this context, even as CSOs work to promote transparency and accountability, they frequently operate under conditions of limited political autonomy and institutional resistance.

Watchdog and advocacy organizations remain particularly vulnerable during electoral cycles, as they are often labelled "foreign agents".

Moreover, CSOs face considerable operational and financial barriers. While there are no formal restrictions on funding, anti–money laundering regulations classify CSOs as high-risk entities, subjecting them to excessive banking scrutiny. The absence of a tailored crowdfunding legal framework leaves a regulatory gap that further restricts financial innovation. Access to public procurement is also limited, as CSOs struggle to meet liquidity and compliance requirements that favour commercial entities. These challenges are even more acute for organizations operating in the Transnistrian region, which face near-total exclusion from national financial systems.

Although disinformation and smear campaigns targeting civil society have somewhat declined in recent years, watchdog and advocacy organizations remain vulnerable during electoral cycles, when political actors among the pro-Russian forces often seek to discredit their work by labelling them "foreign agents". This volatility limits both the reach and perceived legitimacy of civil society, particularly in rural or politically polarized regions.

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In this broader context, Moldova's democratic transition remains fragile. As highlighted by the Freedom House 2024 Report, "pervasive corruption in the government sector, links between major political parties and powerful economic interests, and deficiencies in the rule of law continue to hamper democratic governance." While international actors, notably the EU and US, have been instrumental in supporting Moldova's civil society, external assistance alone has not been sufficient in overcoming domestic resistance or building sustainable institutional partnerships.

If adequately supported through stronger legal safeguards, genuine access to decision-making, and protection from political interference, Moldovan CSOs could play a more influential role in addressing corruption, strengthening governance, and advancing EU integration. Realizing this potential will require not only institutional reforms but also a sustained political will to move beyond formal consultation toward genuine, inclusive dialogue. EE

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Strengthening the civil society's resilience in Serbia

SOFIJA POPOVIĆ

Despite growing authoritarianism and a shrinking civic space in Serbia, civil society has demonstrated remarkable resilience through grassroots environmental movements, student protests, and citizens' assemblies. These forms of activism have expanded locally and transnationally, mobilizing citizens, especially the youth, to demand accountability and democratic reforms.

Over the past decade, civil society in Serbia has undergone profound transformations, navigating an increasingly complex political and social landscape. While the early 2000s, following the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime, witnessed a surge in civic activism, the last ten years have been characterized by mounting challenges – political pressure, shrinking civic space, and limited access to decision-making processes. Civil society organizations have encountered numerous institutional obstacles, including burdensome legal frameworks, selective cooperation with the government, and financial constraints, especially when engaging in activities perceived as critical of the ruling authorities.

Yet, despite these setbacks, Serbia's civil society has shown remarkable resilience. Grassroots initiatives, informal activist networks, and student movements have played a vital role in sustaining civic engagement. Notably, student-led protests have brought renewed urgency and visibility to critical issues such as academic freedom, political accountability, and corruption. These movements have mobilized large segments of the youth and fostered intergenerational solidarity within civil society.

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The collapse of democracy

All major international democracy indices have documented a sharp decline in Serbia's democratic standards across the board. Since 2019, Freedom House has classified Serbia as a "partly free" country, with democracy deteriorating year after year. In its *Freedom in the World 2025* report, Freedom House ranked Serbia among the countries with the most significant decline in freedoms over the past 19 years, alongside El Salvador and Venezuela. Serbia was described as a nation where the ruling party relentlessly dismantles democratic institutions while consolidating authoritarian power.

Under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) over the past decade, political analysts have widely agreed that Serbia has been transformed into an electoral autocracy. Due to structural advantages enjoyed by the ruling party through the abuse of public institutions, it is the opposition alone that is vulnerable to losing elections. Numerous domestic and international reports point to a trend of state capture – a form of systemic political corruption in which those in power exploit their positions to control decision-making processes for personal gain.

European institutions, including the European Commission and the European Parliament, have issued consistently critical assessments of Serbia's rule of law. As a consequence, Serbia's EU accession process has stalled, with no progress recorded for four consecutive years. Paradoxically, Serbia ceased to be a free country precisely during the EU accession process. Brussels's strategy of prioritizing stability over democracy has significantly contributed to the erosion of fundamental freedoms in the country.

Increased repression

The assumption that stability and authoritarian rule go hand in hand was disproved by events following the collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad railway station on November 1st last year – an incident linked to the opaque expenditure of millions of euros on its reconstruction.

Citizens rightly saw the deaths of 16 people as a direct consequence of systemic, deeply rooted corruption, while long-neglected and captured institutions were identified as the reason justice could only be demanded on the streets. At the end of November, student-led blockades of all universities and mass protests erupted across Serbia. The youth's innovative methods of mobilization – including organizing blockades; walking, running and cycling to cities across Serbia and beyond

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its borders; and calling general strikes – awakened the entire country and led to the largest protests in its history.

After nine months of continuous protests, the main demands remain transparency and accountability for the deaths of those 16 people. Instead of addressing these demands, the government has responded with increased repression, with numerous violations of citizens' rights to peaceful assembly, free expression, and association reported. Although authoritarian tendencies and the violent nature of the SNS-led government were recognized earlier, the massive civic protests led by students have fully exposed the regime's true nature.

State-controlled media accuse civil society and activists every day of orchestrating a "colour revolution" in Serbia.

Serbia has once again become a country of political prisoners. On March 15th, state authorities used firearms against peaceful demonstrators commemorating the victims. Today, Serbia expels EU citizens arbitrarily, labelling them as threats to national security without cause. Citizens participating in peaceful protests face beatings, arrests by the police, and mass surveillance via sophisticated domestic and foreign software. The mass protest in Belgrade on June 28th this year marked a new peak in the ongoing violations of fundamental human rights, with scenes of violence against demonstrators and selective arrests of students and citizens.

A target of the regime

Even before the mass protests began, Serbia was described by international organizations as a country where civil society activity faces obstruction. The deepening political crisis further narrowed the space for citizen and civil society engagement. CIVICUS, an organization monitoring the NGO situation in the world, noted an alarming decline in civic freedoms in 2025, adding Serbia to its watchlist due to "serious restrictions on civic space and incitement of violence against tens of thousands protesting corruption".

In this fraught political context, civil society organizations have become targets of attacks by top government officials, pro-government tabloids, and institutions that should operate independently but instead act on orders from the regime's leadership. Although civil society organizations supported the students' demands from the outset, they did not organize the protests. Nevertheless, government officials and state-controlled media accuse civil society and activists every day of orchestrating a so-called "colour revolution" in Serbia. This narrative, used

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during previous anti-government protests, targets the ruling party's electorate by blaming citizen discontent on alleged foreign orchestrators to delegitimize criticism of the government.

Terms such as "traitors", "foreign mercenaries" and "enemies of the state" are only the mildest insults regularly hurled at civil society organizations and activists who highlight societal problems. Activists and organizations face daily stigmatization, and recent years have seen multiple cases of political abuse of state institutions to suppress and intimidate critical civil society actors. One case involved pro-government media publishing confidential financial data on 39 civil society organizations, framing them as part of a western-funded plot to destabilize the state. This smear campaign followed the president's call to disclose foreign funding received by NGOs.

International reports confirm the difficult environment faced by civil society. The European Commission's annual report on Serbia highlights ongoing verbal attacks and defamation campaigns involving high-ranking officials. Those monitoring elections, environmental issues, and protests against lithium mining, as well as the glorification of war criminals, are particularly vulnerable.

Police raids, SLAPPs and mass surveillance

The peak of the pressure placed on civil society came in February this year, when police raided four organizations investigating their use of USAID funds. The raids were triggered by issues within the US administration regarding USAID, but even seven months later, no details have been disclosed about the legal grounds for the raids. This lack of transparency fuels suspicion that judicial and police institutions are being misused to intimidate and defame organizations critical of the government. The raids followed a public presidential attack accusing civil society of plotting to overthrow the state with USAID money. Institutional pressure dates back to 2020, when an anti-money laundering campaign saw investigations launched against 37 prominent organizations and individuals, citing possible links to illicit finance and terrorism financing. To date, none have been formally charged or faced further legal action.

Another major concern is the rising number of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) filed by state and local officials against organizations and media groups. These lawsuits aim to stifle public interest, freedom of expression, and civic activism by exhausting the defendants' resources. A December report by the CASE coalition noted that Serbia ranks among the countries with the highest number of SLAPP cases.

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One of the most important forms of civic resistance and activism in Serbia beyond environmentalism has been student protests. In recent months, students have become key drivers in the struggle for academic freedom, justice, transparency and government accountability.

Activists also face border detentions and, alarmingly, widespread surveillance. A December 2024 investigation by BIRN and Amnesty International revealed that Serbia's Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) installed spyware on activists and journalists' phones during police detentions, using Israeli technology to gather personal data. The authorities denied these findings, and new hacking cases targeting students and journalists have been reported in 2025. The absence of effective oversight emboldens the continuation of these illegal practices.

While collaboration between government and civil society – motivated by the public interest – is standard in democratic countries, especially EU candidates, in Serbia it is reduced to mere box-ticking for Brussels and international organizations. By law, authorities must hold consultations and public hearings with civil society organizations at both national and local levels, allowing broader public participation in the decision-making process. In practice, however, civil society and citizens have had virtually no influence on policy-making for years.

In February 2025 dozens of prominent civil society organizations suspended cooperation with the legislative and executive authorities due to the hostile atmosphere of attacks and smear campaigns. Harassment, arrests, and expulsions of foreign nationals directly prompted this decision. This suspension followed a December proposal by a coalition partner of the ruling SNS to establish a special register for foreign agents that is modelled on laws in Russia and Belarus. This was sub-

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mitted just ten days after the Serbian president accused NGOs of trying to overthrow the state.

Financial uncertainty

Civil society organizations in Serbia face severe financial insecurity that threatens their work and sustainability. While the government systematically restricts space for critical organizations, increasing public funds are funnelled to so-called "GONGO" groups – nominally NGOs but politically linked to the regime. These receive significant institutional and financial support, while authentic independent organizations are systematically sidelined, ignored, or openly targeted.

The situation worsened in 2025 when the Trump administration decided to withdraw USAID from Serbia, ending decades of crucial support for civil society capacity building, independent media, and local initiatives. This withdrawal created a severe financial and institutional vacuum unfilled by domestic institutions or other international donors. The process was accompanied by a political campaign against USAID-funded organizations, which have been portrayed in pro-government media as foreign agents. Some also faced institutional pressures, including raids and audits.

As a result, many organizations have had to cut staff, cancel local programmes, or cease activities entirely. The lack of stable, independent funding seriously undermines civil society's ability to serve as a guardian of democracy and deprives society of a vital mechanism for holding power accountable.

Grassroots initiatives in Serbia often emerge as a direct response to a concrete problem faced by local communities.

Over the past decade, civil society in Serbia has faced a range of challenges, from the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the government to restrictions on civic rights and the shrinking space for NGOs to operate. Yet, precisely in this complex political and social environment, grassroots initiatives, student protests, and citizens' assemblies have demonstrated the resilience of civil society and renewed faith in the power of civic participation.

Grassroots initiatives in Serbia have often emerged as a direct response to concrete problems citizens have faced in their local communities. These initiatives are particularly notable in the field of environmental protection, where local communities began organizing protests against small hydropower plants, environmentally harmful mining projects, or pollution caused by industrial polluters. These initiatives did not remain only local, as some managed to expand their reach nationally and even transnationally, gaining support from international environmental or-

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ganizations and spreading their demands beyond Serbia's borders. This process of transnationalization not only increased their visibility and impact but also encouraged networking with similar movements in the region and Europe.

Catalysts for social change

One of the most important forms of civic resistance and activism in Serbia beyond environmentalism has been student protests. In recent months, students have become key drivers in the struggle for academic freedom, justice, transparency and government accountability, as well as broader social issues such as corruption and democratic backsliding. These protests, often supported by and connected with other segments of civil society, have contributed to strengthening intergenerational solidarity and demonstrated how young people can be catalysts for social change. Through citizens' assemblies and public debates, citizens have been given the opportunity to directly participate in discussing important issues affecting their communities, thereby strengthening bottom-up democratic processes.

All these forms of civic activism, from grassroots initiatives to student protests and citizens' assemblies, have contributed to strengthening the resilience of civil society in Serbia. Despite government pressures, funding restrictions and legal obstacles, citizens have shown that it is possible to organize, mobilize and have a visible impact on public policies and social processes. This resilience is also reflected in the ability to establish new forms of cooperation and alliances both within the country and through international frameworks.

The power of citizens lies in their ability to collectively express dissatisfaction, articulate their demands, and pressure decision-makers. Grassroots environmental movements have shown how local issues can grow into broader political and social topics, while student protests have proven that young people can be a pillar of democratic resilience. Citizens' assemblies, on the other hand, enable a more inclusive approach to democratic participation and promote active citizenship.

Ultimately, the resistance and activism of citizens through these various forms demonstrate that civil society in Serbia, although faced with significant challenges, has the inner strength and capacity to shape social change and resist negative trends. This is a key indicator of democracy in practice and a confirmation that power does not lie exclusively in the hands of political elites. Indeed, it also exists among ordinary people who, by acting together, can shape their future. EE

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Civil society in Armenia

From peak to decline in advocacy

ARSHALUIS MGDESYAN

Faced with rising populism, polarization, socio-economic challenges, and mounting geopolitical pressure, Armenia's civil society remains one of the key pillars of the country's democratic resilience. Having evolved from fragmented local initiatives into a relatively mature and thematically diverse institutional sector, NGOs are entitled to play a significant role in shaping public discourse, monitoring state reforms, protecting vulnerable groups, and developing expert capacity. At the same time, the sector faces serious and growing challenges.

Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia's civil society found itself in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, its capacities and influence expanded. On the other hand, the integration of some activists into state institutions weakened the sector's independent oversight function. Initially, an informal consensus emerged between NGOs and the government, built on expectations of reform. However, it soon became clear that there was a gap between these expectations and the actual political practice. The reformist momentum slowed, criticism from NGOs began to be perceived as political pressure, while the NGOs continue to function based on new rules.

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Strengths and institutional achievements

Over the past two decades, Armenia's civil society has evolved from a fragmented network of local initiatives into an institutionally stable sector with a tangible public presence and the ability to shape the national agenda. The sector's strengths are reflected both in its formal institutional parameters, such as the legal framework, freedom of association, and pluralism of views, and in its practical experience of participating in socio-political processes.

According to the CSO Meter 2024 report by Transparency International Armenia, a key achievement of the Armenian NGO sector remains the relative simplicity of registration procedures and the absence of excessive bureaucratic barriers to operation. This creates a favourable environment for the emergence of new organizations, including regional initiatives, thematic platforms and hybrid formats (e.g., associations with elements of social entrepreneurship). The existence of hundreds of NGOs active in various spheres of the country's public and political life is vivid proof of this. NGOs are free to operate across diverse fields – from protecting the rights of vulnerable groups to monitoring government reforms, including digitalization, environmental regulation, social policy, and education transformation.

The Freedom in the World 2025 report by Freedom House notes that despite ongoing political tensions and a general decline in political rights, Armenia maintains a basic legal and institutional foundation for the existence of independent organizations. In particular, it highlights that NGOs critical of the authorities are not subject to systematic persecution, and key organizations still have access to mass media and can appeal to the courts, including the Constitutional Court. Additionally, the Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2024 report emphasizes the active involvement of civil society in electoral processes, including independent election monitoring and parallel vote counting, both in the capital and in the regions.

The regional dimension also deserves attention. In recent years, efforts to decentralize NGO activity have intensified. Some organizations have shifted their programmes to the regions, establishing offices in Gyumri, Vayk, Goris and Vanadzor. This contributes to greater civic engagement at the local level and fosters the formation of regional coalitions around specific topics – such as migration, the environment, local self-governance and education.

Finally, another notable achievement is the emergence of some institutionalized forms of NGO participation in public dialogue. Despite limited influence, the restoration of the Public Council under the prime minister in 2024 (which includes representatives of several respected NGOs) marks a still-fragile attempt to institutionalize interaction between the government and civil society – even if it is largely symbolic for now.

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Financial vulnerability and institutional risks

Despite notable institutional achievements, Armenia's civil society sector faces persistent constraints that undermine its functional independence and reputational resilience. One of those challenges is financial vulnerability and institutional risks. According to the CSO Meter 2024 report by Transparency International (TI) Armenia, the vast majority of NGOs in Armenia remain reliant on international donor funding – primarily from the EU, USAID, Swedish and German development agencies, as well as specialized foundations such as OSF, NED and others. Since 2022, and especially in 2023–24, a re-allocation of foreign aid toward defence needs in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, coupled with the winding down of USAID programmes in Armenia, has led to a sharp contraction in the sector's resource base.

> Armenia's civil society sector faces persistent constraints that undermine its functional independence and resilience.

As noted in the TI Armenia report, this has resulted in a state of "vacuum resilience": although organizations continue to function formally, many face a severe shortage of flexible funding and are increasingly dependent on short-term projects and sub-grants. This undermines their strategic sustainability, particularly among regional NGOs with limited access to direct donor support, further reinforcing centralization within the sector.

In parallel, as Freedom in the World 2025 highlights, the political changes of 2018 initiated a trend of institutional convergence between civil society and the state. A significant number of NGO representatives – especially from the human rights and democracy bodies – entered government structures or took on advisory roles. While this broadened channels for policy influence, it also gave rise to conflicts of interest: former watchdog organizations began to avoid public criticism of the authorities, which in turn weakened public trust in the independence of the sector.

Moreover, a number of organizations have seen a shift toward personalized management as internal accountability mechanisms have eroded. This is particularly clear in entities connected to current or former state officials. This complicates donor verification processes, reduces transparency, and limits accountability to both the public and target constituencies.

Rise of the anti-civil sector

One of the most alarming trends in recent years has been the emergence and strengthening of the so-called "anti-civil sector" – networks of pseudo-NGOs

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Over the past two decades, Armenia's civil society has evolved from a fragmented network of local initiatives into an institutionally stable sector with a tangible public presence and the ability to shape the national agenda.

formally registered as public organizations but effectively serving the interests of ideological-political groups hostile to human rights agendas.

The Nations in Transit 2024 report notes that these organizations aggressively employ rhetoric centred on "traditional values", positioning themselves in opposition to the "liberal" sector. In practice, they run hostile campaigns against initiatives on equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and women's rights. They enjoy access to major media platforms, receive funding from opaque sources, and act as ideological proxy groups for the former authorities and, likely, foreign actors.

Weak legal regulation allows such groups to operate on an equal footing with genuine NGOs, creating a false sense of parity and distorting public perceptions of civil society. As a result, NGOs are increasingly associated with "foreign agents", "destroyers of tradition", or "politically biased structures", which only fuels public scepticism.

The public image of the NGOs is another challenge. According to the CSO Sustainability Index (CSOSI) by USAID and FHI 360, the public image index of Armenian NGOs has remained at 3.0 since 2017, with no signs of improvement. This indicates that despite growing experience, impact and institutional maturity, the sector has not overcome communication barriers with the general public.

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Since 2020, amid the pandemic, the Second Karabakh War, and domestic political turbulence, independent NGOs have come under intense information pressure. As Transparency International Armenia reports, during a period of heightened public anxiety (over identity, security and religion), anti-NGO activists launched discrediting campaigns, accusing organizations of "supporting the enemy", "opposing traditional values", and "serving foreign interests".

Telegram channels, anonymous social media pages, and television networks affiliated with ultraconservative and nationalist groups play a significant role in this process. Their rhetoric includes demonization, threats, factual manipulation, and in some cases, open incitement to violence. This leaves a bitter aftertaste and lasting impact.

According to the Caucasus Barometer 2024 by CRRC, the most comprehensive source of public trust data in Armenia shows that trust in NGOs remains low and unstable. In 2024, 41 per cent of respondents expressed distrust in NGOs (29 per cent complete, 12 per cent partial), while only 26 expressed trust (19 per cent partial, seven per cent complete). Another 23 per cent were neutral. Compared to 2021, the share of distrustful respondents increased (from 37 to 41 per cent), while those fully trusting nearly doubled (from four to seven per cent).

This comparison shows growing polarization in public perceptions of NGOs. Despite the rise in complete trust, the number of those expressing categorical distrust also grew – from 24 per cent to 29 per cent. Overall attitudes became less favourable, and neutral views remained stable. This indicates a decline in the sector's legitimacy, increased risks for activists and organizations, and a tendency toward "self-isolation" – a retreat from public activity for safety reasons.

Declining advocacy effectiveness: from peak to regression

Advocacy activity is a key indicator of the maturity and institutional effectiveness of civil society. According to the CSO Sustainability Index, from 1997 to 2019, Armenia demonstrated a steady positive trend: the score for the "Advocacy" component moved from 6.0 to 2.7, reflecting active NGO involvement in legislative development; national strategies; sustained public campaigns; formalized mechanisms for engagement with authorities; and the consolidation of coalitions around key issues (such as anti-corruption, women's rights and open governance).

However, the trend shifted after 2019. In 2022–23, the advocacy remained stuck at 3.0, which according to the index signalled a deterioration in the enabling environment for civil society influence on public policy, effectively returning to the conditions of 2016–17 – a period marked by limited dialogue between govern-

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ment and the civic sector. This coincided with a political transformation. Following the 2021 elections, the prime minister's team, previously composed of diverse like-minded groups, evolved into a more centralized and loyalty-based structure.

The decline in advocacy conditions was accompanied by specific manifestations:

- a weakening of institutional dialogue between NGOs and the state, as participation in working groups, parliamentary hearings, and advisory bodies became largely formal and ineffective;
- the fragmentation of coalition-based pressure: whereas in 2018–19 strong cross-sector alliances existed (e.g., on justice reform or combatting domestic violence), in recent years such coalitions have become episodic and unstable;
- growing self-censorship: fearing the loss of access and perceived disloyalty, some organizations have refrained from public criticism and limited themselves to expert support and monitoring without mobilization efforts.

Thus, the weakening of advocacy in Armenia is driven not only by the political context, but also by the gradual erosion of participatory mechanisms. Nevertheless, some areas show signs of resilience. In the media sector, for example, self-regulatory bodies such as the Media Ethics Observatory remain active, and leading media organizations continue to respond collectively to violations of journalists' rights – regardless of their political affiliations.

Symbolic inclusion in public policy making

According to the CSO Meter 2024, even when NGOs are formally included in consultations or discussions, their proposals are often excluded from final decisions. This "symbolic inclusion" creates the illusion of participation but lacks a legal obligation for the state to provide a reasoned response and a transparent system for monitoring the implementation of recommendations.

> Civil society representatives in Armenia regularly put forward proposals that are frequently ignored without explanation.

This issue is particularly evident in areas such as environmental regulation (e.g., projects in Amulsar or Teghut), gender policy, freedom of assembly, and NGO legislation. In these domains, civil society representatives regularly put forward proposals that are frequently ignored without explanation, undermining motivation and rendering expert work seemingly futile. Another example of declarative inclusion is the re-establishment of the Public Council under the prime minister as an attempt to resume dialogue with civil society. However, the Council lacks a dedicated budget for analytical or project-based work; legally

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defined powers to influence government decisions; and feedback mechanisms concerning the fate of initiatives proposed by council members.

In essence, the Public Council serves a ceremonial role rather than functioning as an effective bridge between society and the state. Its activities generate little public resonance and are largely perceived as a façade of inclusiveness.

The disappearance of civil society in Nagorno-Karabakh after 2023 deserves special attention. Prior to the mass exodus of the Armenian population – triggered by an eight-month blockade and subsequent military offensive by Azerbaijan in September 2023 – dozens of NGOs operated in the region. These included humanitarian foundations, human rights centres, and youth initiatives. They played a vital role in supporting and defending the rights of local communities in Nagorno-Karabakh.

With the loss of the territory, these organizations ceased to exist. Their core functions were urgently transferred to Yerevan, where central NGOs assumed responsibility for working with refugees, collecting testimonies, and conducting international advocacy. However, this led to overloads on capital-based institutions and a total vacuum of local engagement in decision-making regarding the displaced population.

This situation also highlights the weakness of emergency institutional support mechanisms for civil initiatives during political crises or population displacement.

What should be done differently

Armenia's non-governmental sector is undergoing an institutional transition in which its remaining resilience coexists with growing structural and geopolitical challenges. Having evolved from a peripheral actor into a recognized partner in reforms, civil society is now facing a weakening of its advocacy function, fragmented engagement with the state, and increasing constraints.

In the context of political polarization, declining donor support, and the rise of anti-civil society rhetoric, risks to institutional cohesion and regional outreach are becoming more acute. Particularly alarming is the disappearance of the civil sector in Nagorno-Karabakh after the mass exodus of the Armenian population in 2023, which undermines the principles of inclusiveness and deprives the most vulnerable groups of systemic human rights protection. In this context, a comprehensive reset of the participation model is needed – one that can re-establish the role of NGOs as independent, resilient and constructive democratic institutions with diverse profiles.

First, the institutionalization of participation is required through the formalization of mechanisms for NGO involvement in policy-making and evaluation. This

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includes participation in parliamentary hearings, legal expertise on draft legislation, and the operation of consultative bodies with real mandates and resources.

Second, restructuring external support is essential. Donor assistance should shift from short-term project grants to strengthening institutional sustainability, with an emphasis on regional balance and cross-sectoral collaboration. This involves the establishment of national and targeted support funds, the development of endowment mechanisms, and the introduction of innovative fundraising models to ensure the sector's long-term financial independence.

Third, amid rising informational polarization, strengthening the public legitimacy of the sector is critical. This requires public awareness campaigns, the professionalization of communication strategies, and coalitions with independent media to counter anti-civil narratives.

Finally, without restoring a regional presence, genuine inclusivity cannot be achieved. Support for initiatives in border and crisis-affected areas is needed, along with the development of mobile resource platforms and rapid response systems for humanitarian and legal emergencies. EE

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Silenced by law

How Azerbaijan uses legislation to crush dissent

ZUMRUD PASHAYEVA

Despite early efforts towards civil society formation following independence, serious setbacks have been observed in Azerbaijan in recent decades. Restrictive legislation on the activities of NGOs, strict limitations on foreign donors to operate within the country, the de facto restriction of freedom of assembly, and pressure on independent media have all had a negative impact on organized and independent civic activism in the country.

The development of civic society across the post-Soviet space varies significantly and is shaped by each country's political developments. While countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have fostered vibrant civic sectors, others, such as Belarus and the countries of Central Asia, have seen civil society remain under strict state control. In Azerbaijan civic initiatives do exist, yet they often face serious legal and institutional restrictions. In fact, if one would claim that civil society cannot monitor the authorities in Azerbaijan, but that this can happen vice versa, it would not be an exaggeration.

Civic participation in Azerbaijan began to take shape in the late 1980s when people, especially intellectuals in the capital, started organizing secretly due to fear of Soviet repression. After independence, the 1990s saw a surge in civic activity, fuelled by exposure to western democratic ideals and the emergence of a middle class. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict further catalysed mass mobilization, mak-

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ing civic participation a significant force in Azerbaijan's early post-Soviet political landscape.

Tightening control

Yet, this early momentum faced limitations. According to the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (2007), Azerbaijan's civil society remained poorly structured, led by a small group of key actors, and often lacking in a broad participatory base. Despite these shortcomings, the collapse of the Soviet Union created conditions for political pluralism and the emergence of public initiatives, NGOs, and independent media, which initially interacted in a dynamic way.

In the second half of the 1990s, the political environment developed (in terms of stability and legislation) and civil society began to have a better profile. However, over the years this dynamic began to gradually weaken with the establishment of centralized governance, the marginalization of the opposition, and the narrowing of political activism. In the 2000s, with the increasing revenues generated by the gas and oil industries in Azerbaijan and the establishment of a "development model" based on economic stability, control over political activism was further tightened. This resulted in certain mechanisms being created to neutralize civic actors from public life.

> In Azerbaijan, administrative repression against civic organizations has been extensively used through legal mechanisms.

Authoritarian and hybrid regimes often maintain a façade of democracy. Rather than outright banning civil society organizations, or CSOs, they impose restrictive laws and regulations that systematically disrupt operations. Governments may perceive CSOs as threats, especially in the realm of electoral mobilization, and respond with either violent repression or administrative crackdowns. At the same time, a non-violent and long-term approach is more common, as it appears to be regulatory rather than repressive, reducing the likelihood of public backlash. In Azerbaijan, administrative repression has been extensively used through legal mechanisms. For instance, the Venice Commission criticized the 2011 amendments to the country's NGO law, stating that they "overturn the previous efforts to meet with the requirements of international standards". These changes added layers of bureaucracy to an already burdensome registration process.

Further amendments between 2013 and 2015 to laws governing NGOs, grants and state registration introduced tighter controls. Donors were required to register with the ministry of justice and seek permission to operate. Non-registered or-

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ganizations were barred from receiving grants. Even though amendments in 2017 aimed to ease procedures, most major foreign NGOs and donor institutions had already exited the country: around 50 international organizations left, and foreign aid sharply declined. Meanwhile, penalties for noncompliance significantly increased.

Despite repeated calls from the Council of Europe to simplify the registration process and reduce bureaucratic barriers, no substantial reforms have been implemented. The 2014 NGO law introduced even stricter requirements, such as reporting changes in membership to the ministry of justice and complying with additional administrative obligations. New violations were created, and fines imposed, expanding government control over both domestic and foreign NGOs.

This legal-based approach allows the government to suppress civil society while maintaining a democratic veneer. Instead of open repression, it relies on tough legal language, excessive bureaucracy, and shifting requirements to quietly sideline NGOs: a form of repression by paperwork that is less visible, but highly effective.

Silencing civic space actors

In Azerbaijan, actors in the civic space – including activists, independent journalists, NGO leaders, and members of the political opposition – are systematically targeted through politically motivated criminal charges. While physical violence is less common, the authorities rely heavily on legal tools to suppress dissent. Charges such as "hooliganism", "disobedience of police", "illegal drug possession", "tax evasion", and even "high treason" are routinely used against critical voices.

This pattern of legal persecution is well-documented. For example, over the last two years in Azerbaijan more than 20 journalists have been arrested under such allegations as currency smuggling or illegal entrepreneurship. However, these arrests appear to be aimed at silencing independent reporting on corruption, human rights abuses, and governance issues. Amnesty International, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, and other international observers have consistently described these actions as politically motivated.

Civic actors are frequently accused of having connections to foreign intelligence services or foreign NGOs.

In parallel, state-run and pro-government media play a key role in shaping public opinion against civic actors. These outlets often publish sensationalist and accusatory content, which mirrors the government's narrative. Civic actors are frequently portrayed as "foreign-funded agents", "traitors" or "destabilizing forces", and are often accused of having connections to foreign intelligence services or foreign NGOs.

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This deliberate framing serves to delegitimize civic activism by casting it as a national security threat rather than a legitimate form of democratic participation. It is part of a broader state strategy to discredit dissent and equate critical voices with subversion. As a result, public discourse becomes infused with suspicion and fear, eroding societal support for civil society and further isolating those who challenge the status quo.

While civil society organizations, particularly NGOs, are popular and influential in the western world, the situation in the former Soviet republics is quite different. In many of these countries, authorities view CSOs with scepticism. For example, in Russia, the Kremlin has long promoted the narrative that the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, movements that led to mass protests and regime changes, were the result of western support for local NGOs and activists.

"Foreign agent" laws

In 2006, Russian authorities passed a law restricting NGO activities, followed by the infamous "foreign agent" law in 2012. This law required organizations receiving foreign funding and engaging in political activities to register as foreign agents. Moscow justified the crackdown by claiming that American and Western European aid to NGOs played an excessively political role. In reality, this legislation served as an inspirational model for neighbouring countries, including Azerbaijan and Georgia. While the names of such laws differ, their core principles and restrictive effects are nearly identical.

Over the past decade, Azerbaijani authorities have increasingly portrayed foreign-funded CSOs, especially those supported by the European Union and USAID, as tools of foreign influence. This narrative has been used to legitimize legal and administrative measures aimed at restricting foreign funding and tightening control over independent NGOs.

Most foreign donors have traditionally focused on programmes related to democratic governance, human rights, free media and anti-corruption, areas often seen as threatening to the interests of authoritarian elites. Consequently, the Azerbaijani government has framed such support as a danger to national sovereignty and state stability. State-run and pro-government media play a central role in reinforcing this narrative. These outlets often depict western-funded NGOs as "agents of influence", accusing them of advancing foreign agendas under the guise of promoting democracy. They frequently link these organizations to the broader "colour revolution" conspiracy, drawing parallels with events in Georgia and Ukraine to suggest a coordinated threat to regime stability.

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It should be acknowledged that in recent years the EU and USAID have been very careful in choosing CSOs with which to cooperate and allocate funding. For instance, before USAID significantly scaled back its operations in Azerbaijan, it cooperated with a variety of actors, including state institutions and at times pro-government NGOs. At the same time, development-focused projects that clearly operate far from politically sensitive matters have been frequent beneficiaries of EU or USAID funding.

A country of civic apathy?

Civic apathy remains a serious issue in Azerbaijan. Most citizens feel that their engagement in civil society has little chance of making a meaningful impact. While some civic organizations, such as labour unions, have large memberships, many of these members lack confidence in the institutions themselves. As a result, their functions are largely formal, existing more on paper than in practice.

Other contributing factors include the limited outreach and lack of diversity among CSOs. Most are concentrated in the capital, with minimal presence or engagement in the regions. Additionally, many people view civil society as irrelevant to policy-making and believe it plays no significant role in decision-making. Instead, they continue to see the state as the sole defender of public interests. This perception is rooted, in part, in the Soviet legacy of authoritarian governance, where state authority was viewed as a superior force above society.

> Volunteering has become more popular in recent years, however these initiatives typically remain politically neutral.

Socio-economic conditions further complicate the development of civil society. Despite some economic reforms, small and medium-sized businesses, often seen as the backbone of civil society, remain disconnected from civic life. Tied closely to a corrupt bureaucratic elite, they have not supported CSOs or promoted social responsibility.

However, the rise of digital technologies and social media has enabled new forms of civic activism, especially among the youth. Informal initiatives, such as petition campaigns, online protests, and social media-driven awareness efforts, are gaining ground. These platforms serve as tools for mobilizing public pressure around specific social and civic issues.

In the regions, informal groups and local environmental activists offer alternative models of public engagement. Yet, their efforts often lack institutional support and legal protection, making long-term sustainability difficult.

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Volunteering has also grown in popularity in recent years, particularly among young people. Promoted by the government, these initiatives typically remain politically neutral and align with official narratives. While valuable, they do not offer a substitute to critical or independent civic activism.

Independent media?

Independent media in Azerbaijan face many of the same restrictions and challenges as civil the society. Today, economic suppression, police raids, arrests of journalists, and judicial bans have become common tactics used to dismantle non-state media. Television, radio, online platforms, and print outlets remain tightly controlled by the government.

According to the 2025 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, Azerbaijan ranks 167th out of 180 countries – despite marking the 150th anniversary of its national press this year. The Committee to Protect Journalists reports that since late 2023, at least 20 journalists have been arrested, primarily under Article 206.3.2 of the criminal code, which concerns currency smuggling by organized groups. Authorities claim these journalists illegally brought foreign donor funds into the country, though observers argue the real motive is to silence independent reporting.

Economic suppression, police raids, arrests of journalists, and judicial bans have become common tactics used to dismantle non-state media.

The legal framework adopted by the government does not favour the independent operation of media outlets. The 2022 media law bans journalists from receiving any form of foreign funding, including salaries, fees or grants, and requires mandatory registration in a government-controlled media registry. This registration involves disclosing personal data and meeting strict criteria: only Azerbaijani citizens with a higher education, clean criminal records, and formal employment contracts are allowed to work as journalists. As a result, many freelancers, particularly those working with international outlets, were effectively made illegal.

Ownership of media is also restricted. Only Azerbaijani citizens without foreign ties may own outlets, further limiting independence. The closure of the Turan News Agency – the first and last independent outlet with an office in the country – in February 2025, was a symbolic moment. Its director, Mehman Aliyev, remarked that the media landscape had become entirely dominated by pro-government outlets, ending any real pluralism.

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Independent media websites such as Meydan TV, Radio Azadlig, AbzasMedia, ToplumTV and the *Azadlig* newspaper have been blocked and their offices shut down over the years. With the state maintaining full control over the advertising market, independent outlets have struggled to generate revenue and have relied heavily on international funding. However, restrictive amendments to NGO and grant laws have sharply limited access to such support, threatening the sector's survival.

Under the current media law, only outlets registered with the state agency "MEDIA" are officially recognized. Both media organizations and their employees are included in a centralized "media registry", placing them under direct state oversight. In short, nearly every aspect of the media sector is now regulated by the state. A joint assessment by the Venice Commission and the Council of Europe's Directorate General for Human Rights warned that the law would have a "chilling effect" on independent journalism. Despite recommendations for revisions, the final version of the law reflected no significant changes. What comes next for society in general remains uncertain. EE

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Russia's long game in Africa and Latin America

ALICE VOLFSON

It began with bananas and Soviet-era weapons. In early 2024, Ecuador tried to offload its ageing Russian arms stockpile to the United States, which intended to pass it on to Ukraine. Moscow responded with a trade war, partially banning Ecuadorian banana imports and sending shockwaves through the country's economy. Within weeks, Quito backed off from the deal, caught between western alliances and dependence on Russian trade.

In the heart of downtown Quito, tucked in the middle of Parque El Ejido, amid colonial churches and street vendors selling fruit, stands a bronze bust of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Just 35 metres away, behind a construction fence, a sign announces the June 6th inauguration of the *"Diálogo de Culturas"* memorial – a small tribute to the Ecuadorian poet Medardo Ángel Silva and Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, the Soviet-era Russian Cultural Centre now bears a mural of Pushkin and his great-grandfather. Far from Moscow, these quiet symbols of Russian culture raise a question: what is Russia doing here, and why now?

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Political mythmaking

As Russia continues its brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine and faces diplomatic isolation from the West as a result, it is turning to Latin America and Africa with an old playbook: Soviet-style soft power diplomacy in the developing and post-colonial worlds. The goal was never cultural exchange and still is not. It is political mythmaking aimed at securing allies or proxies, whitewashing war crimes, and undermining western influence in the so-called Global South.

Russia wages this campaign through literature, education, and symbolic diplomacy. It represents a subtle, persistent and potentially perilous form of soft power: the ability to influence other countries through culture and values rather than military or economic force, which was central to Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War. Following the era of decolonization, the USSR actively courted the newly independent nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America through university scholarships, cultural exchanges and festivals. The USSR presented itself as anti-colonial and anti-imperialist, vying for the allyship of the Global South in contrast to western influence.

Framed as solidarity, Russian soft power masks strategic efforts to counter the West in the developing world.

Framed as solidarity, this soft power masked a strategic effort to expand Moscow's ideological reach and counter the US in the developing world. The Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University, established in 1960 and named after the assassinated Congolese leader, became a flagship institution of Soviet soft power, training thousands of students from across the Global South, many of whom became prominent political, academic and cultural elites in their home countries. These figures include Mahmoud Abbas, Michel Djotodia, and allegedly Ali Khamenei. Educational soft power also went both ways, with Soviet teachers, engineers and doctors sent across Africa and Latin America as emissaries of Soviet ideology. While on the ground, they aided in the construction of cultural and civic infrastructure (such as the cultural centre in Brazzaville).

Meanwhile, mass festivals and ideological conferences became regular platforms for Soviet internationalism. The World Festival of Youth in 1957 is a notable example, bringing together thousands of young people from over 100 countries to celebrate "solidarity". The Afro-Asian Writers' Conferences, held in Central Asia between 1958 and 1988, provided a place for promoting Soviet-aligned anti-colonial cultural and literary exchange. Today's Russian Federation has revived many tactics, albeit with a new ideological framing. It uses literature, history and state-sponsored cultural diplomacy to build goodwill, project influence and erode western credibility, especially in regions still marked by colonial legacies and geopolitical resentment.

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Photo: Matthew Swagler (used here with his permission)

Amid shifting political and economic tensions, seemingly neutral cultural initiatives provide Russia with a durable and non-confrontational way to maintain visibility in Ecuador and elsewhere.

Soft power in disguise

Ecuador's relationship with Russia has been fraught and tense in the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Shortly after the invasion, Quito voted to condemn Russian aggression at the United Nations but maintained a trade relationship with Moscow, particularly regarding agricultural exports. In early 2024, Ecuador attempted to sell its Soviet-era weapons stockpile to the United States, which announced plans to transfer it to Ukraine. Russia responded by launching a trade war, banning Ecuadorian banana imports, accounting for nearly a quarter of the country's total exports. With an economy highly dependent on such deals, Ecuador quickly withdrew from the arms deal, illustrating its precarious position between western geopolitical alignment, economic stability, and reliance on Russian trade.

Within this context, Ecuadorian and Russian actors conceived the *Memorial Diálogo de Culturas – Silva–Pushkin* in February 2023, a year after the full-scale invasion. The official framing of the project is riddled with contradictions. The memorial is publicly promoted as a citizen-led initiative, spearheaded by the local

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Fundación La Clé and seeking public sponsorship, with donors' names to be engraved at the site. The website, available in Spanish and Russian, reads, "The Memorial will contribute to consolidating a message of culture, internationalism, aesthetic development and construction of collective memory." Its design reflects this civic framing: etched glass portraits, volcanic Ecuadorian stone, and malachite inlays, allegedly a nod to Pushkin's birthplace.

Still, the memorial's civic façade masks a deeper geopolitical function: soft power cloaked in stone and glass. A banner at the construction site confirms that the Russian embassy in Ecuador is one of the memorial's official sponsors, directly linking it to Kremlin-backed cultural diplomacy efforts. "It should be noted that the site is located very close (about 35 metres) to the so-called *Paseo de los Poetas*," reads the website. "In this area, there is, proudly, the statue of the great Peruvian poet César Vallejo and the bust of the brilliant Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, which was a gift from the Moscow City Council to the city of Quito, in 2007." This highlights earlier Russian-sponsored cultural ventures, with this one dating back over 15 years.

> Amid shifting tensions, seemingly neutral cultural initiatives provide Russia with a non-confrontational way to maintain visibility.

Amid shifting political and economic tensions, these seemingly neutral cultural initiatives provide Russia with a durable and non-confrontational way to maintain visibility. Even as Ecuador's government takes steps to distance itself from Moscow diplomatically, monuments like the Dostoevsky bust and the *Diálogo de Culturas* memorial ensure that Russia's influence remains, quite literally, embedded in the public space. This secures Moscow a level of soft power that sanctions and diplomatic condemnations cannot easily erase.

Culture as geopolitical influence

Congo-Brazzaville, unlike Ecuador, has long been a key stage for Moscow's cultural and political manoeuvring. During the Cold War, the country was a key African ally of the USSR under the leadership of President Marien Ngouabi. The Soviet Union provided military aid, sponsored thousands of educational scholarships and cultural exchanges, and embedded itself within the country's political and intellectual arenas. One of the remnants of this era is the Russian Cultural Centre. With its relevance fading after the USSR's collapse in 1991, the centre has experienced a revival in recent years, coinciding with Russia's renewed interest in Africa. Managed since 2008 by *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the Brazzaville centre is part of

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a network of seven such centres across the continent, known simply as "Russian Houses". The centres uniformly offer Russian language classes, film screenings, historical and artistic exhibitions, and theatrical performances, all under the guise of cultural development. Beneath these gestures lies an enduring Soviet legacy, one that casts Russia as Africa's eternal, anti-colonial "brother".

Nowhere is this clearer than in the newly painted mural on the exterior of the Brazzaville Russian Cultural Centre, which features Alexander Pushkin alongside his great-grandfather in a deliberate nod to Russia's claimed historical bond with Africa. Abram Petrovich Gannibal was an African-born military strategist who was taken to Russia as a child and later became a close confidant of Peter the Great. The message is clear: Pushkin's African ancestry (proudly touted during the Soviet era) is leveraged to present Russia as having indisputable historical ties to the continent by portraying itself as a nation inherently linked to Africa's past, present and future.

However, the use of Pushkin's African ancestry is less a historical celebration than a carefully curated myth designed to validate the Russian presence in Africa. It allows Moscow to cloak its geopolitical interests in a narrative of shared heritage while reinforcing the Cold War-era rhetoric of solidarity that masks imperial ambitions. The Kremlin has long understood the power of cultural diplomacy, and in a country where Soviet nostalgia still lingers, these murals are not just aesthetic – they are geopolitical. They are an attempt to reclaim space in Africa's political imagination, to reinforce relationships that date back to Soviet-era partnerships, and to ensure that Russia remains a visible force at a time when western powers have scaled back similar projects. This is especially true with the recent defunding of USAID initiatives, coupled with the proposal to close all US embassies and shutter operations on the continent. As western diplomacy retreats, Russia's visibility grows, filling a void left by nostalgia and purposeful neglect.

> The use of Pushkin's African ancestry is a carefully curated myth designed to validate Russia's presence in Africa.

New footholds on old foundations

The ideological commitments may have changed, but the gameplaying has not. Just as the Soviet Union once used universities, friendship societies, and infrastructure building to cultivate pro-Moscow sentiment across Africa during a period of polarizing geopolitics, Putin is repackaging the playbook for a new era. At a time when Moscow is committing war crimes in Ukraine, it is also unveiling such monuments across Latin America and Africa, a cynical manipulation of history

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designed to bolster Russia's image in the region where western involvement has created justified scepticism. The Kremlin is betting that, just like during the Cold War, hiding within the rhetoric of solidarity can obscure its imperialism.

However, how effective is this? While soft power offers a temporary veneer of goodwill, it does not entirely mask the reality of Russia's aggression. Ecuador, despite cultural and economic ties, voted to condemn the invasion. African states have not fully backed the war as well. To answer this, we must examine history and understand that Russia has co-opted the Soviet "long game". Through the soft power of the Cold War, the USSR cultivated sympathetic elites and embedded cultural myths in the memory of generations.

The goal was not just short-term influence; it was to create ideological footholds using education, media and friendship, footholds that endured even after the collapse of communism. Today, Putin attempts the same through historical revisionism, selective nostalgia, and carefully placed memorials to Pushkin and Dostoevsky.

If the West hopes to counter this growing influence, it must invest in its own long game by supporting independent cultural institutions, funding education and exchange programmes, and amplifying the local voices that resist authoritarian narratives. This is all the more urgent as the US continues to scale back its investments in cultural (and political) diplomacy, ceding ground to authoritarian narratives by default. Otherwise, Moscow's myths will continue to outlast its wars. EE

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Russian cultural diplomacy in Germany

Between promoting Russia and undermining Ukraine

MARIA PROTSIUK

A number of facts testify to Russia's destructive influence abroad through disinformation or direct interference in the domestic politics of countries, alongside the financing of political forces. Yet, there is another less obvious (and therefore even more dangerous) Russian Trojan horse – the institutions of cultural diplomacy, which under the cover of culture promote the Kremlin's agenda and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Despite the war, Germany still remains one of the most affected EU countries by Russian soft influence.

From the theoretical point of view and practical approach of democratic states, cultural diplomacy is designed to shape a positive attitude towards one state among the public of another state through cultural means. In fact, this is a narrow, simplified definition of cultural diplomacy, which aims to promote mutual understanding and dialogue between two countries. However, such an explanation has nothing to do with the authoritarian approach to cultural diplomacy that Russia professes in the international arena.

In the Russian implementation, its state institutions of cultural diplomacy are not at all similar to their counterparts in other countries, such as the British

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Council, Goethe Institute, Cervantes Institute, Polish Institute, Ukrainian Institute and many others. Moreover, it is impossible to call these institutions as "peers" with the Russian cultural diplomacy institutions abroad. Instead, the activities of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation as key state actors of Russian cultural diplomacy are not so much about promoting Russia through its cultural heritage and modern Russian culture, but about methods that are complementary to the Russian military capabilities. These serve to justify its aggressive foreign policy actions, including those in Ukraine since 2014.

One of the most striking examples of how Russia blinds the eyes of the foreign professional community and the general public, hiding behind the so-called great Russian culture, are the activities of state and non-state affiliated institutions of cultural diplomacy in Germany. This is a country that has long been a key geopolitical partner of Russia not only in Europe, but also in the world.

Aggressive approach

For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that the Russian Federation does not use the concept of "cultural diplomacy" in its foreign policy activities. Thus, the abovementioned institutions are mainly actors of cultural diplomacy more in essence than in name and their self-identification. Instead, Russia officially calls such activities as "international humanitarian cooperation". For example, the "Concept of the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad" is a document that was released six months after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Among other things, there is a formulation that "…culture aims to neutralize anti-Russian sentiments of a political or ideological direction," which has a frankly negative formulation. Another document dated March 2023 is the "Concept of Russian Foreign Policy", which states that "…Russian culture is called upon to combat Russophobia campaigns carried out by unfriendly foreign states and their associations." Accordingly, in the vein of such documented approaches, and with quite an aggressive tone of voice, the actors of Russian cultural diplomacy operate in Germany as well.

> Formally an NGO, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation is financed and dependent on the Russian state.

The most notable body in the field of Russian cultural diplomacy in Germany, among a large network of organizations, is the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, as well as the German representative office of *Rossotrudnichestvo* – the federal agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States affairs, compatriots living abroad, and in-

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ternational humanitarian cooperation. This agency is a part of the executive structure of the Russian Federation.

Rossotrudnichestvo in Germany is represented through its branch, the Russian House in Berlin. This is the largest branch of this organization in the world and supposedly aims to popularize Russian culture and language. It also cultivates the memory of common German-Russian pages in history. In contrast, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation in Germany is represented through cabinets (*"кабинеты"* in Russian, as they themselves translate it in English as "cabinets") and centres, which are comparatively less visible but no less influential platforms.

Formally, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation is a non-governmental organization. However, like the Russian House in Berlin, this group is financed from the Russian state budget and it would be incorrect to perceive it as independent from the state. For many years, both of these organizations have indeed fulfilled the task of popularizing Russian (mostly classical) culture and language, as well as preserving the identity of the numerous Russian diaspora in Germany. Yet, in the meantime, they have largely promoted the official Russian political agenda in Germany.

Is there room for culture in the Russian House of culture?

The Russian House of Science and Culture in Berlin was founded as the House of Soviet Science and Culture in East Germany in 1984. Clearly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia not only inherited the infrastructure on Berlin's Friedrichstrasse, but also adopted the Soviet methods of conducting propaganda through cultural cooperation. Since 2017, the Russian House has been headed by Pavel Izvolsky, who, among other interesting facts from his biography, was registered at the address of the dormitory of the Moscow Higher Military Command School, whose graduates often serve in the Russian GRU or the foreign intelligence service.

Of course, in theory, the focal activity of the Russian House is the promotion of Russian culture. Yet, within the framework of the activities and communications of the institution, there is clear political propaganda. Instead of creating a positive image, the Russian House actively works on creating a negative image of Ukraine, as confirmed by the following cases.

For example, in 2014, the Russian House hosted a "cultural event" involving the presentation of a book titled *Neonazis and Euromaidan. From democracy to dictatorship*, where "neo-Nazism" in Ukraine was discussed. In addition, during the Week of Russian Cinema in 2018, the Russian House cinema showed the film *Donbas. Outskirts* with a number of propaganda plots about fake events. For example, the film discussed alleged shelling of Ukrainian cities by Ukraine and the shooting

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of civilians by the Azov Battalion. The Russian House cinema also showed the film *Opolchenochka*, which contained anti-Ukrainian propaganda and Kremlin narratives about Russia's war against Ukraine.

The activities of the Russian House go far beyond the spheres that should be considered cultural diplomacy. A number of facts indicate the institution's ties to certain German political forces, Russian special services, and pro-Russian activists. In particular, it should be mentioned that events at the Russian House have been held by the German socio-political portal "Compact". This media group is known for its anti-western, conspiratorial and pro-Russian views, as well as its popularization of the far-right Alternative for Germany.

> The activities of the Russian House in Berlin go far beyond the spheres that should be considered cultural diplomacy.

Another example is the Russian House's ties with public activists, who regularly organize and hold pro-Russian political events in Germany and justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This includes, among other things, the tandem of Maksim Schlund (formerly known as Senior Lieutenant of the Russian Army Rostyslav Tesliuk) and Elena Kolbasnikova (allegedly his wife, who positions herself as a "victim of German Russophobia"). It is noteworthy that German law enforcement agencies became interested in their activities due to suspicions that the couple transferred funds to purchase communications equipment for the Russian army fighting in Ukraine. It is also believed that they illegally stored weapons at home. According to a Reuters investigation, the German branch of *Rossotrudnichestvo* paid for these "activists" to travel to Russia. In addition, in the Russian House Kolbasnikova recorded a video address after a pro-Russian meeting in Berlin, which promoted the idea of stopping the supply of weapons to Ukraine. This demonstrates the use of the infrastructure of this cultural diplomacy institution to disseminate the Kremlin's political narratives.

Representatives of Russian intelligence are also covertly involved in the activities of the German branch of *Rossotrudnichestvo*. Although there is no direct evidence linking Moscow's special services with the Russian House, there are clear examples of its hospitality towards agents of the Russian intelligence agencies. Notably, there is photographic evidence of Oleg Yeriomenko, a former officer of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, visiting the Russian House. Yeriomenko was also known for his association with the Russian terrorist Igor Girkin, the former representative of the Russian FSB and leader of the militants of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic.

After the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian House significantly reduced its activities and initially moved them to an online format.

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But soon after, the institution resumed its normal activities. However, cultural, academic and educational areas still remain key in the activities of the Russian House, which is trying to maintain the image of an institution working in the field of culture in Germany. For many years, this allowed *Rossotrudnichestvo* in Berlin to maintain the loyalty of a wider audience, who viewed it as a bridge to understanding Russian culture.

Invisible or invincible *Russkiy Mir*

Founded in 2007, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation began operating in Germany in 2008. Therefore, its activities are relatively less visible, and methods slightly different. As of 2025, the foundation declares on its website the existence of five centres and three cabinets in six federal states of Germany. There is no fundamental difference between the centres and cabinets, since both are aimed at popularizing Russian language and culture, providing targeted programmes for their study, and expanding cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Russia and the states in which these cabinets and centres operate.

It is interesting to note that most of the NGOs existed long before the foundation offered them financial or organizational support and opened its centres. For example, the Russian-German Cultural Centre in Nuremberg was established in 1998, while in 2009 the *Russkiy Mir* representative office was opened there. There is also the German-Russian Institute of Culture in Dresden that was established in 1993, with the *Russkiy Mir* office arriving in 2009. Other examples include the House of Tchaikovsky in Hamburg; the Phoenix Society in Mainz; the Association of Russian-speaking parents and teachers of Berlin *Mitra*; and the so-called cabinets. This final group includes the German-Russian Charitable Society of St. Alexandra in Leipzig, the *Nezabudka* NGO, and the Russian Society of North Rhine-Westphalia.

It turns out that in Germany the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation opens centres or cabinets on the basis of already existing and previously recognizable NGOs, which actively supplement their previous activities with the projects of *Russkiy Mir*. In essence, these German NGOs are transformed into Russian GONGOs while also being able to receive funding from European and German sources (private and public).

Most branches of *Russkiy Mir* in Germany do not declare their involvement with the foundation and are reluctant to communicate about it publicly. This cannot be understood either from the descriptions of the organizations on their websites or from their visual identity. Mentions of the foundation are often fragmentary. Despite the laconic and sporadic communication of the presence of the *Russkiy*

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Mir Foundation on all relevant internet resources, it is still possible to find many photos from events at which the Foundation's logo is present.

In terms of content, the situation is similar to the Russian House. Some events at the cabinets and centres of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation are accompanied by presentations on the Russian political agenda. Among other things, they have touched on Ukrainian topics, such as the presentation of the book *Saving Crimea* by Ralph Rudolph and Uwe Markus, which concerns the so-called "restoration" of the peninsula by Russia at the German-Russian Institute of Culture.

After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the centres and cabinets did not change their activities. Some of them condemned the invasion to some extent or called for peace. However, this is not about condemning Russia's aggression, but about criticizing the war as such without naming the actors. Therefore, all cabinets and centres of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation in Germany continue to operate.

Narratives matter

The unifying feature of the German branches of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation is a number of identical key narratives they systematically

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articulate in their activities. Their predominantly aggressive tone and attraction towards historical and political topics with an emphasis on discrediting opponents are characteristic. This is despite the fact that these narratives are broadcast under the guise of cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

One example is the narrative of the existence of long-standing, deep historical and cultural ties between Russia and Germany. Another group of narratives involves the topic of the Second World War. First, it was the Soviet Union that played a key role in the victory over Nazism in Europe, and, second, Germany is solely responsible to Russia for what it did during the war, while downplaying the participation of others who were then part of the USSR, such as Ukrainians and Belarusians.

A significant part of the activities of Russian cultural diplomacy institutions in Germany, in various ways, is the promotion of anti-American and generally anti-western narratives. Russia opposes the "collective West" in every possible way and positions itself as an open and inclusive country, which, obviously, is far from the truth in practice.

Russian cultural diplomacy institutions in Germany actively promote anti-American, and generally anti-western, narratives.

At the same time, Russia's foreign policy actions were directly reflected in the emergence of new narratives at cultural events of the Russian House and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation in Germany. After 2014, special attention was paid to the topic of the "fair" annexation of Crimea to Russia, and at the same time, the narrative about the so-called "Nazi regime" in Kyiv was replicated. It is obvious that with the start of the full-scale invasion after 2022 new topics were added. This includes the narrative about the need to lift sanctions against Russia, as they harm Germany more than Russia itself, or the narrative about the futility of supporting Ukraine in the war because it will not win anyway.

The narrative about so-called "Russophobia" in Germany was also often noticeable. It is important to note that it was first launched back in 2012, before Russia annexed Crimea. This suggests that this narrative was artificially constructed to prepare the German public for the coming events and begin to form a perception of Russians as unfairly accused and offended.

It is quite logical to have the impression that culture is being marginalized in the activities of these institutions, being displaced by political topics. However, with the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, it is rare to find direct support for Moscow's policy and the war it has unleashed against Ukraine on the websites of Russian cultural diplomacy institutions in Germany. At the same time, arguments are being made in favour of maintaining peace and ties with Russia at the public level, as well as on the level of individual cultural figures. A desire is be-

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ing formed to maintain Russian-German contacts in areas that supposedly remain "outside politics" – in culture, education, science and religion.

Under "sanctions"

The EU sanctions against Russia in a number of areas are one of the truly effective levers of influence possessed by the international community when it comes to the aggressor country. However, not all EU sanctions work equally well, with a number of exceptions and loopholes to circumvent certain bans. This is exactly what is happening in terms of Russian cultural diplomacy.

In the summer of 2022, the EU imposed sanctions on *Rossotrudnichestvo* for "spreading Kremlin narratives, supporting propaganda projects and being responsible for actions or policies that undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine". In fact, at the same time, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation was also sanctioned by the EU. In particular, this was due to its "endorsement of pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian propaganda, as well as the justification of Russian aggression against Ukraine". The imposition of such sanctions should have automatically meant restrictions on all its representative offices in Europe. Yet, despite this, the Russian House continued to operate unhindered in Berlin. Its representatives defend the institution by saying that *Rossotrudnichestvo* is subject to sanctions but not the legal entity of the Russian House. Therefore, it continues to sell tickets for cultural events, rent out its premises, and actually earns money without hindrance. The fact is that the Russian House is directly subordinate to *Rossotrudnichestvo*.

> Despite sanctions, the Russian House continues to sell tickets for cultural events, rent out its premises, and actually earns money without hindrance.

In January 2023 the Berlin prosecutor's office launched an investigation into a possible violation of the law on foreign economic activity by *Rossotrudnichestvo*. The investigation was later suspended due to the diplomatic status of the Russian House representatives, which is stipulated in a bilateral agreement. Therefore, even though the Russian House is actually and formally under the control of the sanctioned *Rossotrudnichestvo* group, it has not yet been possible to take measures to terminate its activities.

The *Russkiy Mir* Foundation also continues its work in Europe. In particular, in Germany, none of the foundation's affiliated organizations in the form of cabinets or centres have publicly spoken out about severing ties with the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation. The situation is comical: how is it possible to break off cooperation

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that practically did not exist in the public sphere? This indicates the likelihood of continued cooperation between cultural and educational centres and representatives of the Russian regime, as well as the continued receipt of funding for "independent NGOs" from both the Russian and German governments.

Culture as a foreign policy tool

The activities of the Russian House in Berlin as the German branch of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation in the form of cabinets and centres go well beyond the boundaries of cultural diplomacy and promotion of Russia. A characteristic unifying feature of these organizations is their predominantly negative rhetoric and the discrediting of opponents, mainly Ukraine. Moreover, the cultural screen for their activities allows them to continue despite EU sanctions.

Therefore, Russia continues to instrumentalize culture as a foreign policy tool in the Kremlin's attempt to legitimize the occupation of Ukrainian territories and to position culture as a factor of reconciliation, a universal phenomenon beyond borders and politics. Therefore, the European community needs to seek more effective methods of combatting this destructive influence of Russia under the guise of culture, which carries a clearly expressed pro-Kremlin political agenda. One place to start would be revising domestic legislation on cultural cooperation, such as in the case of Russia and Germany. EE

This text is based on the data and results of a study conducted by the analytical team of the Ukrainian Institute. The full-text version of the study in Ukrainian, English and German is available on the website of the Ukrainian Institute: https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/en-projects/en-research-analytics/russian-cultural-diplomacy-in-germany-actors-narratives-and-achievements/.

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Italy and Russia

A never-ending love story

ALEKSEJ TILMAN

In Italy, public scepticism about Russia's war in Ukraine has grown, with recent polls showing declining support for Kyiv and rising neutrality. Some political figures, from both the right and the left, have tapped into this sentiment, highlighting its broad appeal across the spectrum. Understanding this trend requires looking at Italy's unique political history, including the enduring legacy of its communist party during the Cold War.

"In 2022 we blamed Russia for the war in Ukraine, while in reality the responsibility for it is 50/50. Both NATO and Russia had competed over Ukraine." This quote comes from a long speech by Marco Travaglio, an Italian journalist, during the *èStoria* festival, held in the city of Gorizia in May 2025. Travaglio conceded that the Russian leader Vladimir Putin "is an autocrat", but the core of his argument was that the West had conspired to provoke Russia into war since the 1990s as part of a strategy to weaken it. He also described Ukraine as a divided country where fascist ideology plays a significant role.

These views, including some elements of Russian propaganda under the guise of neutrality, are neither new nor surprising. Travaglio has been voicing similar lines since before the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. He portrays himself as an outcast in the Italian media landscape, which, he claims, is dominated by "warmongers" – his label for those who support Ukraine's right to defend itself.

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In reality, this self-styled outsider persona is a carefully crafted narrative that resonates with his many followers, who view him as a challenger to mainstream discourse. Travaglio is the director of *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, one of Italy's best-selling newspapers, which he co-founded in 2009. He is also a regular guest on political talk shows broadcasted on national TV channels, hardly an outcast.

Fertile ground

Travaglio's fame mostly comes from his journalistic investigations on Silvio Berlusconi's murky affairs in the first decade of the 2000s, when the late politician was at the peak of his power. Berlusconi notoriously despised Travaglio, but the two would ironically end up sharing similar views on what they consider to be the causes of the war in Ukraine. A few months before he passed away in May 2023, the former prime minister claimed that the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "provoked" Russia's invasion.

Travaglio and Berlusconi also share another trait: both are sensitive communicators, who are naturally able to grasp the sentiment of public opinion. In 2022, both well understood that there was a part of the Italian public inclined to believe that the war in Ukraine was not just the result of Russia's leadership imperial ambitions, and leveraged this understanding for their own gains. The fact that two public figures from opposite sides of the political spectrum voiced similar opinions on the conflict reveals how widespread those beliefs are in Italy. A 2025 IPSOS poll shows that 57 per cent of Italian respondents did not support either Russia or Ukraine (in 2022 only 38 per cent of the polled individuals considered themselves as neutral). The same poll shows that support for Ukraine has sharply decreased in Italy over the last three and a half years, from 57 per cent in 2022 to 32 per cent in 2025. A recent SWG survey also shows that 41 per cent of the respondents thought that Italy should stop sending weapons to Ukraine (while 42 per cent think that it should keep sending them). Meanwhile, 11 per cent of the respondents declared their support for Russia.

> A recent survey says that 41 per cent of the Italians believe Italy should stop sending weapons to Ukraine.

Many factors have to be considered to understand this state of affairs, which cannot be attributed entirely to Russian interference. It is beyond any doubt that such interference does exist, but Moscow's disinformation efforts needed fertile ground in which to take root. Therefore, it is important to understand how these foundations came to be both on the left and right side of the Italian political spec-

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trum. To do that, we must look back to the Cold War era. While within the American sphere of influence and one of NATO's founding members, Italy was home to the largest communist party in Western Europe. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) never succeeded in winning a national election, but from the late 1940s to the 1980s, it consistently held the position of the second most popular party in the country. Its best electoral result was 34.4 per cent in the 1976 parliamentary elections. Apart from its name, the PCI had little in common with its Eastern European counterparts.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and Italy's contribution to it was perceived extremely negatively in leftist circles.

Although it received political and financial support from Moscow, the party was far from being just a Soviet proxy. In particular, under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer (1972–1984), the PCI embraced the policy of so-called Eurocommunism, distancing itself from the Soviet Union to focus on socio-economic issues within the framework of liberal democracy. The violent crackdown by the communist authorities on demonstrations in Poland ultimately led to a formal break between the PCI and Moscow in 1982.

Anti-American sentiments

Given these caveats, strong anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment was widespread within the PCI leadership and among its voters, leaving a lasting influence on Italian public opinion. The end of the Cold War coincided with the decline and eventual dissolution of the PCI in 1991, after which its members dispersed into a range of new parties competing for the same electoral base. Those voters were left without the ideology in which they believed, but with a view on international affairs inherited by that ideology, which was clearly influenced by aforementioned anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment.

This sentiment was inflated by internal and external developments in the 1990s and early 2000s. From 1960s to 1980s, Italy suffered numerous terrorist attacks by both left and right-wing extremist groups. In the 1990s, various parliamentary committees were held to investigate and prosecute these crimes. According to various leftist politicians and conspiracy theorists like Daniel Gansier, the United States supported various extremist groups organizing these attacks as part of a "strategy of tension" to stop the PCI from taking power in the country.

The real extent of the American interference has never been fully proven, but the investigations and allegations were enough to strengthen the feeling of distrust

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An anti-war protest against the invasion of Ukraine in Rome in March of 2022. In 2025, 57 per cent of Italians did not support either Russia or Ukraine thanks in part to ongoing efforts by pro-Russian voices in the Italian media.

towards Washington on the left. Moreover, the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and Italy's contribution to it was perceived extremely negatively in leftist circles. Similarly, the decision of the Bush administration to invade Iraq in 2003 was met with huge pacifist protests in Italy.

Looking at the political centre-right, the ever-present Christian Democracy (DC) party, which led Italian governments continuously from 1946 to 1981, opposed communism and supported an Atlanticist foreign policy. At the same time, there were factions within the party that favoured economic cooperation with the Soviet Union. The most striking example of this approach was the 1966 agreement between the Italian car manufacturer FIAT and the Soviet government, which was backed by DC. This led to the establishment of an automobile plant in the city of Togliatti on the Volga river. There, in 1970, production began on a car based on the FIAT 124 model: the legendary *Zhiguli*.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this economic interest became more relevant, as the Russian Federation came to be increasingly viewed by the centre-

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right – historically close to the corporatist world – as a land of boundless business opportunities. On the one hand, there were imports of cheap oil and gas, in which the energy company ENI played a huge role. On the other hand, there were exports of high-end Italian goods beloved by the new Russian elite.

While the personal friendship between Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin often made headlines, Italy maintained an openly friendly foreign policy toward Russia from 1991 until the beginning of the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, regardless of the many governments in power during that period and their political leanings. To this equation, it should be added that the Italian public had (and still have, to an extent) an extremely poor understanding of the ethnolinguistic landscape of the former Soviet Union and its satellites. All the countries from the area were inherently perceived as "Russian" and many people would have interpreted the region through this Italian lens. Italy is a country with a countless number of dialects. Thus, if the peninsula has Neapolitan, Roman or Sicilian dialects, they thought that, in similar fashion, "Russian" must also have dialects, be it Ukrainian, Georgian or Tajik. This aspect should not be overlooked, as ignorance would become fertile ground for any sort of disinformation coming from Russia (consider the example of Putin's mantra about Ukraine not being a real country that was invented by Vladimir Lenin).

Reactions to Russian aggression

It was in this context that the Euromaidan Revolution erupted in 2013. This was followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea, the declarations of independence in the Luhansk and Donetsk so-called people's republics, and the outbreak of war in the Donbas region. On the left side of the Italian political spectrum, the idea that a country might enthusiastically seek EU, and especially NATO, membership was often seen as inconceivable. Many believed that Ukrainians could not genuinely desire to join the Alliance, and that such aspirations must have been orchestrated from the West. As a result, any rumour discrediting the Maidan movement was readily welcomed by segments of the left. This made it easy for narratives portraying the Ukrainian protests as fascist in nature and heavily influenced by the West, to gain traction, especially among a largely disengaged and indifferent public.

On the political right, there was dissatisfaction with the first western sanctions against Russia, which were widely seen as obstacles to profitable business relations. In 2018, Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing Lega Nord and then (and current) deputy prime minister, stated that he considered Russia's annexation of Crimea legitimate, citing the outcome of the farcical referendum in 2014. He also added

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that he was in favour of removing sanctions against Russia as they were harmful to Italy and the European Union. A year earlier, he had famously posed in Moscow's Red Square wearing a t-shirt featuring Vladimir Putin. In 2019 the magazine *L'Espresso* published an exposé alleging financial ties between Russia and Lega Nord, though these connections have never been fully proven. Beyond economic interests, many right wingers held a broader ideological admiration for strongman leadership, and Putin was often seen as embodying that model.

A wave of "pacifist" protests emerged in 2022, bringing Italians together under the slogan "neither Russia nor NATO".

The picture changed dramatically on February 24th 2022. The horror and violence of the war had a profound impact on Italian public opinion. Many finally came to view the Russian regime as solely responsible for the events unfolding in Ukraine. In a very theatrical turn of events, on March 8th that year, the aforementioned Salvini, while visiting a refugee centre, was confronted for his past support of Putin by Wojciech Bakun, the mayor of the Polish town of Przemyśl on the border with Ukraine. In the immediate aftermath of this public humiliation, the Italian politician was forced to publicly condemn Putin for the invasion.

Open support for Russia diminished significantly, remaining mostly confined to the far left and far right of the political spectrum. This was clear regarding a plethora of small political movements, media outlets and cultural organizations broadly labelled as "*rossobruni*" (a portmanteau of red, representing communism, and brown as the Brownshirts, the first Nazi paramilitary group). One of these groups is responsible for hanging hundreds of pro-Russia billboards around Italian towns in 2024.

The "pacifist" approach

At the same time, a wave of "pacifist" protests emerged in the early days of the invasion, bringing people together under the slogan "neither Russia nor NATO". Unlike the 2003 anti-war movement, which unequivocally condemned American imperialism in Iraq, these protests have rarely denounced Russia for its aggression, instead adopting a stance of neutrality. How this general call for peace translates into a just peace for Ukraine remains unclear.

This segment of public opinion, loosely identifiable as left-leaning, is the most receptive to Russian narratives, such as those expressed in Marco Travaglio's speech mentioned at the beginning of the article. Politically, the populist Five-Star Move-

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ment has been most closely aligned with this position. Its leader, former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte (between 2018 and 2022), has harshly opposed the delivery of weapons to Ukraine since 2022 – a position that helped the party secure 17 per cent of the vote in that year's parliamentary elections. Currently, the party is the most vocal opponent of European rearmament.

A number of intellectuals aligned with this "pacifist" front received a lot of media visibility. Alessandro Orsini, for instance, a professor of the sociology of terrorism and political violence at Luiss University in Rome, was once a relatively obscure figure who suddenly gained prominence. On his countless TV appearances, he suggests that Ukraine should surrender "in order to save lives". The famous medievalist historian and TV star Alessandro Barbero also joined the "pacifists", vocally expressing the need to stop European rearmament policies. In his long speeches about the origins of the war in Ukraine, he offers a nuanced view. However, he always underlines that the borders of Ukraine are "artificial" and systematically fails to mention that with the Budapest Memorandum (1994), the Russian Federation recognized the inviolability of those borders. He also constantly compares the current situation to the one that led to the outbreak of the First World War. Rearming Europe, he claims, will inevitably lead to another war.

National TV channels have also hosted a number of Russian government officials, including the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his spokesperson Maria Zakharova. Other figures include the ultranationalist Russian ideologue Aleksandr Dugin; Olga Belova, a journalist at Russia24; and Yulia Vityazeva, a journalist at NewsFront. This second media group is based in Russian-occupied Crimea and is operated by the FSB state security service. It should be noted that Vityazeva wrote in a Telegram post that she wished a bomb would strike the Eurovision Song Contest in Turin in 2022 after Ukraine's victory.

Italian TV channels have hosted a number of Russian government officials, including the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

In July 2025 Russian conductor and Putin ally Valery Gergiev was invited to perform at the *Un'Estate da RE* festival in Italy's southern Campania region. Defending the decision amid controversy, the regional governor, Vincenzo De Luca, stated: "Culture must not be influenced by politics and political logic. We do not ask these men to answer for the choices made by politicians." The concert was cancelled just days before it was set to take place, following public outcry. The move sparked a clash between De Luca and the culture minister, Alessandro Giuli, who responded: "Art is free and cannot be censored. Propaganda, however, even if done with talent, is something else." Gergiev had previously performed at Milan's La Scala opera house on February 23rd 2022. Days later, as

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Russia invaded Ukraine, Milan's mayor, Giuseppe Sala, urged him to condemn the war. Gergiev's silence led to his swift removal from the programme.

Glimmers of hope?

Over the past three years, tragic global events have divided Italian public opinion mostly into two ideological blocs. On the one hand, those who rightly condemn the West for its silence on the ongoing genocide in Gaza often fail to apply the same moral standards to Russia's war crimes in Ukraine. On the other hand, many who, equally rightly, are supporting Ukraine, tend to be silent about Israel's war crimes. This grotesque ideological polarization – not unique to Italy – has made any proper discussion on international affairs virtually impossible.

Not everything is bleak. The beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did at least change perspectives on Eastern Europe in Italy. Events, such as the ongoing wave of protests in Georgia and the elections in Romania and Moldova in 2024, received unprecedented coverage from the Italian media. While this attention was also influenced by Russian propaganda narratives, many now see the region as something different from a sort of "Big Russia". However, the broadly defined "pacifist" front is gaining numbers and traction. For the time being, this has not been enough to make the government alter its pro-Ukraine stance, but war weariness and other developments might change this picture. RE

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GDAŃSK

GDAŃSK HOSTS NINTH EDITION OF DEMOCRACY WEEK

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

From 12–17 September 2025, the city of Gdańsk hosts the ninth edition of **Gdańsk Democracy Week (GTD)**. Held annually around International Democracy Day (15 September), the event is designed to promote democratic values, freedom of speech and human rights at a time when these principles are increasingly under pressure across the world.

The initiative was launched by the late Mayor Paweł Adamowicz, who saw democracy not as a given but as a constant project requiring civic engagement. Staying true to this legacy, the week encourages citizens to take part in public life and search for solutions to the ongoing crisis of democracy.

The European Solidarity Centre (ECS) serves as the hub of the event, hosting debates, lectures, workshops and panel discussions with experts, politicians and activists from Poland and abroad. While open to a broad audience, Gdańsk Democracy Week places particular emphasis on civic education for young people. Each year, the event inaugurates a new season of **Gdańsk Civic Lessons**, designed to promote democratic values among the city's younger residents.

An integral feature of the programme is the **Gdańsk Book Fair**, which highlights the role of reading and critical thinking in safeguarding democracy. As the organizers emphasize, an informed citizen – able to distinguish between reliable information and manipulation – is the best defence against democratic backsliding.

This year's edition, organized in cooperation with Press Club Polska, for the first time includes a partnership with the

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Gdańsk Book Fair
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College of Eastern Europe (KEW) – publisher of New Eastern Europe and a leading institution supporting democratic development in the Eastern Partnership countries. Thanks to this cooperation, the programme is enriched with comparative perspectives on governance – from liberal democracy to illiberal systems, authoritarianism and even criminal regimes. This regional outlook is intended to remind Polish audiences that while democracy at home faces challenges, it faces far stronger threats in many of Poland's neighbouring states.

The overarching goal of Democracy Week is to demonstrate, especially to younger generations, the risks involved when societies turn away from democracy in favour of authoritarian "strong-arm" politics. Why such models are gaining ground – and why liberal democracy is struggling to retain its appeal – will be central questions addressed throughout the week.

The programme opens with a discussion featuring **Mark Brzezinski, US Ambassador to Poland**, and **Olga Leonowicz**, on the current state of American democracy and the role of the United States as a global defender of democratic values. Another highlight includes a special module dedicated to senior citizens, led by disinformation researcher **Michał Fedorowicz**, who explores the impact of online manipulation and algorithms on political life.

From 15 to 17 September, students from Gdańsk schools will have the opportunity to meet with Belarusian activists, including **Ines, Andrzej and Marcin Pisalnik**, to hear first-hand accounts of life under authoritarian rule. An important feature of the programme is the **Living Library**,

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Magdalena Rigamonti, Mark Brzezinski and Olga Leonowicz
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where participants "borrow" people instead of books, listening to their personal experiences and perspectives.

The programme concludes on 17 September 2025 with the recording of a political podcast **„Stan Wyjątkowy"** hosted by **Dominika Długosz** and **Tomasz Sekielski** with discussions moderated by journalists **Jarosław Włodarczyk** and **Magdalena Rigamonti**.

As Gdańsk once again becomes a meeting point for ideas, the city reminds Europe of its historic role in defending freedom and democracy. Today, this legacy is not only commemorated – it is being actively passed on to new generations.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Maciej Buczkowski is the deputy director of the office of the Mayor of Gdańsk, Poland

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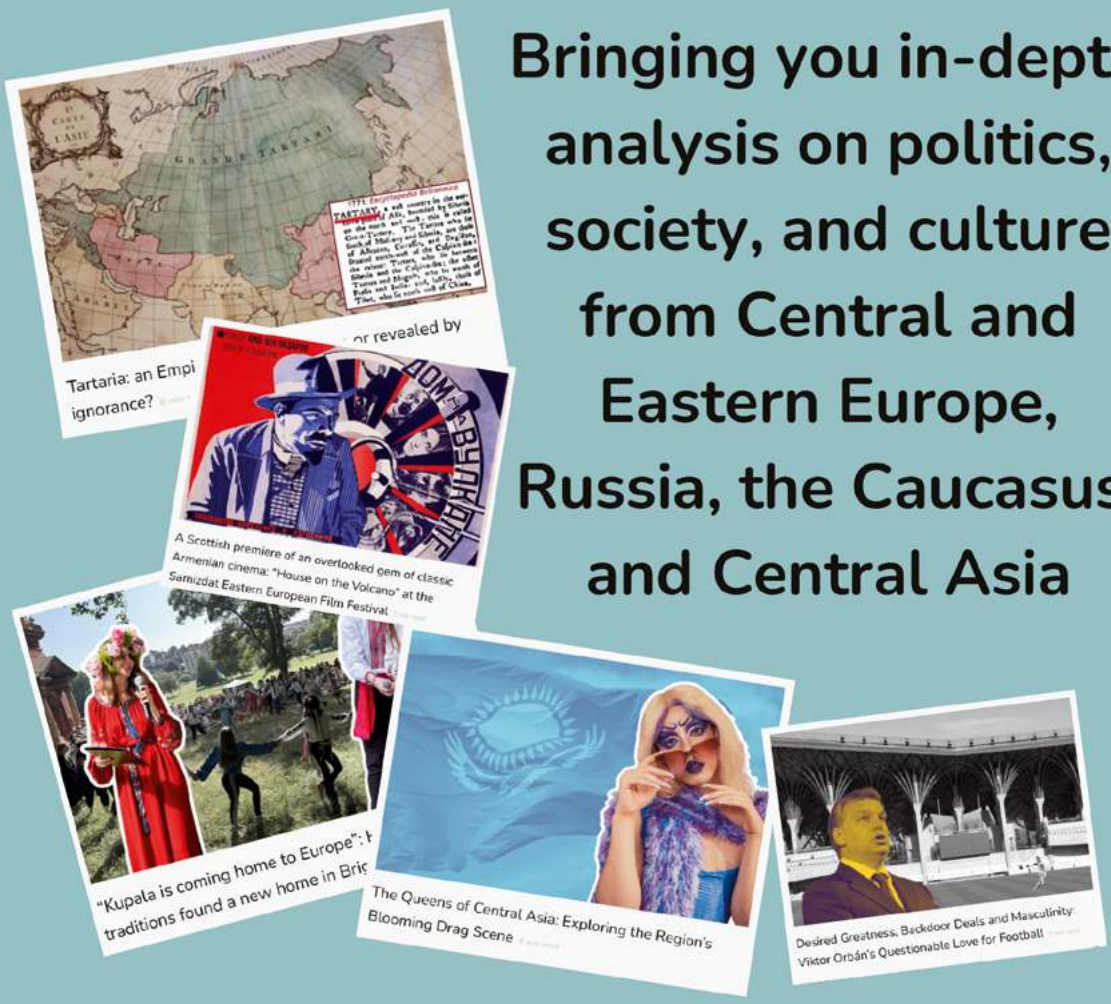

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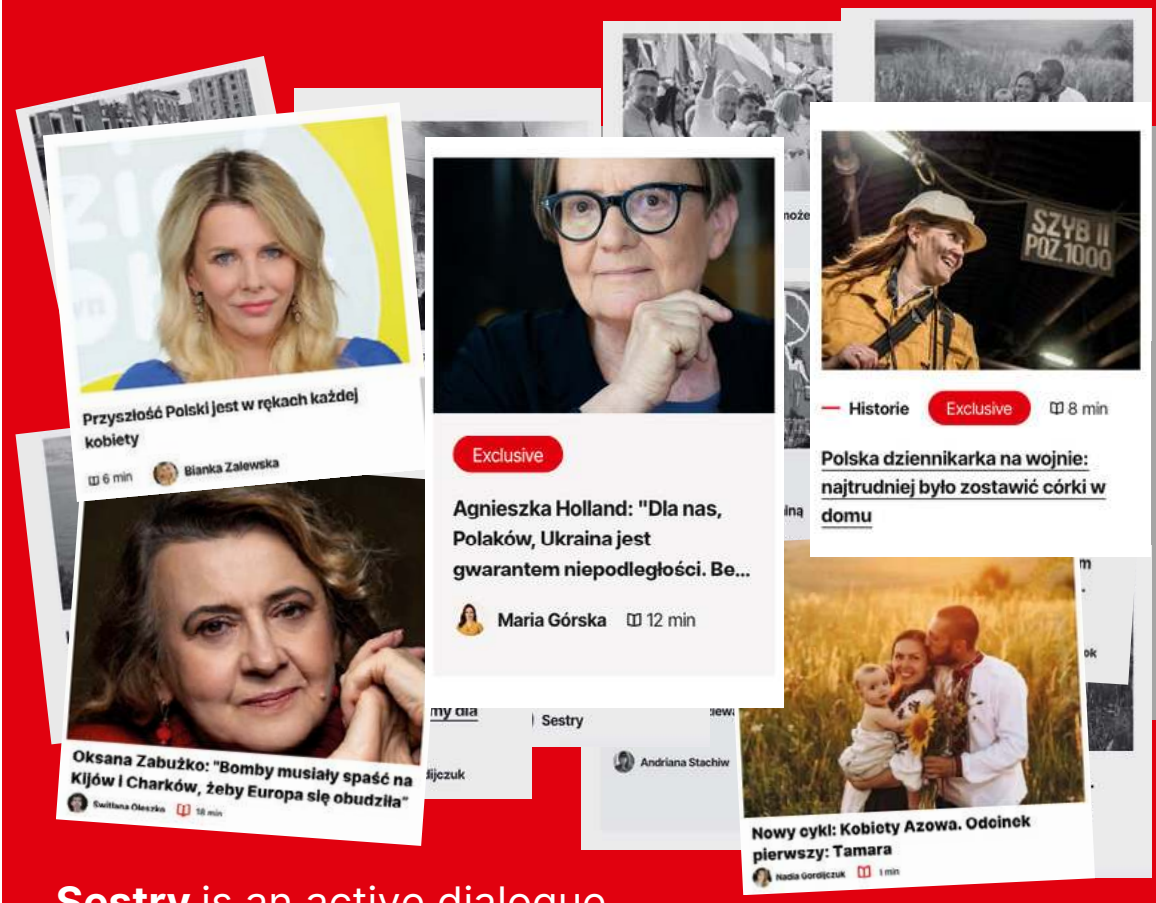

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Europe's heavy cost of dependency

RAZE BAZIANI AND MATTIS KÖRBER

While the European Union is developing plans to finally and completely cut itself off from Russian oil and gas supplies, the solutions it has found are less than ideal. This illustrates the challenge that Europe faces in overcoming its dependency on Russia, while at the same time not giving in to massive fossil fuel development. To make matters worse, Europe cannot escape the geopolitical dimension of fossil fuels.

Much has been said in recent years about European solidarity, about unity and unwavering support for Ukraine in the face of the brutal, illegal and inhumane Russian war of aggression. And much of that is true. The European Union imposed sanctions against Russia, delivered weapons to Ukraine, and welcomed refugees. It created new funds, reallocated old budget lines, and began to see itself anew, as a geopolitical actor with security responsibilities. In the spring of 2025, the EU's military aid to Ukraine surpassed that of the United States for the first time, a geopolitical turning point.

Yet while the EU did take a stand in this way, it left the back door wide open when it came to energy. Even in 2024, billions continued to flow into Russian fossil fuel imports, via Belgium, France or Spain, often in the form of LNG and sometimes obscured by legacy contracts. In total, the EU paid more for Russian gas, oil and coal than it gave Ukraine in direct financial assistance that same year. It is a troubling imbalance, not just morally, but strategically. Instead of supporting Kyiv

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with every available resource, more money, albeit indirectly, ended up bolstering Vladimir Putin's war machine. That, at least according to the European Commission, is now meant to come to an end.

The EU's architecture of energy dependency

Until early 2022, the EU's energy ties to Russia were a quiet arrangement. So embedded that they went unquestioned. They were seemingly efficient, apparently irreplaceable, and always, in multiple ways, tainted. In 2022, about 40 per cent of the EU's gas came from Russia, along with nearly a third of its oil, and almost half of its coal imports. Energy accounted for 62 per cent of all EU imports from Russia. It was never about political affinity, but about economic utility. It was a relationship that functioned because it worked, not because it was wise.

The imbalance, however, had long been apparent. Russia had weaponized the idea of "energy partnership" well before the war, turning interdependence into a one-sided tool of pressure. Central and Eastern European countries, in particular, became proving grounds for this strategy: abrupt supply cuts, restrictive bilateral contracts, and sudden price hikes. Dependency was not a flaw in the system – it was Russia's goal.

> When Russian tanks crossed into Ukraine in February 2022, Europe's gas dependency on Russia became a geopolitical liability.

The decision to increase Europe's energy dependency on Russia by inking the agreement for Nord Stream 2 between Gazprom and five European companies in September 2015, just one and a half years after Russia illegally annexed Crimea, was a strategic mistake that should have been foreseen. In fact, it was foreseen; just not by Germany. Clear warnings from the Baltic states, Ukraine and Poland were ignored. Although a private-sector project that received no government funding or guarantees, Nord Stream 2 enjoyed considerable political support from Germany. This became apparent in July 2021, just seven months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when Germany reached a compromise with the US, which had opposed the project up to that point. This led to the US lifting its threat to impose sanctions on the project's operators.

Against the backdrop of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, any discussion about the Nord Stream pipelines potential recommissioning is absurd. What was a grave mistake in 2015, and will go down in history as such, would be inexcusable if repeated today. When Russian tanks crossed into Ukraine in February 2022, the gas dependency on Russia became a geopolitical liability overnight. The question of when and how the EU would untangle itself from Moscow's fossil

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fuel grip became a litmus test for its oft-invoked *Zeitenwende*, its much-heralded foreign policy turning point. Well, that test has been anything but straightforward. Europe's attempt to wean itself off Russian energy reads less like a clean break. It is rather full of legal acrobatics and political obstruction.

The EU responded with a mix of sanctions and symbolism: coal and oil imports were banned. But gas? That was off limits. The reason is as banal as it is intractable: the necessary unanimity of the EU member states. To pass a sanctions package, all member states must agree and some just do not wish to cooperate. Hungary and Slovakia, in particular, have resisted for a blend of political, economic and, at times, ideological reasons. In Budapest, Russian gas is framed as a symbol of sovereignty; in Bratislava, it is seen as an industrial lifeline. The result? The EU's new Danish energy commissioner, Dan Jørgensen, had to get creative.

But while the diplomatic rhetoric speaks of bold strategic pivots, the energy ledgers tell another story. According to a report by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, published in February 2025, the EU imported about 22 billion euros worth of Russian oil and gas in 2024. In that same year, financial aid to Ukraine amounted to just under 19 billion euros, a gap of more than 15 per cent. By any reasonable logic of war and deterrence, the continued purchase of Russian fossil fuels amounts to indirect co-financing of the invasion. It is difficult to dress it up as anything else. A strategic rupture this is not.

Europe turns off the tap

Rather than opting for the blunt instrument of sanctions law, the European Commission has chosen a more circuitous route. The phase-out of Russian gas will not be framed as a sanction, but as part of a broader legislative package anchored in multiple provisions of EU treaties. The idea is to engineer a gradual, legally binding withdrawal from Russian gas. Unlike a sanctions decision, which would require unanimity among all 27 member states, legislation can often pass with a qualified majority in the Council and the backing of the European Parliament.

To give this legal path some teeth, the Commission draws on two key provisions: Article 192 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which allows for measures in the fields of environment and energy, such as ensuring supply security or advancing climate goals; and Article 122, which provides a legal basis for emergency measures in times of serious economic or energy-related disruption. Together, they form the legal scaffolding for a political project with real explosive potential. Because unlike a formal sanction, this route can be enforced even against the will of individual member states.

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The plan unveiled in June 2025 outlines two key phases. Starting at the end of 2025, no new contracts may be signed with Russian gas suppliers, neither long-term agreements nor short-term spot deals. By the end of 2027, existing contracts are also meant to expire, even those that legally run longer. In Germany this would finally effectively shut the door on any future revival of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline beneath the Baltic Sea.

With the announcement, the second and more decisive stage has now begun: the EU's legislative process. The Commission's proposal is currently being examined by the European Parliament, with the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy taking the lead. At the same time, member states are holding parallel negotiations in the Council. Both institutions must agree on a final text, if necessary, through the so-called "trilogue" talks with the Commission. It is a complex legislative effort that could take months. If all goes smoothly, the law might be adopted by early 2026, setting the first binding legal requirements into motion.

Europe is preparing to turn off the tap. It is long overdue, but finally happening.

But even this detour is lined with complications. Many European utilities, among them SEFE, the German provisionally state-owned successor to Gazprom Germania, are locked into long-term contracts with Russian gas suppliers. These often include "take-or-pay" clauses: you pay whether you take delivery or not. A forced exit, imposed by law, could trigger compensation claims worth billions, possibly in international arbitration courts. Brussels is now exploring whether the principle of *force majeure* might apply, meaning extraordinary events that render the fulfilment of a contract unreasonable. But can a war that has dragged on for years now qualify, in legal terms, as "unforeseeable"? Whether a Commission regulation is powerful enough to override existing contractual obligations remains a matter of legal dispute and likely will not be settled until the first rulings.

For now, it is a delicate balancing act. The Commission appears to be betting that political pressure alone might persuade companies to withdraw voluntarily, avoiding high-profile courtroom battles. In this sense, the phase-out is also a form of threat – a signal of intent. Europe is preparing to turn off the tap. It is long overdue, but finally happening.

What the numbers do not show

Russian gas does not always arrive in Europe showing its passport. Increasingly, there are indications that part of it is reaching the continent through third

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countries – Azerbaijan, India or China – repackaged, rerouted, and sometimes barely altered. In some cases, the gas remains physically identical; in others, it is re-gasified, blended with non-Russian sources, or re-liquefied altogether. Either way, it sheds the one thing that gives it political weight: its identifiable Russian origin.

Unlike agricultural goods, liquefied natural gas comes with no standardized certificate of origin. There is no reliable, industry-wide traceability. LNG is traded on spot markets, passed between intermediaries, and can change ownership multiple times along the way. Each transfer blurs the trail further, a logistical fog in which provenance becomes guesswork. The EU plans to introduce stricter reporting requirements starting in 2026. But so far, how these rules will work – or whether they will work at all – remains vague. Even under the proposed regime, it is unlikely that the circuitous rebranding of Russian gas would fully disappear from European import flows.

And yet, technical solutions do exist, such as digital freight certificates, satellite-based vessel tracking, or blockchain-authenticated supply chains. The tools are there; what is missing is the regulatory architecture to enforce them. This is not a technological failure – it is a political and institutional one. Before Europe can credibly claim to have ended its dependence on Russian gas, it must first learn how to recognize it. Only then can it account for this issue in full.

On paper, Brussels has started to move on, diversifying suppliers and redrawing maps. In the first quarter of 2025 Norway covered more than 30 per cent of the EU's gas demand, with the US close behind at 24 per cent, followed by Russia with 14 per cent. North Africa, Qatar and Azerbaijan were also among the larger suppliers. These numbers suggest a broader portfolio. In practice, old dependencies are gradually replaced by new ones, only the coordinates change.

In July, Qatar openly threatened to halt gas deliveries if the EU's new supply chain law was not softened.

Take Qatar, for example. The European Commission has named the Gulf state as a key future gas supplier. But trustworthy is not the word that comes to mind. The regime in Doha is authoritarian, its foreign policy assertive, and its domestic policies repressive. In July, Qatar openly threatened to halt gas deliveries if the EU's new supply chain law was not softened. Internal documents accused Brussels of "excessive" and "business-hostile" standards. The message was clear: energy comes with strings.

A similar story has unfolded with Azerbaijan. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Baku has been cast as a strategic stand-in, both for the EU and for Ukraine itself. But the politics behind this pivot are deeply uncomfortable. The regime in Baku is marked by systemic human rights abuses, violent suppression of dissent,

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a festering territorial conflict in the South Caucasus, and bribery schemes aimed at EU lawmakers – known under the euphemism "caviar diplomacy". That such a state is being positioned as a cornerstone of Europe's energy future and security is not just geopolitically short-sighted – it also shows a collapse in EU values.

New geopolitics of the climate crisis

In July the European Commission struck a deal with US President Donald Trump as part of ongoing tariff negotiations: over the next three years, the EU will purchase an additional 750 billion US dollars worth of fossil fuels from the US, on top of existing agreements. The figure is staggering, not just in its scale but in symbolism. At a time of record-breaking heat across Europe, the EU is doubling down on fossil supply chains that run counter to its own climate commitments – the EU's credibility in climate diplomacy will definitely take a hit. Officially, the deal covers only the remainder of Trump's term. But if the promised volumes materialize, the necessary infrastructure investments would amount to a financial lock-in, anchoring the EU to carbon-heavy imports just as the effects of climate breakdown accelerate.

The global economy is already undergoing a structural transformation. Globally, money is no longer flowing primarily into oil and gas. In 2024 global investments in renewables and related technologies and infrastructures reached two trillion dollars. That is nearly twice the amount invested in fossil fuels. Over just five years, funding for renewable energy has surged by more than 60 per cent, driven above all by spending on grid infrastructure, storage, efficiency, and the expansion of wind and solar. It is a momentum that could, in theory, work in the EU's favour. But in practice, it seems to falter under the weight of old dependencies and the inertia of an industrial policy shaped by past vulnerabilities. Thus, while Brussels continues to reaffirm its official targets – a 55 per cent emissions cut by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2050 – it simultaneously locks itself into continued fossil reliance for years to come. The EU's climate ambitions are beginning to feel less like a driving force and more like background noise, a set of aspirations that sound good on paper but struggle to shape clear policy when it counts.

The expansion of LNG terminals, the financing of new fossil infrastructure, gas power plants, and long-term purchase commitments – none of this builds a path to a truly resilient energy system. It cements a carbon lock-in, a kind of engineered inertia that sidelines the only real way forward: renewable energy.

Above all, LNG is an ecological dead end. The process of liquefying natural gas consumes enormous amounts of energy. Transporting it across oceans, often on

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tankers powered by heavy fuel oil, adds a further layer of emissions. Once it reaches its destination, regasification places additional strain on the climate. Throughout the entire supply chain, methane escapes into the atmosphere, a greenhouse gas that, over a 20-year period, is approximately 80 times more harmful than carbon dioxide. Even minor leaks can result in major environmental damage. The harm is silent, cumulative and increasingly irreversible.

What strategic energy resilience would look like

If the EU were to fully acknowledge the new geopolitical realities, it would be driven to the same conclusion as it would by a clear-eyed reckoning with the climate crisis. The energy transition must finally be pursued with full speed. For an economy so dependent on fossil fuel imports, the EU's energy transition and its security are inseparable. Expanding renewable energy capacity is not only a climate and security imperative. It is also economically sound. According to the latest data from the International Renewable Energy Agency, in 2024 as many as 91 per cent of all new utility-scale renewable energy projects delivered lower cost electricity than the cheapest newly built fossil fuel project.

Rather than signing new gas deals and deepening import dependencies, the EU should focus on scaling up domestic renewable production and accelerating its integration into the system. This could be done through the development of storage capacity, the expansion and digitization of electricity grids, and the full interconnection of Europe's periphery.

This effort must go hand in hand with the large-scale electrification of heating, mobility and industry wherever technically and economically feasible. In areas where direct electrification is not possible (such as aviation, heavy shipping, chemical and metals industries, and seasonal energy storage) green hydrogen and its derivatives like ammonia, methanol or biomethane can serve as viable substitutes. The principle is clear: first, maximize domestic and EU-wide potential; and second, where imports are necessary to stabilize prices, diversify as broadly as possible.

Today, the EU remains deeply reliant on fossil fuels as its infrastructure and everyday economy were built on them. Yet the good news is that the EU is already moving. In 2024 the fossil fuel share of the EU energy mix fell to a historic low. Nearly half of the EU's electricity came from renewables. This puts the EU in step with a global trend. In the same year, solar power met more than ten per cent of global electricity demand for the first time. The direction is clear: those still investing in fossil gas are swimming against the current of global markets and Europe risks building overcapacity in a shrinking sector. The consequences are long-

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term vulnerabilities. Once fossil infrastructure is built, it creates pressure to keep it running for decades, long after its climate legitimacy has expired. It risks locking the continent into a structure that slows down the very transition it needs to speed up. If the EU were to invest 750 billion US dollars in solar power at home, it could add nearly 1,000 gigawatts of new capacity – thus nearly quadrupling it's currently installed capacity.

Another winding path

Nevertheless, the EU aims to fully phase out Russian gas by 2027. That indeed is a historic break with decades of energy policy shaped by dependency on Russia. The goal is right. But the current plan leaves loopholes that must be closed. What at first glance appears to be a clean break reveals itself, on closer inspection, to be a winding path. More than anything, though, the exit plan comes too late. The priority now must be to end deliveries from Russia as quickly as possible and with them, the European cash flow into the Kremlin's war chest. That urgency cannot wait.

Still, for a solution to arrive more than three years into a war, one would expect more strategic foresight. Yes, the rhetoric has shifted. Yes, there has been progress on renewables. But the EU remains deeply entangled in fossil dependencies. Rather than dramatically reducing its demand for carbon-intensive fuels, Brussels is merely shifting suppliers. This time it is happening with different names, but yet with the same logic, as well as the same exposure to geopolitical blackmail.

The core lesson regarding Europe's dependence on Russian gas points in another direction: fossil energy will always be geopolitically exposed. A real shift in course would mean not just changing whom we buy from, but rethinking the structure of the system itself. There is still time to do so. But not much. EE

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The disfigured spectrum

How post-communist legacies distort conservatism and democracy

TAMAR GAMKRELIDZE

Under one-party rule, political legitimacy does not come from adhering to constitutional limits but from exercising unchallenged authority in the name of the "correct" cause – once framed as ideological duty, now justified as cultural defence or popular sovereignty. The ingrained habit of bending institutions to political will, rather than letting them operate autonomously, was embedded in political culture over decades and passed on to the post-1989 elite, many of whom now lead ostensibly democratic states.

Across Europe – and particularly in Central and Eastern Europe – societies are searching for political clarity. Yet instead of clear choices, contradictions keep surfacing. More than 30 years since the fall of communism, the habits, networks and political instincts formed under one-party rule have not disappeared. Instead, they have adapted to new conditions. After 1989, few political elites were fully replaced. Many adopted the language of democracy while retaining communist-era reflexes:

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distrust of independent institutions, concentration of power, media control, and patronage to secure loyalty. Today's Russia, as the inheritor of the Soviet Union, continues to promote this political culture, and in many parts of the region, it still finds a receptive environment.

What was once justified in the name of socialism is now defended through nationalism and "traditional values". The result is a political spectrum where old left–right divisions are less relevant than a leader's relationship to democratic norms. The blurring is especially visible on the right, where parties calling themselves "conservative" often reject the constitutional restraint that defines democratic conservatism in the West. Instead, they govern in ways that echo the authoritarianism of their communist past – an approach that aligns neatly with the governance model of Moscow today.

Blurring the spectrum

Examples make the above continuity clear. Hungary's Viktor Orbán once boasted "I was a very active member of the Communist Youth League (KISZ)" – he even served as a KISZ secretary in secondary school. Slovakia's populist leader Robert Fico joined the Czechoslovak communist party in the mid-1980s while studying law. Across the border, Angela Merkel (by no means a radical) had joined East Germany's state youth movement (FDJ) as a student in 1968. In Germany's new far-right AfD, co-leader Alice Weidel spent six years (2006–2012) working for China's state-owned Bank of China and lived in the country – a detail she herself has acknowledged. And in Romania, the ultra-nationalist candidate Călin Georgescu denounces communism yet publicly hails the Second World War era dictator Ion Antonescu as a "national hero". Such patterns show how post-communist legacies blur the ideological spectrum and bring nationalist-populist and ex-communist traditions into alignment, producing a hybrid authoritarianism that corrodes pluralist democracy and sustains the political culture of the Soviet past.

> Post-communist legacies blur the ideological spectrum and bring nationalist-populist and ex-communist traditions into alignment.

Given these continuities, and the ease with which old habits adapt to new rhetoric, how can we be surprised when the shadow of that past continues to shape the politics of the present? The question, then, is not only how these habits endure, but how they have come to be dressed in the language of conservatism, a tradition that, in its democratic form, once stood as a bulwark against the very authoritarianism now reappearing in altered appearance.

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In addition, to understand this endurance, we must look beyond political reflexes and examine the architecture of post-1989 governance itself. If the communist legacy supplied the instincts – a distrust of independent checks and readiness to centralize authority – the new institutional frameworks often provided the means. In a rush to stabilize fragile states emerging from one-party rule, constitutional and electoral designs tended to prioritize order over pluralism. Strong executive powers, high electoral thresholds, and the capacity of dominant parties to reshape key institutions were justified as safeguards against instability. Yet these same features made the concentration of power far easier than its dispersal, ensuring that when leaders with authoritarian instincts took office, the system itself smoothed their path to control. What was intended as a framework for stability became the scaffolding for entrenched illiberalism, now repackaged in democratic and, in some cases, conservative language.

> The populist narrative reframed institutional capture as democratic empowerment, under the guise of sovereignty.

Levers of entrenchment

Hungary offers perhaps the clearest example of how post-1989 institutional design, meant to stabilize democracy, could be repurposed to consolidate power. When Orbán's Fidesz party won a landslide in 2010, just over half the popular vote translated under the country's majoritarian electoral system into a two-thirds parliamentary majority. This "constitutional majority" enabled the rapid adoption of a new Fundamental Law in 2011, replacing the amended 1949 constitution but carrying over many features that allowed sweeping institutional changes without broad political consensus. Within two years, Orbán's government had rewritten the constitutional framework, packed oversight bodies from the constitutional court to the central bank with loyalists, and entrenched electoral rules that favoured the ruling party's continued dominance. What was presented as a project of national renewal was in fact a textbook case of turning stability-oriented mechanisms into levers of entrenchment.

Poland after 2015 shows similar dynamics without the benefit of a constitutional supermajority. The Law and Justice (PiS) party lacked the numbers to change the constitution outright, yet it systematically exploited vulnerabilities in institutional design. It refused to seat lawfully appointed judges on the constitutional tribunal, altered court governance laws to bring the judiciary under political control, and justified these moves as the "will of the people". This all overrode what party leader

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Jarosław Kaczyński dismissed as legalistic "impossibilism". In both countries, the populist narrative reframed institutional capture as democratic empowerment, masking the erosion of checks and balances behind the rhetoric of sovereignty and cultural defence.

These patterns show that illiberal consolidation is not just the return of old communist habits, but a result of how post-communist democracies were set up. The systems built in the 1990s to keep these new states stable also made it easier for leaders to gather power and harder to share it. Once in the hands of leaders steeped in authoritarian reflexes, these systems enabled illiberal governance to emerge through formally democratic means, allowing it to be normalized and even rebranded as a conservative defence of the nation, blurring the line between genuine democratic conservatism and its illiberal imitation.

This blurring of boundaries invites comparison with an earlier, very different model of conservatism, one that emerged in post-war Western Europe. There, centre-right movements proved that stability and tradition could be safeguarded without sacrificing constitutional limits or pluralism. Understanding that contrast is key to seeing how far parts of Europe's "conservative" politics have drifted from their democratic roots.

A counterpoint to communist legacies

After 1945, centre-right parties in Western Europe were central to rebuilding democratic governance. Leaders such as West Germany's Konrad Adenauer and Italy's Alcide De Gasperi built their politics on constitutionalism, individual liberty and gradual reform. Christian-democratic movements like the CDU in Germany and *Democrazia Cristiana* in Italy drafted constitutions that made a return to one-party rule structurally impossible. West Germany's 1949 *Grundgesetz*, pushed through by Adenauer, entrenched a federal system, a strong constitutional court, and a binding catalogue of rights. Italy's 1948 constitution, shaped under De Gasperi, placed clear limits on executive power and grounded the republic in popular sovereignty and the rule of law.

This version of conservatism combined political restraint with the "social market economy" – free enterprise tempered by anti-monopoly safeguards and strong social protections. It helped deliver Western Europe's post-war recovery and provided a stable platform for European integration, from the Marshall Plan to the European Coal and Steel Community.

What gave it credibility was consistency. Adenauer "abhorred communism as he had detested Nazism", seeing both as totalitarian systems that destroyed free-

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Viktor Orbán, who has been prime minister of Hungary since 2010, once boasted he was a very active member of the Communist Youth League. Given the ease with which old habits adapt to new rhetoric, how can we be surprised when the shadow of that past continues to shape the politics of the present?

doms, dismantled independent institutions, and put the state above law and conscience. Rejecting one form of dictatorship while tolerating another was not an option. The defence of tradition was inseparable from the defence of pluralism and constitutional limits on power.

Much of this clarity has gone. In parts of Europe, especially in the post-communist space, political actors who call themselves conservative adopt centralized, top-down methods reminiscent of the regimes they claim to reject. The same is visible on parts of the left, where populist strategies treat political opponents as illegitimate and see independent institutions as obstacles to be bypassed.

The new divide

The defining political question is no longer left or right, but whether leaders accept limits on their power. A 2016 Atlantic Council report noted that the communist legacy "muddied the traditional left-right political spectrum" in Central and Eastern Europe. In practice, far-right nationalists and rebranded ex-communists often compete for the same voters on similar nationalist, law-and-order, and stat-

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ist platforms. Research from the study "Strange Bedfellows: Explaining Political Cooperation between Communist Successor Parties and Nationalists in Eastern Europe" shows that in 15 post-communist parliaments, communist successor parties gave almost the same share of their programmes – around 12 per cent – to law-and-order and national security issues as radical-right parties. This overlap has allowed coalitions between the two on a shared authoritarian agenda.

Europe likes to believe that this style of rule belongs elsewhere, to Russia and its post-Soviet allies, yet it is not free of it. Across the continent, elements of the same political reflexes have been quietly absorbed into the mainstream: the impulse to concentrate power, sideline inconvenient institutions, and treat politics as a contest for total control rather than negotiation. This may help explain why it took so long to identify Russia as the threat it truly is, and why even now Europe underestimates the depth of its infiltration. When parts of Europe's own political life operate by similar instincts, the danger does not always appear foreign. Instead, it feels uncomfortably familiar, making it easier to tolerate and harder to confront. When domestic political actors use a similar playbook, such tactics blur into the ordinary conflicts of domestic politics, making them harder to recognize as systemic threats. In this sense, Europe's own political landscape has been partially conditioned to tolerate, or at least to underestimate, the authoritarian methods it claims to resist.

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And here lies the deeper issue: viewing the problem as a matter of "right-wing" or "conservative" politics is not only misleading – it obscures the core dynamic at work. The real divide is not over left versus right economics or even the culture wars, but over whether political actors respect institutional limits or treat them as obstacles to be bypassed.

As Freedom House has observed, "Illiberalism is not a code word for policies we disagree with. It is an ideological stance that rejects independent institutions as checks on government." In other words, one can be firmly conservative, proudly socialist, or anywhere in between, and still operate within democratic constraints – or one can adopt any ideology as a convenient façade for dismantling them.

The cross-ideological adaptation of authoritarian methods

This is where the communist inheritance becomes central. Under one-party rule, political legitimacy did not come from adhering to constitutional limits but

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from exercising unchallenged authority in the name of the "correct" cause – once framed as ideological duty, now justified as cultural defence or popular sovereignty. The ingrained habit of bending institutions to political will, rather than letting them operate autonomously, was embedded in political culture over decades and passed on to the post-1989 elite, many of whom now lead ostensibly democratic states. Today's authoritarians are opportunistic heirs to that tradition: some wrap themselves in the flag and faith, while others revive socialist nostalgia. In the end, all of them share the aim of concentrating authority and delegitimizing the opposition.

The durability of this legacy lies in its transformation from a political memory into a political method. What began as the survival of ex-communist elites has evolved into a cross-ideological operating style that rewards loyalty over competence, centralization over negotiation, and political dominance over institutional autonomy. Once stripped of explicit Marxist ideology, these habits became portable: they could serve nationalist, socialist, or even nominally liberal agendas with equal ease. This portability explains why former communist cadres and their political heirs can collaborate seamlessly with far-right nationalists – both recognize the same rules of the game, even if they speak in different rhetorical registers.

The Soviet past is therefore not just a historical inheritance; it is a flexible toolkit of governance that remains embedded in the region's political mainstream. In this sense, the authoritarian instincts of today's Moscow find not only nostalgia to exploit, but a ready-made template already familiar to much of the political class. This is why framing the challenge as a partisan struggle misses the mark. What we are witnessing is not simply a "populist moment" or a right-wing surge, but the persistence of a political reflex shaped in the communist era and adapted to the post-Cold War order. Defenders of democracy across the spectrum – liberal, conservative, or otherwise – must recognize a shared threat in the erosion of checks and balances.

Defenders of democracy across the spectrum must recognize a shared threat in the erosion of checks and balances.

After years of hesitation, there are now tangible signs that this recognition is beginning to translate into action. In Hungary, the European Union continues to withhold 18 billion euros in cohesion funding, while an EU commissioner has explicitly warned that proposed restrictive laws concerning the media and NGOs could further trigger legal and financial consequences. Meanwhile, the Commission is advancing "smart conditionality" in the upcoming seven-year budget, proposing that rule-of-law benchmarks become mandatory for disbursing regional and agricultural funds, a move that would embed institutional integrity directly into EU investment policy.

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Yet reversing these trends will be a long battle. Leading democracy monitors note that the region's democratic backsliding has accelerated: according to Freedom House, there are now fewer full democracies in Central and Eastern Europe than at any time since the 1990s, as illiberal rulers chip away at independent institutions and the rule of law. If Europe fails to address these habits at their roots, the political spectrum will remain disfigured: conservative rhetoric will be used to justify illiberalism, socialist traditions will be invoked to excuse centralization, and the line between genuine democratic politics and its authoritarian imitation will stay dangerously blurred. The real divide is not between left and right, but between those willing to govern within the limits of the rule of law and those determined to rule without them. Until this is recognized and acted upon, Europe's democracies will remain vulnerable to the very governing style they believe they left behind in 1989. EE

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Trump's "Reverse Kissinger" is wishful thinking

LUCINDA RITCHIE

More than nine months into his second term, US President Donald Trump has shown a willingness to revive an old geopolitical fantasy: that the United States can pry Russia away from China in a modern-day reprise of Kissinger's Cold War diplomacy. Yet unlike in the 1970s, today's Moscow and Beijing are bound by converging strategic interests, mutual dependence, and a shared hostility toward western dominance.

Rumour has it that US President Donald Trump went to visit former secretary of state and political theorist Henry Kissinger on his deathbed in 2023. During that visit, Kissinger is supposed to have given the president a piece of advice: do not let Russia and China get too close. Kissinger should know. He famously orchestrated a thaw in Sino-American relations in the 1970s on behalf of President Richard Nixon, isolating the Soviet Union on the international stage. Whether this meeting actually took place is debatable, but it is clear that the idea has captured Trump's imagination. Today, commentators have speculated that Trump's readiness to offer the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, concessions in peace negotiations earlier this year were inspired by this strategic vision. However, the horse has already bolted and Trump now appears to be losing patience with Putin's intransigence – and bombing of nursing homes in Ukraine.

The Russia-China partnership is now too deeply entrenched and mutually beneficial for either party to quit and the US has little to offer without weakening its

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own hand. For Kissinger in the 1970s, his masterstroke move was predicated on exploiting existing fractures between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union, rather than creating them. Ideological differences between Nikita Khruschev and Mao Zedong escalated in 1961 with Mao's formal denunciation of Soviet communism as "revisionist". Before the end of the decade the two were at war. Although there was never a formal declaration of war between the USSR and the PRC, the bloody conflict over Zhenbao (or Damanksy) Island dragged on for seven months. Against this backdrop, American diplomatic overtures to China fell on ready ears.

The ties that bind

Today's geopolitical landscape is very different. The past 20 years have been marked by a steady deepening of Russia-China ties and the increasing alignment of their core interests. And according to Xi Jinping, the "no limits" partners must fight "back-to-back" to defend them. These core interests can be whittled down to three objectives all rooted in maintaining regime security.

First, Russia and China share an expansive vision of territorial sovereignty that, in their view, can only be secured through regional hegemony in a multipolar world. For Russia, achieving dominance over its self-defined "sphere of influence" is seen as vital for protecting Putin's personal power and realizing Russia's historical mission. In practical terms, this means maintaining influence over Ukraine and Belarus but, given the chance, all the lands of the former tsarist Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Meanwhile, China's leader, Xi Jinping, has made clear that the country's reunification – fully absorbing areas such as Hong Kong and Taiwan – is essential to China's renewal and future security. Like Putin, Xi believes that reunification is destiny, declaring in his 2025 New Year's address that "no one can stop the historical trend of national reunification". He sees Taiwan's independence as an aberration of history and the division of the South China Sea as a relic of China's "Century of Humiliation". For both powers, western opposition to the unprovoked invasion of neighbouring states is an affront to their sense of sovereignty and a desperate effort to deny their great power potential. Their sense of civilizational destinies, of territorial entitlement, is fundamentally incompatible with America's interests. As Trump is starting to realize, no amount of transactional dealmaking can change that.

Second, the Russia-China axis wants to de-dollarize the global economy and reshape global governance architecture to weaken US influence. Russia and China resent the US dollar's role as a global reserve currency and the dependencies it creates. The pre-eminence of the dollar makes Russia and China vulnerable to US

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financial sanctions, curtailing their freedom of action. Although western sanctions post-2014 did little to curb Russian adventurism towards Ukraine, Russia's exclusion from western capital markets is slowly squeezing the economy and Putin knows it.

The two countries hope to achieve their shared objective of reducing the dollar's footprint in global finance by creating an alternative institutional framework for transactions. For example, in 2015 China launched the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), an alternative to the West's SWIFT, to settle international payments in renminbi (Chinese yuan). This mechanism allows transactions to be made outside of US jurisdiction and therefore outside of its sanctions framework. Further, Chinese hydrocarbon payments now take place chiefly in renminbi, challenging the petrodollar system. The BRICS+ formation and its new development bank are crucial institutions in furthering this project. Member states deal bilaterally in local currencies and their central banks hold renminbi in their foreign reserves. This said, China's renminbi remains far behind the dollar, accounting for just four per cent of global payments compared to around 48 per cent for the US dollar.

Third, Russia and China share an ideological goal: to legitimize non-democratic systems of governance. The notion of universal human rights undermines their desire for total control over their populations and – in their eyes – is a western tool for interference in domestic politics. Both Xi and Putin frequently refer to the danger of "colour revolutions", accusing the West of fomenting unrest in sovereign states to destabilize rival regimes and limit their power. Together, Russia and China employ an array of techniques to support hybrid or undemocratic governments across the globe. These range from the mercenary activities of the Wagner Group in Africa to the provision of surveillance technology and educational courses for officials in regulating the internet and "guiding the promotion of positive energy online" (propaganda). Both China and Russia are strong proponents of "internet sovereignty" – the idea that the state should have ultimate control over who sees what online in their countries. Internet sovereignty is a crucial mechanism for quelling dissent, ensuring that government messaging dominates and data can be collected on citizens.

Who is in charge?

China's position as a net hydrocarbon importer is a source of potential vulnerability that necessitates strong relations with petrostates like Russia. Ever tactical, China has a diverse array of oil providers of which Russia is the single largest, accounting for about 20 per cent of Chinese imports. However, it is Russia's increasing dependency on China, as well as its military and nuclear capabilities; permanent

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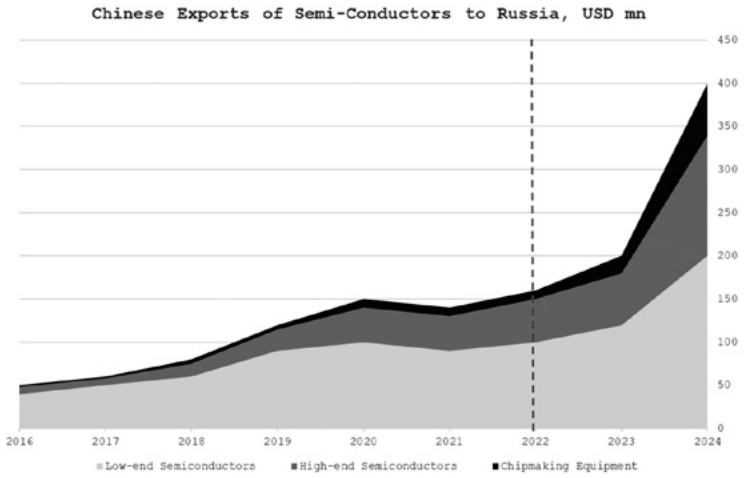

Source: Taiwanese Customs Authority

Chart: semiconductor exports to Russia

seat at the UN Security Council; and Putin's willingness to upset global norms, that elevate the country's usefulness to China over other oil producers.

In 2016, Russia's "Eastern pivot" was enshrined in the Kremlin foreign policy concept, a document recounting the imminent decline of the West and the formidable potential of Russia-China cooperation. Against a backdrop of post-2014 sanctions from the West and economic challenges at home following the 2015–16 oil price slump, an isolated and weak Russia was in need of new partners. As Russo-Chinese cooperation deepened, so too has Russia's dependency on China, a dependency now laid bare by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Although China's support for Russia's war in Ukraine has not been as overt as US, British and EU support for Ukraine, it has nonetheless been crucial for Putin's ability to continue his war of aggression. Chinese imports of Russian oil, coal and raw materials have been a vital source of foreign currency for the Kremlin amid western sanctions. China's exports of dual-use technologies, such as chips and semiconductors, have played a key role in sustaining the Russian military, with around 80 per cent of the critical components in Russian-made drones originating from China. And in the consumer economy, Chinese exports of consumer goods to Russia have plugged gaps left by departing western companies, maintaining a precious sense of normalcy. Support has been financial too: Chinese banks have set up correspondent relationships with Russian counterparts to give them access to international banking channels and Chinese insurers have risked western sanctions in order to facilitate bilateral trade according to US intelligence.

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Despite all of China's largesse, the Russian economy is struggling. Predictions of an imminent and precipitous crisis are premature, but levels of discomfort are rising. With an introspective financial sector, scarce capital for foreign investment, and its reputation for military technology undermined by battlefield failures, Russia has little material value to offer China beyond hydrocarbons and raw materials. But Russia's very dependency is useful to China. It smooths the way for China to gain the upper hand in Central Asia and it gives Beijing leverage over both the Power of Siberia II negotiations and energy pricing. Xi knows that Putin will vote with him in the UN Security Council and he knows that Russia has not the money or the technology to exploit its Arctic resources without China's help. Xi holds the power.

The wise man learns from the mistakes of others

Potentially most useful of all, Russia and China's strategic partnership has given Xi Jinping the opportunity to study the West's response to an illegal invasion at close range – and plan accordingly. Only months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese government set up an interagency group to study the sanctions placed on Russia and assess how the impact of similar measures could – if placed on China – be mitigated. The agency regularly reports its findings and conclusions back to He Lifeng, China's deputy prime minister. Of chief concern to the Chinese leadership is the country's foreign currency (FX) reserves, which total 3.3 trillion US dollars and contain up to 1.2 trillion in US treasury bonds, alongside euro, British pound and Japanese yen denominated bonds. It would be a severe blow to China if these assets were to suffer the same fate as the 350 billion dollars of frozen Russian assets marooned between Euroclear, the US and other G7 nations.

> The Chinese government has studied sanctions placed on Russia and assessed how the impact of similar measures could be mitigated.

However, studying Russia's experience of sanctions as an informative test case does not necessarily mean that China intends to invade Taiwan imminently or in such a way as to invite the same severity of western sanctions. Instead, the activities of the interagency group demonstrate the degree of long-term calculation given to Chinese geopolitical strategizing. The way in which China will move against Taiwan will be shaped by cost considerations and carefully weighed against the economic risks, with its strategy adjusted accordingly.

Already, US dollar denominated assets have declined from as much as 79 per cent of total reserves in the early 2010s to around 30 per cent currently. Gold

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holdings have increased almost fourfold over the past 20 years to a record high of 2,292 tonnes in March 2025. Even Russia, arguably a rasher and more opportunistic global player, spent several years building up its war chest and diversifying away from the US dollar before tanks rolled into Ukraine in 2022. Admittedly, this economic fortification came at the cost of market dynamism.

Crucial difference

Although Russia and China have much in common, there is a crucial difference that may – in a post-Putin and post-Xi world – facilitate a de-escalation in Sino-American relations. China has something to lose from a confrontation with the West, while Russia does not. The Chinese economy is densely integrated with global supply chains and over-supply in its domestic manufacturing base requires outward expansion. Beijing can wargame all it wants and study sanctions playbooks forever, but the result will still be the same: China's dislocation from American and European markets would set its economy back years. The US is China's single largest trading partner, accounting for 14.7 per cent of total exports. The EU bloc accounts for roughly the same share of exports (15 per cent) and around 12 per cent of total imports. By comparison, just three per cent of Chinese exports go to Russia. Efforts to take Taiwan or further sections of the South China Sea by force could also alienate ASEAN countries – another important trading group.

> While Chinese leaders have good reason to tread carefully around the issue of Taiwan and avoid direct confrontation with the US, Russia would benefit from US-China friction.

Ironically, China also needs Taiwan – or more accurately, Taiwanese chips. China depends on Taiwan for over 90 per cent of high-tech chips and cannot realize its ambition of eclipsing American technological and economic might without an ample, stable supply of high-tech chips. In the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, it is possible that the US would rather bomb the island's chip manufacturing facilities than have them fall into Chinese hands.

By contrast, the Russian economy is surviving (just) in relative isolation, a pariah already. Putin has little to lose from a further souring of ties with the West. Under what Timothy Snyder has termed "strategic relativism", Russia cannot materially increase its strength and so must resort to weakening others to level the playing field. While Chinese policymakers have good reason to tread carefully around the issue of Taiwan and avoid direct confrontation with the US, Russia would benefit

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from US-China friction. A great-power showdown would weaken both the US and China, reducing the asymmetry in the China-Russia axis.

The long game

Trump has under three and a half years left as leader of the free world. He has neither the time nor the opportunity to derail Russia and China's partnership – the interests that unite them are too deeply held and long coveted. Both Putin and Xi are operating in a completely different time frame to Trump, whose foreign policy is rooted in short-term output and rapid dealmaking. One only has to look at China's long-term commitments into the Belt and Road Initiative; the 40-year bet on building a rare earths industry; the readiness of Chinese exporters to operate at huge losses in order to win market share abroad; and the 70 billion US dollars spent on lithium production and processing to see that China is playing the long game.

The whole idea has been to build western dependency on the Chinese economy, and to erode American and European manufacturing capabilities and resilience. Then, the logic goes, the country will be too powerful for containment and its would-be disciplinarians too hooked on its exports to cut ties.

While Russia may have a less refined long-term strategy than China, Putin knows how to hold a grudge. Moreover, Putin's personal legacy is tied up with the question of Ukraine's future and – in his world – Russia's security. The Russia-China partnership is personal too. Xi and Putin like one another, have even referred to each other as their "best friend". They understand one another and can rely on each other to outlast democratically-elected leaders like Trump. In a post-Xi and post-Putin world, the tasks of taking Taiwan and all of Ukraine may feel less urgent to their successors and there could be scope for a Kissinger-style rebalancing of partnerships. Yet for now, those days are far away. EE

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The EU-US policy divide over Belarus

VITALI MATYSHAU

As the Russia-Ukraine war grinds on with little movement towards President Donald Trump's pledged "24-hour resolution", other arenas have gained momentum in his second-term foreign policy. Amid this dynamic context, Minsk has recently surfaced as a new, previously untapped, yet demonstrably successful venue for his deal-making agenda – and a potential strategic lever in Washington's efforts to shake up the war next door.

Since Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 – as during his preceding election campaign – the Russia-Ukraine war has remained the centrepiece of American foreign policy. As NATO's leading force, the United States has played (and continues to play) a central role in sustaining Kyiv's morale and defence capacity, along with that of its European allies, providing a lifeline of both military and financial support for Ukraine's resistance. Meanwhile, Belarus, Russia's only European ally and the EU's eastern neighbour, long regarded as solely Brussels's responsibility, has reappeared on Washington's radar. This has prompted Trump's envoys and state department officials to travel to a country still listed on the department's "do not travel" advisory.

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Competing (or complementing) agendas

The West's stance on Belarus – historically shared by both Washington and Brussels – has undergone two major shifts in the past five years. In early 2020, Minsk enjoyed diplomatic highs in its relations with both the EU and the US: long-anticipated visa facilitation and readmission agreements were signed with Brussels in January, while then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was hosted in the capital in February. Yet the August 2020 presidential election derailed any progress achieved. The West adopted a policy of critical disengagement: sanctions, both diplomatic and economic, were imposed on a scale unseen in previous decades, while Alyaksandr Lukashenka's legitimacy was denied and support for the country's exiled democratic forces intensified.

Then came February 2022 and Belarus's facilitation of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This prompted the EU and the US to recast Belarus from a deviant, quasi-sovereign actor into a co-aggressor and Kremlin puppet – rendering Belarus largely indistinguishable from Russia, with even the sanctions regimes toward both becoming synchronized.

Recently, however, Washington has begun to diverge from Brussels by re-engaging directly with Minsk – not in opposition to the EU's policy of non-recognition, but as part of a complementary strategy unfolding within the broader stalemate of the war next door. This cautious bilateral diplomatic opening emerged just after Trump's January 2025 inauguration, which coincided with Belarus's presidential election, when the regime in Minsk took an initial step by releasing an American citizen from prison.

Attributed to Trump's leadership and welcomed on both sides of the Atlantic, the move marked the beginning of more on this front. In February, Christopher Smith, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, visited Minsk – amid talks of a potential sanctions relief deal – and secured the release of three more political prisoners. Just two months later, on April 30th, John Coale, now Trump's Deputy Special Envoy to Ukraine, visited Lukashenka's palace and brought home another wrongfully detained American. Far from one-off, isolated gestures, these visits and their tangible outcomes laid the foundation for broader diplomatic engagement enabled by the then-thawing US-Russia dynamics.

America first, Europe second

On June 21st, the US Special Envoy Keith Kellogg made another landmark visit to Minsk, breaking the diplomatic freeze once again. Framed from the outset as

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the highest-level US engagement since February 2020, Kellogg's trip – alongside Smith and Coale – made waves far beyond Belarus. This culminated in the release of 14 detainees, 11 of whom were recognized as political prisoners. The released group stood out for its broad international profile: of the 14, nine held foreign residency, including three Polish nationals, two each from Latvia and Japan, and one each from Estonia, Sweden and the US. Moreover, among the five with Belarusian residency, one name dominated the headlines: Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the husband of the exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The politician stepped in to replace her spouse in the 2020 race against Lukashenka and has since become the international face of Belarus's pro-democracy movement.

The June 21st release list was no coincidence – it emerged from behind-the-scenes coordination between Washington and Brussels, which was later relayed to Minsk and ultimately greenlit by Lukashenka himself. The international makeup of the group – half of them EU citizens – points less to Minsk's benevolence or signs of early liberalization, and more to Lukashenka's calculated bid to give a signal to Brussels. Belarus wants the EU to take a page from the White House's diplomacy-first playbook and prioritize progress over principled posture. Essentially, with nearly all politically imprisoned US nationals now released – except for the US-backed Radio Liberty journalist Ihar Losik – Trump's "America first" policy, outlined by Christopher Smith after his February visit, appears to have gained an additional aspect: "Europe second".

This renewed emphasis on Europe, effectively amounting to a quiet handoff, aligns neatly with Minsk's interests – an apparent prerequisite for any further releases. Lukashenka has no objection to playing any de-escalatory role, provided western guests arrive, the terms are fulfilled, and the Kremlin signs off. His regime has made it no secret: propagandists and officials in Minsk have openly and repeatedly voiced readiness to trade what the West and the opposition value most – political prisoners – if the EU picks up the phone and discusses steps toward de-escalation, including but not limited to sanctions relief. Picking up that call is no simple task when the line is tangled between 27 different wires.

> The West's position on Belarus has undergone two major shifts in the past five years.

Amid this diplomatic relay, one wire has so far been sidelined from the diplomatic opening. However, it is no less crucial if Belarus's democratic voice is to reach the line: the exiled democratic forces. Led internationally by Tsikhanouskaya, these increasingly institutionalized actors continue to reclaim relevance and influence over western policy on Belarus. Similar to, and aligning with, Brussels and Washington's competing yet complementary approaches towards the regime

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Recently released from prison, the Belarusian opposition figure Siarhei Tsikhanouski and his wife Svetlana Tikhanouskaya arrive for a public gathering with the Belarusian diaspora on June 26th 2025 in Warsaw. His release, with others, was no coincidence – it emerged from behind-the-scenes coordination between Washington and Brussels, which was later relayed to Minsk and ultimately greenlit by Lukashenka himself.

in Minsk, diverging perspectives have also taken root within the exiled democratic forces, with some aligning more with the EU and others leaning towards the US.

Between two rocks and a hard place

Following the 2020 protests in Belarus and the regime's subsequent crackdown, Belarusian civil society and democratic forces found themselves dramatically repositioned. Although they retained symbolic and financial prominence, they faced significant limitations, with both the EU and US continuing to support the country's legitimate representatives, now defined as a civil society in exile. The very circumstances that elevated them internationally also curtailed their ability to exert meaningful political influence. Operating primarily from abroad, with only a handful of NGOs still active inside Belarus under the constant threat of repression, these actors are increasingly detached from the domestic political landscape.

With Lukashenka maintaining full control over internal affairs and blocking any outreach from abroad, the exiled forces have a limited to non-existent abil-

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ity to influence developments inside the country and have redirected their efforts toward the Belarusian diaspora. Yet even there, engagement remains modest, as does western practical backing – constrained in part by the EU's own sanctioning policies, which align Belarus, and by extension Belarusians, with Russia.

In this light, the EU's support for exiled democratic actors – though essential – appears to be more ceremonial than strategic. As the only remaining element of the EU's bottom-up "Belarus policy", and with Brussels's top-down approach having shifted toward a geopolitical focus – treating Belarus much like Russia, with sanctions as the Union's sole instrument of engagement with it – the exiled opposition has assumed a symbolic but guaranteed place within Brussels's policy of principled confrontation. Meanwhile, the US seems to pursue a more pragmatic than value-based approach, favouring a deal-making style of diplomacy directly with the regime in Minsk. This leaves no place for exiled democratic forces at the negotiating table, since any overt reference to them would likely collapse the possibility of dialogue given Lukashenka's zero-tolerance stance toward what he sees as an illegitimate, western-backed opposition.

The EU's support for exiled democratic actors – though essential – appears to be more ceremonial than strategic.

Two broad perspectives

Despite the constraints posed by the blurred border between Belarus and Russia – as perceived from Brussels – and the strategic silence surrounding democratic forces from Washington, the Belarusian democratic movement is actively reassessing its relevance and agenda. Through unofficial negotiations, advocacy efforts, and participation in high-level policy discussions, exiled actors are responding to the US's renewed engagement with the government in Minsk. Rooted in past experience – most notably the long-standing precedent of sanctions relief in exchange for Lukashenka's political prisoner releases, and the 2024 US-Russia prisoner exchange that excluded Belarusian detainees – two broad perspectives have emerged within the exiled democratic movement on how to deal with officials in Minsk. This involves one that favours the EU's value-based policy of non-recognition, and another that sees opportunity in the pragmatic engagement now led by Washington.

The first, EU-aligned perspective – advanced primarily by political actors like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office, the Coordination Council, and their affiliated structures – advocates for sustained pressure on Lukashenka through an ever-expanding and uncompromising sanctions regime, viewing it as a form of principled

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confrontation consistent with the EU's normative stance. Grounded in the conviction that Lukashenka's regime is incapable of meaningful negotiation or liberalization, and that political prisoners must not become bargaining chips in exchange for concessions, this position frames sanctions as both a moral imperative and a long-term strategy for systemic transformation. Such transformation is envisioned as contingent on Ukraine's victory in its war with Russia, potentially precipitating the collapse of Lukashenka's rule and enabling a democratic transition in Belarus. Referencing past patterns of political prisoner releases, proponents contend that these outcomes were achieved through consistent international pressure – not appeasement – citing previous US-brokered releases as proof of strength, not compromise. While generally supportive of US efforts, they stress that any negotiations with the regime must remain strictly conditional: sanctions pressure must persist as a Sword of Damocles, and genuine domestic de-escalation must precede any political engagement.

The second perspective, broadly aligned with US policy, is championed by grassroots and human rights-focused actors, as well as by some former political prisoners and their associations. It rests on the assumption that maximum-pressure sanctions and the maximalist aims they want to achieve are no longer realistic in the current geopolitical context. While not outright rejecting the EU's sanctions policy, this camp argues that today's sanctions have produced results opposite to those expected and instead endorses a more adaptive approach to the Belarusian regime, grounded in political realism and moral urgency. Pointing to Lukashenka's enduring grip on power and his full alignment with Moscow despite extensive western efforts to isolate him, proponents of this view advocate for structured engagement with Minsk. They argue that targeted diplomatic efforts – backed by calibrated sanctions – could both untether Belarus from Moscow and secure tangible humanitarian outcomes, above all the release of political prisoners.

Lukashenka's regime, as evidenced by recent US-facilitated releases, is not entirely immovable, but selectively responsive.

In their view, Lukashenka's regime, as evidenced by recent US-facilitated releases, is not entirely immovable, but selectively responsive, particularly when coordinated pressure is paired with positive incentives such as the easing of sanctions imposed for Belarus's domestic conduct. Stressing that engagement must not be confused with legitimization, they frame the current moment as a critical window of opportunity for advancing diplomatic contacts – an uncomfortable but necessary evil in the face of enduring repression and limited leverage.

While divided on strategy, both camps agree on two critical points: US engagement should continue, and the EU currently lacks a coherent strategy toward the

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"last European dictatorship". This strategic vacuum, among other factors, has left many in the democratic movement uncertain about their role, caught between two western agendas. In this context, the coexistence of the US's pragmatic engagement and the EU's value-driven approach – along with the corresponding alignments within Belarus's democratic movement – should not be seen as evidence of western diplomatic fragmentation or fundamental division. Rather, this pluralism reflects a form of diplomatic "creative destruction", to borrow Joseph Schumpeter's term. While broader developments, such as the apparent zugzwang in the Russia-Ukraine war and President Trump's unorthodox ambitions in the region, may initially seem chaotic or destabilizing to established processes, they may potentially contain the seeds of constructive, if unexpected, diplomatic breakthroughs. In this sense, Belarus represents a compelling test case – one that has already demonstrated tangible outcomes of such "creative destruction" and holds promise as a pilot for resolving the region's broader diplomatic impasses. EE

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Neither Kaczyński, nor Tusk

Who gets the vote of the Polish youth?

An interview with Paweł Marczewski, sociologist and head of research at the ideaForum at the Batory Foundation. Interviewer: Iwona Reichardt

IWONA REICHARDT: "Disappointed with the state, satisfied with life" – this is the title of a recent report published by your organization, the Stefan Batory Foundation. It explores the political preferences of Polish youth. Why did you decide to focus on young voters in such an ageing society as Poland?

PAWEŁ MARCZEWSKI: It is true that young voters are not the largest cohort in Poland's electorate. And their share will only decline in the coming years. Yet, our research – and recent election campaigns – show that this group has become increasingly aware of its position. Young people recognize that, because they are outnumbered, they must mobilize if they want their voices heard. We saw this clearly in the last presidential election. Youth turnout in both rounds exceeded 70 per cent – even higher than in the 2023 parliamentary elections. So, although they are not the most numerous, young voters are politically engaged. We wanted to understand their political preferences for a few reasons. First, they offer a glimpse into the future of Polish politics. We saw them in large numbers at campaign rallies, and we know their views will help shape Poland's political landscape. Second, we wanted to learn about their motivation. If their numbers cannot decide an election result, why are they so determined to vote? Do they use voting to make their voices heard? Finally, we wanted to find out where this group stands today, that is almost two years after the 2023 parliamentary elections when their mobilization was said to have contributed to

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the election outcome. Thus, we asked: are young people satisfied with politics? Or have they become disillusioned? And if they are disappointed, what effect does it have on them? Are they demobilized or are they looking for new political alternatives?

Many of our readers remember the "black protests" of 2016–2022 against Poland's restrictive abortion laws. They were dominated by young women. Today, we are seeing images of a very different Polish youth – at anti-immigration demonstrations, mobilizing around a completely different issue. Has something fundamentally changed in this age group?

In my view, the support that young voters showed for the centrist Civic Coalition was an exception. Even back then, research showed that many young people were radical – on both the right and the left. After the black protests that you mentioned, many expected a triumph for the left. Instead, the centrist Civic Coalition had managed to convince young voters that it represented a new quality in politics. For those who had protested against the abortion restrictions, Donald Tusk's promise to liberalize the law – unprecedented for him – was a powerful message. Today many young people admit that they feel betrayed. They believe the government has abandoned the issues that were most important to them. This only reinforces my belief that their earlier support for the Civic Coalition was an exception. We also need to remember that young people consume politics differently. They get much of their information from social media – especially fast-moving platforms like TikTok. This is why politicians such as Sławomir Mentzen from the far-right Confederation have become so popular among them. He offers something "new" – or at least he looks like he does. And he is very active on TikTok. Thus, when these young voters saw that the government, and especially the Civic Coalition, failed to deliver this new quality, they began searching again. The results of the first round of the presidential election in May 2025 illustrated this change among young voters perfectly: a clear majority of youth refused to vote for candidates associated with the two main parties that have dominated Polish politics for decades.

In your report, you point to the popularity of Mentzen, who represents the far-right Confederation. Does this mean Polish youth are fascist?

No, absolutely not. Many of Mentzen's supporters are not even traditionally right-wing. For them, he simply represents an alternative to mainstream politics. In our in-depth interviews, they told us that they see him as "uncompromised" – he has not held high office, has not been tainted by political scandals, and is not controlled by a major party. This sense of novelty matters enormously to young voters. Their motivation is often very straightforward: they neither want Tusk nor Jarosław Kaczyński (the leader of the right-wing nationalist Law and

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Justice party – editor's note). They want someone new. They feel that those who have ruled for years have grown complacent and indifferent to their concerns – and that is why they look elsewhere. This dynamic has been present for quite some time, and it is not going away. One focus group participant, for example, admitted she was worried about Mentzen's anti-abortion stance. But she also reasoned that as president, he would have no power to change the abortion law – so she simply dismissed that part of his platform. This pragmatic approach is common among his young voters.

Photo: Anna Liminowicz / Stefan Batory Foundation

Would you say that the democratic mainstream has lost touch with young people?

For sure young people feel ignored by mainstream politicians. Meanwhile, there are politicians who speak directly to this frustration – and Mentzen is one of them. So is Adrian Zandberg from the Left party, who also performed strongly among young voters. His success reinforces the point: what matters most to the youth is novelty and authenticity. In fact, authenticity is key. Many young voters explicitly reject anyone who has already been prime minister, minister, or president. They simply don't trust established political figures. That is why even Karol Nawrocki, despite being backed by Law and Justice, managed to win their support in the second round of the presidential election. For these voters, Nawrocki appeared as an independent candidate, who contrasted sharply with Rafał Trzaskowski – someone they saw as the quintessential insider: the mayor of Warsaw and deputy chairman of Tusk's Civic Platform.

What do young people expect from politicians? Why do they vote for these alternative candidates?

They want politicians who will actually improve their everyday lives. Many of them complain that mainstream politics is consumed by endless party battles while ignoring practical issues. Housing is at the top of their list. They believe that neither the current nor previous governments have done enough to ensure affordable housing.

Is housing also important for right-wing young voters?

Absolutely. This is a cross-cutting issue. While right-leaning voters may

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be less interested in large-scale social housing projects, they still view access to affordable housing as essential. Another major issue is education – and this is where Mentzen wins their hearts. For many young people, school is their first direct contact with the state, and their verdict is negative. They see schools as outdated, poorly preparing them for the labour market or for life in a modern society. Instead of inspiring or equipping them with practical tools, schools reinforce a sense of stagnation. Mentzen's libertarian message – less state, more individual freedom – is appealing precisely because it speaks to this frustration. Several interviewees even told us that they only felt relief once they had graduated from high school. University students tend to be more optimistic, largely because they combine study with work and enjoy greater independence. But the image of secondary education remains bleak. Beyond education, young people are anxious about the cost of living and their future job prospects. These day-to-day concerns often outweigh broader ideological questions – and in many cases, they are even more pronounced than among older voters.

One of the biggest problems in Polish politics is polarization. Do younger voters share this tribal hostility, or are they different?

To a certain extent they are different. As our research on Mentzen's voters shows, many young people are willing to back a candidate even if they disagree with parts of his or her platform. What unites them is their rejection of the old political order, and their search for something, or someone, new.

Would you say that if young people are in conflict, it is primarily a generational conflict?

Yes, it is definitely an inter-generational conflict – and a strong one. In Poland, many of the current worldview divisions have a clear generational dimension. We saw this very clearly during the protests against the tightening of abortion laws. These were, above all, protests of the youth. Large numbers of young women, particularly from the youngest generation, were on the streets. Women from older generations were far less visible. This pattern is reflected in other areas as well. For instance, data from a major Pew Research Center study on secularization shows that among all the countries covered by the survey, Poland has the highest gap – 23 percentage points – between younger people (ages 18–39) and older people (40+) who say that religion plays an important role in their lives.

Indeed, some say Poland's secularization among the youth is the fastest in Europe.

In fact, it might be the fastest in the world. Meanwhile, among older generations, this process is far slower. In this sense, there is a kind of generational community: those who lean to the right or are drawn to figures like Sławomir Mentzen share this sense of "youth identity" with their peers on the left, such as support-

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ers of Adrian Zandberg. I remember being surprised a few years ago when we conducted in-depth interviews. I spoke with a young activist from an extreme-right youth organization who told me she was enthusiastic about cooperating with other youth groups – regardless of their political orientation – on specific issues that mattered to them. In this case, it was mental health counselling. There are not many such examples, but they are revealing. They show that among the youngest generation, there are issues that transcend political divisions. Among older generations, such cross-cutting issues are far less visible.

One finding in your report that surprised me is that young people in Poland fear migration more than the war in Ukraine. How can we explain that?

It's a bit more complicated. When asked directly about the war, young people say they are concerned. But their fear is far less intense than that of the older generations – and that is probably natural. For them, war is an abstract concept, something they know only from family stories, if at all. This does not mean they are indifferent. If you talk to them for longer, they will acknowledge that the war is close to Poland, and that we are on NATO and the EU's border. But at the same time, they recognize the security guarantees that come with our membership in these organizations. They also see that Russia has not been able to simply overrun Ukraine. That realization calms them somewhat. Migration, however, is different. The presence of Ukrainian migrants affects their daily lives – in schools, in the labour market, even in local communities. This is something they experience directly. Many young people are sceptical of official statistics on the number of Ukrainians in Poland because they feel their presence everywhere. This perception – that their everyday reality is changing – is what drives anxiety. Sometimes it's fear of job competition; sometimes it's anger over perceived preferential treatment of Ukrainians. As a result, willingness to help Ukrainians among the young is noticeably lower. But this is not necessarily rooted in xenophobia. It is often the result of their own economic and social insecurities.

And what about migrants who are not from Ukraine? Poland is also home to people from the Middle East, South Asia, or Latin America…

Interestingly, these groups are far less visible to young Poles. With Ukrainians – many of them students – young people have daily contact in schools, on the streets, in shops, even at the doctor's office. Other migrant groups, however, are much smaller and more dispersed, so their presence is not perceived in the same way. Overall, migration is seen as a source of anxiety – but when it comes to non-Ukrainian migrants, young people's attitudes do not differ significantly from those of the wider population. The Ukrainian case is unique because it touches their daily lives directly.

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The second part of your report says: *satisfied with life*. To end on a positive note, what exactly are young Poles satisfied with?

This satisfaction is largely in the realm of declarations. When asked about their future, about how they see their professional situation in a few years, young people tend to be optimistic. But this optimism comes partly from what I would call a libertarian spirit. They believe they can handle things on their own. They know that their current situation is not the worst in the world and that, with effort, they can make things work for them. But if you probe a little deeper, you realize that this optimism is also tied to family resources and support. At the same time, their satisfaction coexists with fear. Many young people admit they do not believe they will live better than their parents.

But this is not only a Polish phenomenon, is it?

No, it's not. Economic data from across Europe confirm this. On the one hand, young people feel they can rely on themselves, or perhaps their families, and that they will "somehow manage". On the other hand, they are painfully aware that structural progress – the sense that each generation will live better than the last – is no longer guaranteed. This creates a kind of fragile satisfaction: young people do not feel hopeless, but they are not truly optimistic either. They do not see a clear path toward improvement. And this lack of optimism is fertile ground for politicians who thrive on fear and channel anxiety toward specific groups. In short, their declared satisfaction rests on shaky foundations. EE

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When values were trampled on, Austria was never neutral

An interview with Alexander Schallenberg, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chancellor of Austria. Interviewer: Aureliusz M. Pędziwol

AURELIUSZ M. PĘDZIWOL: Chancellor, you seem to be a politician of a special kind. You preferred to remain foreign minister rather than become head of government. How so? Is it in your genes?

ALEXANDER SCHALLENBERG: No, that's not it. I've simply learned that it's a fallacy to think one can neatly plan out one's life. I didn't plan my political career. After spending almost six years in government, in many different roles and during a very intense period, I decided the time was ripe to move on. But even though I may be leaving the playing field – please allow me this metaphor – I am not taking off my Team Austria jersey. Once a politician, always a politician, regardless of the position one might hold.

There are rumours that you will be involved in Central and Eastern Europe.

Not only there. But of course, I will remain faithful to my geopolitical and European themes. There is a Chinese saying, sometimes spoken as a curse: "May you live in interesting times." We do live in interesting times. Times that require less emotion and more pragmatism – a more direct, open view of the world. We Europeans have a tendency to see the world as we would like it to. I think it is time we saw the world and our immediate neighbourhood as they are and make that the basis of our policies.

In the context of Austrian politics, I wonder if one can really be neutral in such interesting times? I am thinking of Ukraine…

Austria's neutrality applies exclusively to military matters. Our constitution is quite clear on this. We do not want to join any military alliance; we do not want any foreign troops or bases on Aus-

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trian soil. However, Austria's neutrality has never been political. Whenever the fundamental values and principles of the UN Charter were trampled on and thrown overboard, Austria took a clear stand. And it is not neutral in the case of Ukraine either. We do not want to live in a world where the law of the jungle prevails. Where one country can invade another under any pretext, simply because it is bigger, has nuclear weapons and is powerful. That is why we created the United Nations and the Charter of the United Nations after the Second World War. So, when it comes to values, we have never been neutral, we have never been neutral in our worldview. To give you a historical example…

Hungary in 1956? Czechoslovakia in 1968? Poland in 1981?

That is exactly what I mean: the crushed uprising in Budapest, the suppressed Prague Spring. Young Austria has never been neutral; it has always taken a clear stance. We have done the same now in the case of Russia and Ukraine. And we will continue to do so in the future.

But military neutrality in a country surrounded by friends – isn't that living at the expense of one's neighbours?

We Austrians must realize that neutrality alone does not guarantee security. Neutrality means that you have to take care of your own security. And that is what we are doing. Previous federal governments have already significantly increased spending on the armed forces. The current government is continuing to do so, and I believe this is very important. We Europeans thought we would never experience war on our continent again. As we've seen with the Russian attack, war has returned. History has caught up with us. And that means that Austria, too, must take care of its own security. But not in the sense that everyone now has to join NATO. We still have very, very strong support for neutrality among the Austrian population. Our history and geography are different from that of Finland or Sweden, for example. However, I believe that the question that can legitimately be asked, and to which we in Austria also respond positively, is: how is Austria prepared to strengthen European solidarity? And here Austria is making a very important contribution.

For example?

There is no vacuum in politics. Either we succeed in exporting security and stability, or we run the risk of importing instability and insecurity from our neighbours in the long term. In this regard, Austria is one of the most vocal voices in the European Union, one of the most determined advocates of both the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the Union and stronger ties with other Eastern European countries. For us, South-Eastern Europe is our neighbourhood. You drive 500 kilometres south from Vienna and you are in Bosnia and Herzegovina. You drive 500 kilometres east and you are in Ukraine. Both

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Photo: Aureliusz M. Pędziwol

are our neighbours. In other words, the geostrategic seismograph in Vienna is triggered when something happens in Southern or South-Eastern Europe, as well as Eastern Europe. I believe that the main task of the European Union in the coming years is to stabilize our neighbourhood and create a ring of security and prosperity there. This will be a litmus test of the Union's geostrategic capability.

For a long time after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was said that Austria was a supporter of Putin's Russia. Was that the case?

That is simply a misconception. Yes, like many other countries, we have close historical ties with Russia that have developed over centuries. Yes, we distinguish between Putin and his regime on the one hand, and the Russian people, Russian history and Russian culture on the other…

But the Russian people support Putin…

Yes, although we must beware of seeing everything in black and white in politics. I would caution against demonizing an entire nation. Russia remains Europe's largest geographical neighbour. Russian culture remains part of European culture. Russian history remains part of European history. The world is not black and white. The world is different shades of grey. The same accusation that we may have reacted too late has also been levelled at Germany. Perhaps we should have spoken out more clearly and taken decisive action after the annexation of Crimea. With hindsight, we are always wiser. However, I believe that the attempt made at the time to find a *modus vivendi* with Russia was the right one. Did we perhaps not recognize the signs of the times soon enough in this new Russia, which is showing its true colours? Yes, we can be accused of that. But since February 24th 2022, Austria has taken a very, very, very clear stand on Russia's attack on Ukraine. Yes, Indeed, we are not providing military aid. But in every other area, we are one of the countries that supports Ukraine most strongly.

How?

We are focusing primarily on humanitarian aid. Austria has welcomed many refugees from Ukraine. Now, of course, we are working on the major task of rebuilding Ukraine. This country needs our

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support and will continue to need it in the future. Austria is in a very good position in this regard. And let's not forget something else. We also have a shared history, with Lviv and Galicia, to name but a few places. We share this history with at least some parts of Ukraine…

… as well as Poland. But let's return to the present. Is Austria now independent of Russian oil and gas?

Yes, Gazprom suspended supplies in November 2024. We should also remember: The Austrian oil and gas company OMV was the first western company to sign a contract with Gazprom. That was in 1968. The gas was delivered reliably, and we paid reliably. The Berlin Wall fell – gas was delivered, and we paid for it. The Soviet Union collapsed – gas was delivered and we paid for it. The first person to use gas as a weapon was Putin. Not Brezhnev, not Andropov, not Chernenko. Putin was the first person to turn food and energy supplies into a weapon. At that time, like other European countries, we were faced with the serious task of freeing ourselves from this undoubtedly one-sided dependence. We did. EE

The interview took place on June 13th 2025 during the GLOBSEC Forum 2025 conference in Prague.

Alexander Schallenberg is a lawyer and diplomat and was Austria's foreign minister from 2019 to 2025. At the end of 2021, he became chancellor for two months after the collapse of Sebastian Kurz's second government in the wake of a corruption scandal. In 2025, when Chancellor Karl Nehammer failed to form a government, he again briefly headed the chancellery, while remaining foreign minister. He then withdrew from active politics.

Aureliusz M. Pędziwol is a journalist with the Polish section of *Deutsche Welle*.

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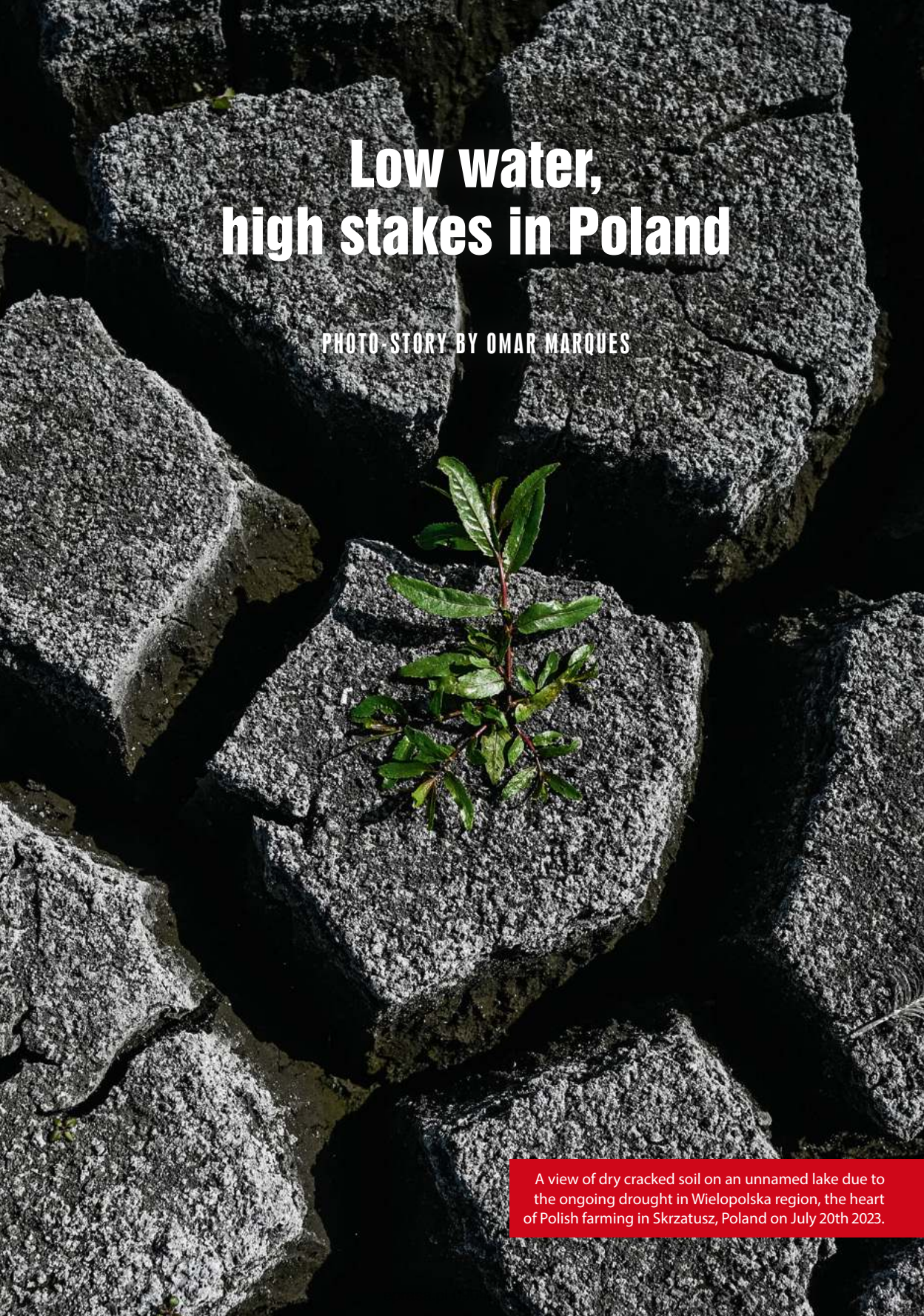
Low water, high stakes in Poland

PHOTO STORY BY OMAR MARQUES



A view of dry cracked soil on an unnamed lake due to the ongoing drought in Wielopolska region, the heart of Polish farming in Skrzatusz, Poland on July 20th 2023.

On World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought (June 17th), Polish scientists revealed that around 45 per cent of the country's forests and agricultural land are under threat of drought.Drought, which has turned to be an annual issue, has been observed since 2011, affecting water reservoirs, agriculture and water levels in the country's rivers. It is estimated that financial losses stemming from drought were placed at 610 million euros in 2018 alone, according to TVP World.This photo essay documents the drought in several regions of Poland since 2023 until today.

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An aerial view of sand banks as low water levels in the Vistula river continue in Warsaw, Poland on July 3rd 2025. As drought in Poland is worsening due to the lack of snow in winter, no rainfall and high temperatures, the main river, Vistula, has hit a record low levels.

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A aerial view of dead fish on an unnamed lake due to the ongoing drought in Wielopolska region, the heart of Polish farming in Skrzatusz, Poland, in July 2023.

A man walks on the dry ground of the Klimkówka water reserve in the Małopolska region in southern Poland. The water reserve was under a quarter of its capacity during the drought in 2024.

An aerial view of the Klimkówka water reservoir with extreme low water levels due to the drought in the region in June 2025. According to the European Drought Observatory, as of mid-May 2025, 41.2 per cent of the continent is experiencing drought conditions. Poland is no exception as there was almost no snow during winter and water reservoirs are at critical levels. According to local reports, Klimkówka water reservoir currently holds only five million cubic metres of water, while its full capacity is 40 million.

Hospitality in practice

How does Estonia support Ukrainian refugees?

NINO CHANADIRI

Estonia has been supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians significantly over the last three years since the full-scale invasion. Even though it was a challenge to receive a significant number of Ukrainian refugees at such a quick pace, the small country of Estonia managed to establish a specific approach to integration.

It has been more than three years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which resulted in millions of Ukrainians becoming refugees in different countries. Countries in the European Union hosted more than four million people with temporary protection status, the majority of them women and children. Estonia has been one of the biggest hosts for Ukrainian refugees among European countries, considering its small size and population. In the beginning of 2024 there were more than 50,000 refugees* in Estonia. Even though hosting the Ukrainian community is not a new phenomenon for Estonia, and there has been a Ukrainian diaspora in the country since before the 2022 full-scale invasion, the wave of refugees significantly increased the share of the Ukrainian community in the country, reaching almost five per cent of the population.

* See UNHCR Country Chapter Estonia https://www.unhcr.org/neu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2024/01/ESTONIA-English-Ukraine-Situation-2024-RRP.pdf

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Even though the majority of Estonians have been supportive and welcoming to Ukrainians, such an increase in a certain group with war-related experiences constitutes a challenge for the country and requires a clear integration approach for the newcomers to become a part of the host society. Estonia has been active in supporting Ukrainian refugees and has practiced an interesting approach to integration. Overall, this is not very similar to what has been previously experienced by different countries in Northern Europe when they have had to deal with significant numbers of refugee communities in previous years during different international crises.

The Estonian approach

Estonia has become a host for Ukrainian refugees from the very first days of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and has been receiving thousands of Ukrainians through different entry points, such as Pärnu, Narva or Tallinn. A significant part of the refugees remained in the country under temporary protection, while others headed to other destinations, using Estonia as a transit country. Thus, the country had to deal with a new reality and a significant increase in a certain societal group. A need for an organized policy-based approach was clear, especially considering the experiences this group has gone through. Estonia provided basic, first-hand support to Ukrainian refugees, starting from housing to psychological aid. However, when it comes to long-term integration, Estonia took an interesting turn. This has already shown some results in terms of integration and how Ukrainians can support themselves in a host country, reducing dependence on the state.

> Among the Baltic states, Estonia has the highest number of Ukrainian refugees willing to learn the local language.

Interestingly, Estonia did not adopt any special decisions "unique for Ukrainians" when it comes to their lives in the country. They started treating them as anyone else who had newly moved to Estonia. This means that they did not create special jobs for Ukrainians or provide special housing offers (beyond the support refugees received right after arrival). Instead, Ukrainians had to engage with the community like everyone else, find accommodation and apply for jobs. For now, according to the organizations working with refugees, the majority of the Ukrainian refugees who remain in Estonia have already secured housing for themselves and more than half of them are employed.

What Estonia provided to the refugees was support in terms of creating structural opportunities to navigate society. One of the first things that refugees received

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was information about Estonia as a country, its culture, customs and society, so that they had an understanding of the society they had arrived in. It is noteworthy that many Ukrainian refugees going to Estonia did not have any knowledge of the country, as the primary aim was to leave the conflict zone. Thus, the destination did not matter that much. This information comes from multiple meetings I have conducted and the stories people have told me. Official reports rarely cover this issue.

During the first weeks, many of the Ukrainian refugees were staying in temporary accommodation that was provided by the state and local authorities. For example, in Tallinn, refugees were staying on a ferry during their first days after arriving in Estonia. The government was also supporting this group by covering rent and utilities over the first weeks for the refugees. This happened once they were able to find accommodation themselves, where they could stay.

Considering that language knowledge in Estonia is important to securing employment opportunities, language support has been a crucial aspect for Ukrainians to start the integration process. Estonian-language courses have been provided for free up until the B1 level, which created a good base for people who started learning the language to create new opportunities for themselves in a new country.

Studies find that among the Baltic countries, Estonia has the highest number of Ukrainian refugees who were willing to engage themselves in local language learning. Which signals that a significant part of the Ukrainian refugee community in Estonia understands the role of language in navigating life in a new country and building connections. This is an especially important factor considering that Estonia has a significant number of Russian speakers, and many Ukrainians coming to Estonia also speak Russian. However, learning Estonian has still been an aim for many, and the language learning opportunity has been supported by the government of Estonia.

Ukrainian children have been admitted to Estonian-language or Russian-language schools, depending on their preferences. However, considering that Estonia has made the decision to transfer to fully Estonian-language education at all educational levels, Ukrainian children studying at Russian-language schools will also have to transfer to Estonian-language education alongside the local Russian-speaking children, who are still dependent on Russian-language instruction.

Support beyond words

One of the major factors that has been significantly visible in the Estonian approach to integrating Ukrainians into society is the support for Ukrainian initiatives, organizations and activities related to their culture and identity. The gov-

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ernmental bodies, such as the ministry of culture, have been actively engaged in such support alongside different influential Estonian local organizations. This includes the Integration Foundation, which supports many Ukrainian groups and initiatives with different focuses. There are both older diaspora organizations and new groups that emerged after 2022 that are run mostly by refugees.

The support covers initiatives from cultural activities and events to the creation of centres and libraries with Ukrainian literature such as the Spilno Library, which was created in 2022 and supported by the Estonian culture ministry and the Integration Foundation. This strongly signals that the Estonian government's aim is not to assimilate Ukrainians but to integrate them through providing some structural opportunities and treating them as equal to other residents of the country. Furthermore, the government is supporting raising awareness about Ukraine among Estonians, as well as building stronger ties. Estonia's interest in supporting Ukrainian identity is reflected in the many successful projects carried out in this area. One example is the establishment of the first Ukrainian radio station in Estonia run by Ukrainians, called DRUZI. This outlet aims to bridge the gap between Ukrainian and Estonian societies and provide content in both languages.

The Estonian government's aim is not to assimilate Ukrainian refugees but to integrate them, like other residents.

One of the crucial aspects that empowers strong governmental support towards the Ukrainian refugees is public support. Even though Estonia has its own challenges related to ethnic communities, when it comes to Ukrainians, Estonians have been very supportive.* It is important to note that this support was not only based on humanitarian grounds, but also derived from a nationwide political, diplomatic and military support approach towards Ukraine. Thus, these two aspects, political and humanitarian support, blended together in the Estonian (and safe to say Baltic) context. It has also been embodied in the volunteer work Estonians have been engaged in since the beginning of the war to support Ukraine and Ukrainians, including a large number of donations.

Strong support for Ukraine, both at public and governmental levels, is clearly seen in Freedom Square or *Vabaduse väljak*, where Estonian and Ukrainian flags have flown together for three years.

* See: "Feeling Concerned: An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Estonia", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, 2023 https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/20566-20230915.pdf

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Gratitude and challenges

Surveys show that Ukrainians are grateful to Estonia for the opportunities provided. The majority is satisfied with language learning opportunities, as well as interactions with the local Estonian community and their support. In conversations, many Ukrainians note that Estonia did its best in terms of support. This is especially true considering its small size and population and the large number of newcomers it had to receive. However, it is important to note that some challenges in integration matters remain.

Although many Ukrainians are employed in Estonia, surveys indicate that their skills often exceed the opportunities available to them. This can be a challenge both for Ukrainians, considering that it can lead to "de-skilling" when the working sector does not respond to their qualifications, and for Estonia as well, as the skill resources within the community could be directed to better contribute to society.

Another challenge relates to language fluency issues. While free courses are available only to intermediate level (B1 usually), others desire to further increase their language skills, which could potentially further contribute to their integration in society. In many cases, these people have to hire a private teacher, which is sometimes unaffordable for them. Thus, despite their desire, they cannot go further in their language learning journeys. In addition, considering that some Ukrainian children are educated in Russian-language schools, the transition to the Estonian language can become a challenge for them in the future, as it means significant changes in an educational environment. Considering their migration background and the many changes in their environment, further support, whether psychological, educational or otherwise, might be needed in the future.

The majority of Ukrainians have managed to set up new lives in Estonia and are not dependent on state support.

Nevertheless, Estonia has been supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians significantly over the last three years, ever since the full-scale invasion. Even though it was a challenge to receive a significant number of Ukrainian refugees at such a quick pace, the small country of Estonia managed to establish a specific approach to integration. It did not create special laws or conditions specifically for Ukrainians as a group but applied the same practices as it would towards other residents in Estonia.

The majority of Ukrainians have managed to set up new lives in Estonia and are not dependent on state support. Estonia has provided some structural opportunities for better integration and securing the new group's position in Estonian society. This includes language support, which is one of the crucial factors for employment

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opportunities and creating ties with the local community. In return, Ukrainians have shown interest and commitment to integrating with the host country.

In the Estonian case, for Ukrainians, integration is not assimilation. Preserving Ukrainian identity is supported through financial and other means by governmental bodies and influential local organizations. Both old Ukrainian organizations and newly emerged ones are able to implement numerous activities and initiatives, and there are already successful examples of projects like different cultural events, established libraries, even Ukrainian radio and much more. What is noteworthy, public support plays a significant role in Estonia's approach towards Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Estonians have shown political and humanitarian support both for Ukraine and for Ukrainians who fled to their country following the full-scale invasion. However, despite these positive efforts, challenges remain in certain areas of integration – such as employment and language acquisition. Addressing these gaps will require continued collaboration between government institutions, the Ukrainian community and the broader public. EE

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Russian mall shutdown sparks uproar and confusion

JAMES C. PEARCE

Yekaterinburg's largest shopping mall was suddenly closed on June 27th. Greenwich, which stands proud in the city centre, is Yekaterinburg's answer to Moscow's Okhotny Ryad or Afi Mall. Opened in 2004, Greenwich has routinely been listed as one of Russia's best shopping malls and entertainment facilities. Why, then, was it shut down so suddenly without so much as a whisper from commentators crying wolf?

The official reason given was due to fire safety violations. Engineering works on these systems were to be conducted immediately, the mall's management said in its statement. Many first heard about the closure on local news media outlets and it was initially assumed to be fake news. Why – and indeed why – would employees not have been informed? Why was everything functioning as normal until the last second? Two hours after making the headlines, the mall's workers had finally received official confirmation: the mall is closed. Go home. Shoppers were utterly clueless and the city somewhat in shock.

More questions than answers

The fast-developing situation and unclear story raised many questions. Why so sudden? Why nobody knew how long the closure would last? The problems con-

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nected to its closure were endless. Parking in the centre of Yekaterinburg is already a nightmare, threatened to be made worse by a large lot shuttered down. Should the mall workers look for other jobs or could they transfer stores? What about the businesses themselves? Would they be allowed to operate despite the mall closure and compensated if not (as was the case during the pandemic)? The more cynical were asking whether it really was about fire safety. Some, and it was a small minority, suspected an unofficial, corrupt or sinister reason might be at play.

Regular readers of this magazine might be wondering who cares about a shopping mall in the Ural Mountains, especially at this stage of the Russia-Ukraine war? But if we want to understand where Russian society is currently positioned, a unique story like this shows how it has localized its politics and civic consciousness.

In fact, Greenwich's closure was the result of a genuine lawsuit in response to actual safety concerns. It was fairly run of the mill and raised real questions about employees and business rights over a place that is quite sentimental to locals. Its mysterious nature became the talk of Russia's liberal heartland and showed where civic debates are now taking place.

Greenwich sits on the site of Yekaterinburg's first self-service supermarket, Maria, which was opened in 1972. In the 1990s, financial difficulties saw Maria sold to become another 24-hour supermarket called Kupets. The supermarket happened to be on the same territory as an unfinished Soviet department store and Maria's owners, the Malysheva 73 Group, smelled an opportunity. After lengthy legal battles and murky political deals, the concept of a new, larger shopping mall with department stores, cinemas, restaurants and big brand names came into being.

Greenwich has over 300 stores, boasting over one million visitors a month, and up to 18 million a year.

Russia's fourth largest city, Yekaterinburg is both an industrial and financial hub on the Europe-Asia border. Finance, transportation, logistics, warehousing and retail trade all came to fill the void left by Yekaterinburg's disappearing industry specializations following the Soviet collapse. A giant shopping mall was a logical next step, and the stars aligned nicely for Greenwich's construction.

Today, Greenwich has over 300 stores, boasting over one million visitors a month, and up to 18 million a year. Perhaps due to Yekaterinburg being Russia's last liberal bastion, Greenwich has also been the site of civic action in recent years. In October 2021, workers at its low-cost diner, Friends, created a high-profile picket line after its abrupt closure. Most days throughout its 13 years in business, Friends was packed full of customers, especially the city's youth.

When the pandemic hit, competition in the fast-food industry grew rapidly, as did the costs. But the diner had no guests and was starting to run huge financial

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losses. The mall's rent increases were the last straw, and Friends went bankrupt without the owner paying his employees their final salary. The owner claimed that all employees were released in accordance with their labour contracts.

Yekaterinburg's service industries and city culture had been changing fast for some time at that point, but Friend's closure was a shock to the city's residents. Even though it was one of a handful of popular restaurants to close in 2021, there was something deeply sentimental about Friends. It was always popular among the city's youth at a time when living standards in the area were growing rapidly. Its closure also came at a time when discontent with the authorities was growing concerning its handling of COVID-19, the quality of public services and decline in living standards after the Football World Cup in 2018. With memories of COVID-19 and Friends (which has since re-opened under new ownership), Greenwich's closure struck a particular nerve with locals. It threatened to disrupt a life already upended by the war, and the lack of clarity around the closure caused real anxiety.

Strange series of unfortunate events

The first news about Greenwich's closure came on June 27th, amidst the "Night of Music". Representatives explained that it was due to the renewal of the engineering and fire safety systems of the shopping centre. The exact date for Greenwich's closure was not reported or given – there was only a notice that the mall would be closed.

One café worker told "It'sMyCity" that she was warned about the closure two days before the mall was sealed, whereas other stores and employees were not immediately informed. This worker was then told that Greenwich would re-open in about a week. Employees of the high-end supermarket chain Hyperbola and the GreenFitness gym knew nothing about the closure and their managers assumed it was fake news. Protocol dictates that tenants should be warned well in advance about a possible closure so that appropriate action could be taken by businesses. Shoppers were still piling in despite the whispers and online rumours. Two hours after the news was distributed, the administration of GreenFitness was finally notified, and they explained the details of the closure to the employees. They were expecting to re-open in two weeks.

Later in the day, the other tenants were asked to remove all cash and perishable products. The shopping centre stated that the measure was necessary for the comprehensive modernization and integration of the building's engineering and fire safety systems. "Historically, the shopping centre's lines were put into operation in stages, in different years, and require unification into a single, reliably func-

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Photo: Фальшивомонетчик (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

Yekaterinburg's Greenwich shopping centre has over 300 stores, boasting over one million visitors a month and up to 18 million a year.

tioning structure to ensure compliance with current standards," Greenwich representatives said.

On June 28th it became clear that Greenwich was closed not by the will of its current owners, the ITS-Group, but a lawsuit filed by the prosecutor of the Leninsky District of Yekaterinburg, Genrikh Guliyev. The ruling on the closure was issued by Judge Yulia Moskaleva on June 26th, one day before it took place. The next hearing on the case was scheduled for August 12th, with the regional departments of the emergency situations ministry and the Russian National Guard involved as third parties, as noted by *Vecherniye Vedomosti*. The length of closure remained unclear.

Earlier signs?

On June 30th, bailiffs sealed the entrances to the shopping centre. Workers told local media outlets that the procedure went smoothly and that Greenwich employees were cooperating with the authorities. The authorities also said that the claims

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against Greenwich had been around for a long time. The emergency situations ministry claimed that some tenants had been made aware of a possible closure back in April, when a fire broke out. The external part of the ventilation unit, whose motor had jammed, caught fire. It is located on a special support on the roof of the shopping centre, so the fire did not spread. It is possible that this fire was the reason for the unscheduled inspection that led to the lawsuit and closure. The changes required were quite minor, but according to the authorities, representatives of the ITS-Group had promised to fix the shortcomings but ultimately failed to do so.

A week after the closure, the entrances to the shopping centre were still closed and covered with barrier tape. It was impossible to get inside either through the metro or underground passages. The entrances to the underground parking lots of Greenwich were blocked and Vainera Street (the Arbat of Yekaterinburg) was unusually empty this week. It had a negative impact on local businesses operating outside of the mall. With nowhere to park and shop, locals chose other parts of the city.

A few days later, the Greenwich administration team released a statement. In it, they asked for "patience" and said that they were not giving an exact date for the re-opening of Greenwich, so as not to give a date that could be postponed. Some tenants heard that they might be compensated for part of their rent, but were also informed that it was unlikely that workers would be compensated for their salaries.

Some stores relocated workers to their other locations across the city, such as Veer Mall, Passazh, Akademicheskiy, MEGA or smaller malls in the city's microdistricts. Hyperbola has two stores in Yekaterinburg, the other in Passazh, the luxury mall. It began to operate on a 24-hour schedule due to Greenwich's closure. The clothing brand SHU was offering free delivery, as were restaurants and fast-food outlets. No customers were accepted, but food deliveries were guaranteed. But that was only true of some. Many simply could not function without customers inside, and the workers relocated were the fortunate few. The fact is most were sent home without pay and no indication as to what the future held. A not insignificant number were unwilling to wait around and so found other jobs.

Much ado about nothing

The mall was actually closed for a total of ten days. By July 10th, the mall had re-opened, but barely so. On July 11th, it was reported by E1 that Greenwich was fined 100,000 roubles (approximately 1000 euros) for violating the requirements for anti-terrorist protection of facilities (Part 1 of Article 20.35 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation). The press service of the Leninsky District Court of Yekaterinburg said that the fine was issued to the ITS-Group.

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A company representative admitted guilt, noting that some of the violations had already been addressed.

The shops gradually re-opened. Some opened much later because they had to replace the staff lost or on vacation. A nervous happiness came back to the city. By early August, Greenwich was working more or less as normal again. This left a big question in everybody's mind. Was it that simple? Was the fire safety issue the real deal and resolved so easily? If so, why was more reassurance not given to everybody?

In short, yes, it was an innocent lawsuit about a genuine safety issue that may have threatened the wellbeing of others if not dealt with. Perhaps that is why few outside of Yekaterinburg cared as the scandal lacked any sensationalism. It had the potential to look dodgy and smell of corruption, and yet it was not. After dominating social media and the news headlines for ten days, the city went back to its business.

Real questions about worker's rights, communication and corporate liability gripped the city for a brief moment. The people of Yekaterinburg view Greenwich as their mall and happy place. They want it and themselves to be treated with a bit more respect. A lot of people were let down due to a lack of transparency by the mall's management and local administration. Local issues and transparency are two factors that make democracies work. Russia's exiled liberal opposition should really take note of their last bastion at home. EE

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Belarusian folklore as a language of expression during repressions

MARIA BADZEI

Throughout history, Belarusians have turned to their rich folklore traditions in times of repression. What may appear as a period of cultural stagnation is, in fact, often a moment of resilience and creative revival. The current wave of repression is no exception – once again, Belarusian culture is finding ways to endure.

In the history of Belarus throughout the 19th and 21st centuries, there is a pattern – after each failed uprising or short-term thaw, the society faces a crisis, resulting in culture retreating into folklore. During repressions, it becomes dangerous to speak about new meanings that emerged in the previous pre-crisis decades. Thus, folklore serves as the only acceptable and safe form of cultural existence and preservation. From it grows a new generation that leads to another uprising or "thaw", and this cycle repeats.

This process manifested in the middle and second half of the 19th century. After the uprising of 1830–31, repressions occurred, including the "review of nobility", the closure of Vilnius University, and the abolition of the Union of Brest. In 1844, Jan Barshcheuski published *Nobleman Zavalnia, or Belarus in Fantastic Stories.* This is an author's expression wrapped in folklore form, where folklore serves an allegorical function and speaks through fairy tales and fantastic stories about events that occurred over the previous 50 years. These include the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and those other events up to the book's publica-

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tion. At the same time, Pavel Shpileuski began his ethnographic and mythmaking activities, and his findings and works are still used in compiling encyclopaedias. His version of Belarusian mythology is taught in schools and penetrates modern literature (*On the Other Side* by Zaraslava Kaminskaya, *Volnery* by Valer Gapeev, or *Ornaments* by Alina Dlatouskaya).

Birth of Belarusian literature

After the 1863–64 uprising under the leadership of Kastuś Kalinoŭski, the region again faced strong repressions. The very name "Belarus" was forbidden and uprising participants were punished or forced to emigrate. However, the uprising ultimately drew attention to the region. In the second half of the 19th century, Belarusian folklore began to be actively studied. During this time, important ethnographic and linguistic works were created by Yulian Krachkouski, Ivan Nasovich, Alexander Shymanouski, Mikhail Dzmitrieu, Nikolai Nikifarouski, Pavel Shein, Eudakim Ramanau and Yefim Karski. In 1894, Yefim Karski defended the first dissertation on Belarusian linguistics.

From folklore emerges one of the most important Belarusian poets of the 19th century – Francišak Bahuševič. A participant in the 1863–64 uprising, he published his books in Kraków (*Belarusian Violin Bow*, 1891) and Poznań (*Belarusian Violin*, 1892), and these two collections define the further development path of Belarusian literature. The rhythms of his poems are the rhythms of traditional Belarusian dances, while works saturated with folklore motifs reflect the problems of Belarusian peasants, their grievances, and the injustices occurring around them. From these two books the Belarusian literature of the *Nasha Niva* period flourishes.

> In the second half of the 19th century, Belarusian folklore began to be actively studied.

The next crisis begins in the late 1920s. Around the same time, Vaclau Lastouski's major ethnographic expedition of 1928 takes place. In the 1930s, during the time of large-scale repressions, the Republican Radio Festival of Folk Art is organized, with about 3,000 creators participating. The festival takes place in October 1937, during the most massive executions.

In the 1960s, the "philological generation" emerged, whose representatives received consistent university education. For them, folklore was not an end in itself but a source of inspiration for creating new forms of expression. In the 1970s, which came after the "thaw" of the previous decade, the era of stagnation began. In 1970, the Institute of Art Studies, Ethnography and Folklore of the Belarus Academy of

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Sciences begins a series of scientific publications on Belarusian folklore according to the genre principle of "Belarusian Folk Art". The series has been published over 23 years and includes 40 volumes.

In cities, communities of Belarusian-speaking youth emerge, who separate themselves from village traditions but recognize their connection to them. During these times, movements alternative to official culture appeal to folklore. The association of young writers *"Tuteyshyia"* emerged in the early 1980s and existed in very close connection with the contemporary Belarusian national movement. *Tuteyshyia* played a major role in ensuring that nation-building processes of the late 1980s, which will lead to Belarus's independence in the 1990s, also rely on folklore. For them, folk culture is returned heritage, and the return to authenticity becomes a strong argument in value and linguistic discussions.

The youth of the association organized *Kupalle* and *Kaliady* preserving rituals, and also performed *"Dziady"* – the classic play by Adam Mickiewicz. The first mass rally in modern Belarusian history is the "Dziady march", which took place on October 30th 1988. The ritual pre-Christian feast of remembering the dead became an important political action that gathered tens of thousands of people. The organizers of the action included the poet Anatol Sys and future human rights defender and Nobel laureate Ales Bialiatski.

After 2020

After the fraudulent election and subsequent protests in 2020, repressions are now taking place constantly. Any open expression of discontent becomes dangerous and folklore again becomes the only space in which culture can exist. Folklore also plays an important role outside Belarus, serving as a tool for finding and preserving identity. The number of Belarusian dance communities in the diaspora is impressive. Initiatives in the field of Belarusian traditional dances that emerged after 2020 and organize regular events exist in Poznań, Gdańsk, Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław and Białystok. In London in 2024, the album *Vaclau Lastouski's Expedition of 1928: Preserved Heritage* was published. This was compiled by Volha Labacheuskaya and published by Czabor Publishing and Skaryna Press.

Regarding the situation inside Belarus, folk culture is now the only relatively safe place for cultural expression and preservation. The celebration of *"Bahach"* (the autumn equinox festival, known since pre-Christian times) in September 2024 gathered hundreds of people. Participants in dance communities inside Belarus are also increasing, despite the emigration of a large number of active Belarusians. Folk crafts are in demand with studios of ceramics, weaving, straw weaving and paper

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cutting opening. In all this, folklore manifests as a de-colonial practice, a tool for finding and preserving identity within the country during times of repressions.

For state cultural institutions, folklore remains the only permitted way to talk about national heritage when it is dangerous to talk about it. The National Art Museum organizes lectures about traditional culture and exhibitions of traditional costumes, with a similar exhibition being held at the National Academic Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre.

The very concept of tradition contradicts change; tradition is directed at finding the lost and restoration, but not at creating and expressing other meanings not laid down by tradition. Therefore, works that use folklore as a tool, grounding and foundation and then go beyond it, being full-fledged expressions of the author's outlook, are especially valuable. Such cultural texts exist in modern Belarus. They have emerged over the last four years and are completely based on folklore but take the subject beyond static museum pieces, transforming it into a full-fledged dark and cathartic expression.

The release of the *"Malitva Belaruskaja"* video by the techno-blues band Intelligency took place in August 2021. The scene in which the action takes place is a *batleika* (a traditional puppet theatre) in the middle of an abandoned factory. The video's characters – a devil and an angel – are the main characters of *batleika*. The song's text begins with the phrase "Oh in our paradise life is merry, life is merry, but for no one," which refers to the song "Three Angels" by Troitsa. This is a folk song that was recorded in the late 1970s in the village of Bartolomeevka in the Vetka district, which soon became a dead village after the Chernobyl disaster. The "Belarusian Prayer" itself ends with a pagan prayer to the sun, which is the culminating image in the video.

The ox is raging

Three performances, each a "song in one act", tell the most important events in human life: marriage, birth and death. The plot of all three performances fits into the plot of the folk song "The Ox is Raging – Spring is Coming", a fragment of which is placed as an "epigraph" in the annotation of "Marriage with Wind":

The ox is raging –
Spring is coming,
The girl is crying –
Wants to marry.

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Don't rage, ox,
You'll go to the field,
You'll still plow plenty.

Don't cry, girl,
You'll get married,
You'll still live plenty.

The raven caws –
Wants raw meat.
The girl cries –
Wants a son.

The raven caws,
Having eaten raw meat,
The girl cries,
Having had a son.

The raven caws,
Having flown away,
The girl cries,
Where to put him:
Whether to put him:
Whether to raise him,
Whether to send him
To the army,
Whether to drown him?
To send to the army –
Will be a pity,
To drown him –
Will be a sin.

(Source: BNT volume "Spring Songs," p. 84)

One of the main themes of the performances is the vulnerability of men who are captive to others' decisions. While in the first performance there is a family story, in the final one men go to war and die. The subjects of the performances are women. There are no words in the performances, only folk songs arranged by Katsiaryna Averkava. All three performances are "ritual dramaturgy". Specifically, *"Zabolotje"* begins with the *"Dziady"* ritual, in *"Pachupki"* there are 18 folk songs from

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the *Birth* ritual, and in *Marriage with Wind* there are songs performed during weddings.

Karniah and Averkava invented a metaphorical language for speaking about the terrible and dangerous, talking about trauma, war, violence, without saying a word – through folk songs, ceremony and ritual. The last performance of the trilogy, *"Zabolotje"*, at a certain point itself becomes a ritual in which the audience participates, making it an extremely intense experience.

Wild, dark world

Eva Viežnaviec's book *What is it you Seek, Wolf?* was published in 2020 by the Pflaumbbaum publishing house and received the Jerzy Giedroyc Prize in 2021. It was translated into Czech, Swedish, German and Norwegian, and has recently been released in the Polish translation. Recently, a performance directed by Monika Dobrowlańska appeared. The genre of the book, as defined in the annotation, is a swamp fairy tale, but it is a horrifying tale about a wild, dark world where it is uncomfortable and scary for humans to live.

The main character of the book – Ryna – returns to her native village to bury her grandmother Darafeia. Ryna's grandmother is a whisperer, and her grandmother's grandmother was too. Spells, rituals, superstitions and magical ways to remove a person from the world and heal them occupy an important part of the book. At the same time, the story is almost non-fiction, the stories told in it are documented either through documents or the oral history of the inhabitants of this area (the Luban region at the border of the Minsk, Homel and Mahilew regions). The central image of the story is also folkloric – it is the legendary "White Pillar" well with a holy spring, which must be found and dug up to restore the harmony of the world.

Each of these works, using folkloric forms, creates new narratives that make sense of the present. In current times, as two hundred years ago, folklore again serves as a space for culture's existence and a tool that allows speaking about particularly painful topics in the current historical context. Does this mean that Belarus is now experiencing the next cycle? EE

Maria Badzei studied Slavic, Belarusian and Polish philology at the Belarusian State University and philosophy and literature at the Belarusian College. Her poetry has been published in the journals *Vierasień, Maladosć and Dziejasloŭ*, as well as the *Scriptorium* anthology. She also translates from Polish, is the founder of the poetry project Zramy as well as the editor in chief of Wir.by.

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Gdańsk's heritage and reconstruction after the war

BŁAŻEJ KOWACZ

After the Second World War, Gdańsk was fully integrated into Poland. Subsequently, the population dynamic of the city changed – many German residents fled or were expelled, and were replaced by Poles, who came especially from areas lost to the Soviets in the former eastern lands. With new rulers and a new populace in place, a question arose – what to do about the ruined city?

Walking through the cobbled streets of Gdańsk, surrounded by houses of brick and stone, medieval cathedrals with towers reaching for the sky and beautiful ornate façades of manneristic buildings, one would be forgiven for thinking the city was spared the ravages of the Second World War that claimed cities such as Warsaw, Wrocław or Dresden. Indeed, much of the main city, thanks to post-war reconstruction efforts, manages to mask the truth of the enormity of the destruction that befell it. However, immediately after the end of the conflict, the idea of rebuilding the city in its current form was far from certain, as the future of Gdańsk and the fate of its historic quarters remained a topic of heavy debate, with proposals ranging from building a Soviet-style city to leaving the centre in ruin as a monument to the war, being seriously discussed.

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A short look at the history and architecture of Gdańsk

The city of Gdańsk boasts a long and eventful history, serving as a melting pot of various cultures and an important trading hub in Central Europe. The first mentions of the city go back to the year 997 with the arrival of St. Adalbert of Prague to a fledgling settlement near the sea while on his way to Prussia. An account written after his death records the name of the settlement as "*Gyddannyzc*", today associated with Gdańsk.

The settlement grew steadily over the next couple of hundreds of years, gaining city rights and becoming an important trade port in the region, attracting settlers, particularly from German lands, and becoming a member of the Hanseatic League. This period of growth coincided with a struggle for control over the city, with the newly established Teutonic Order seizing Gdańsk in 1308. Ultimately, the city would rise up against the knights, pledging allegiance to the Polish king. It became incorporated back into the Kingdom of Poland in 1454.

The city of Gdańsk boasts a long and eventful history, serving as a melting pot of various cultures.

The subsequent period brought about a golden age for the city, which benefitted from substantial autonomy granted to it by the crown, as well as from being situated at the mouth of the River Vistula. This allowed it to become an export hub for grain and other wares from the country's heartlands. By the 16th century, Gdańsk became the wealthiest and most populous city in all of Poland, as well as one of the biggest and most influential trade centres in Europe.

It is this time of prosperity that saw the significant architectural development of the city, with many new buildings and monuments being erected to symbolize Gdańsk's power. The style and form of these constructions was significantly influenced by the cultures and nationalities residing or otherwise trading with the city, leading to the creation of unique and important landmarks, including the Dutch-inspired Great Armoury, the representative Golden Gate, or the manneristic façade of Artus Court.

In 1793 Gdańsk was annexed by Prussia during the Second Partition of Poland. The period of German control over the city saw its importance diminish alongside a decrease in wealth and trade. Architecture and urban development was also affected, with many buildings being erected and renovated in more "Germanic" styles, particularly Neo-Renaissance and Neo-Gothic. These were based upon buildings and trends in cities such as Cologne or Vienna. This was done to propagate the view of Gdańsk in terms of identity and history as a fundamentally German city. Examples of such architecture include the renovated elevation of the Green Gate,

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or the luxurious hotel Danzinger Hof. The status of the city would abruptly change with the end of the First World War, when a dispute over the city's ownership between the defeated Germany and newly reborn Polish state led to a compromise, creating the Free City of Danzig.

The Second World War and the city's destruction

This solution did little to ease the conflict, with revanchist sentiments becoming prevalent, especially after Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany and his subsequent demands for the return of the city. The Danzig crisis boiled over on September 1st 1939, when the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein visiting the Free City opened fire on the Polish garrison at Westerplatte, marking the beginning of the Second World War.

Apart from the shelling of Westerplatte, Nazi forces quickly advanced on other Polish sites, such as the Polish Post Office. The city itself, which was at that point ruled by a local branch of the Nazi party, was promptly incorporated into the Reich, with the state apparatus immediately carrying out repressions and mass executions against the "undesirables", particularly Poles, Jews and Kashubians.

Most of the next years of the conflict were rather uneventful for Gdańsk. The city contributed to the war effort, particularly through its shipyards and naval infrastructure. Neither the city nor its people were subject to much threat for most of the war, with the fighting happening far from its borders. There were instances of Allied bombing raids on the city, which were particularly aimed at the aforementioned naval capabilities. However, with Gdańsk being located significantly further than many other important targets, they were a rare occurrence. The damage and civilian casualties caused by them were unsubstantial, though worth noting.

After 14 days of fighting and intense bombardment, the Soviets stormed the main city.

The situation facing the city would change rapidly in early 1945. By this point in the war, the German army had been soundly defeated on the Eastern Front, with Soviet troops rapidly advancing towards Gdańsk. By March 13th they had reached the city turned fortress and began to lay siege. The air raids by Soviet and other Allied bombers intensified significantly, joined by the massive artillery bombardment of the advancing divisions. Over the next days, the Red Army would wrestle control over districts of Gdańsk such as Wrzeszcz, Stogi or Oliwa, dealing great damage to them and their populace, with plundering, mass murders, rapes and arson a common occurrence. After 14 days of fighting and intense bombardment,

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with many buildings such as the Great Armoury significantly damaged, the Soviets stormed the main city. The battle for the heart of Gdańsk was short but bloody, with the defenders capitulating on March 30th. Some managed to escape under cover of German artillery fire.

By the time of the storming, the city was heavily damaged, with 50 per cent of buildings destroyed. However, many houses, as well as important landmarks, were still standing. The total annihilation of the city came after the dust of fighting had settled. A systematic effort of plundering, raising and setting entire city districts on fire had begun. This was done in order to destroy the "Prussian heritage" of the city and smoke out any defenders left. As a result, the historic centre of the city was nearly entirely erased, with an estimated 90 to 95 per cent of its entirety destroyed, including many aforementioned buildings such as the Danzinger Hof and the Armoury.

A difficult question with many answers

After its capture, Gdańsk was integrated into the new Polish administration. Subsequently, the population dynamic of the city changed – many German residents fled or were expelled, and were replaced by Poles, who came especially from areas lost to the Soviets in the former eastern lands. With new rulers and a new populace in place, a question arose – what to do about the ruined city?

Opponents of reconstruction argued that the ruins of Gdańsk should be left standing as they are.

There were differing proposals, with many expressing opinions that Gdańsk should not be rebuilt at all. Proponents of this view argued that the Gdańsk of the past had always been intractable towards Poland and culturally distant, with the city's architecture, buildings and monuments a representation of Prussian heritage, which was fundamentally alien and unnecessary for the Polish people and nation. Some, therefore, suggested that Gdańsk should be forged anew – the historic centre should be raised and in its place a new modern metropolis built, with blocks of flats and wide streets. This would serve to solidify the city as inherently and eternally Polish, as well as help create a new model of the nation through the usage of socialist realism.

Other opponents of reconstruction went a step further, postulating that not only should Gdańsk not be rebuilt, but the ruins should be left standing as they are – a permanent monument to the horrors and destruction of war. Other still pushed for the ruins to be dismantled, leaving only the foundations of the original city intact,

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Photo: Polish National Digital Archive / Public Domain

An image of Gdańsk after the Second World War. After the war, the city became fully integrated as a Polish city, with differing proposals on how to proceed with the rebuilding, some arguing it shouldn't be rebuilt at all.

creating a sort of national park mixed with an open-air museum, reminiscent of the Forum Romanum or the ruins of Pompeii. Authors of such ideas further argued that the city centre of Gdańsk should be moved to a less destroyed district, such as Nowy Port or Wrzeszcz.

There were proponents of historic reconstruction as well, wishing to save and restore as much of the historic city as possible. It is this group that in the end would prove victorious, with the centre being designated for rebuilding. The exact form of what and how it would be rebuilt, however, was far from historic. The tenant houses and monuments were planned to be rebuilt or revamped in the style predating the "Germanification" of the city, all in an effort to further erase foreign heritage. However, due to a lack of documentation, many buildings would be given a façade only loosely based on history and a form completely detached from what stood in the past. The original layout of streets would also routinely be disregarded, with rebuilt houses being fabricated en masse, not utilizing and often destroying surviving elements of buildings.

The anti-German sentiment present during the reconstruction extended to important monuments of the city. This can be quite clearly seen with the fact that the Great Armory, built in the style that was considered "Polish Gdańsk", was entirely

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restored despite serious damage. At the same time, buildings such as the Danzinger Hof, in this case even with some of the structure surviving, would be torn down.

The biggest change, however, would come with the purpose of the historic city centre. The reality of the post-war situation in Gdańsk, which desperately needed housing for its new incoming population, would make restoring the ornate and luxurious interiors of tenant houses impractical and impossible. Instead, what exists today is a series of blocks of flats, built to house settlers and workers, hidden behind a false, though often convincing, façade.

The above statement accurately describes the modern-day historic centre, born out of necessity, compromise and historic revisionism. Despite this, many tend to not know about the destruction and subsequent reconstruction of the city, nor the impact that forces such as nationalism, socialism and basic needs had on that process. These would all shape how the buildings would look and what monuments would be saved. Those events are worth knowing about, as even despite the fact that Gdańsk preserved a historic feeling, this was never a guarantee. What stands today is the result of one of many concepts, which itself was a product of its era and a testament to Poland's tumultuous and varied history. EE

This text was prepared in the framework of the 2024/2025 edition of the Solidarity Academy, an international project of the European Solidarity Centre, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Warsaw, and New Eastern Europe. The project aims to inspire and support the development of young leaders across Europe.

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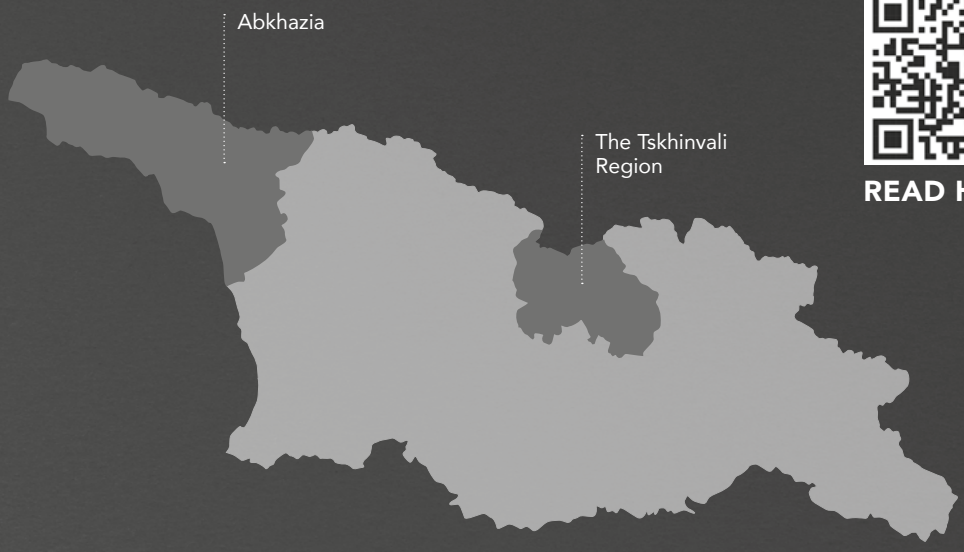
The "foreign policy" of Georgia's occupied regions, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, relies entirely on Russia's diplomatic, political, and logistical support. We examine the "foreign policy" activities of these regions since 2008 August war, including decision-making processes and bilateral relations with other states and various groups.

"FOREIGN POLICY" OF THE RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED REGIONS OF GEORGIA AFTER THE AUGUST 2008 WAR



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This publication was prepared within the framework of the Rondeli Foundation's project **Roadmap to the Kremlin's Policy in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region.**

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NATO at the crossroads

After the Hague Summit

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Eoin Micheál McNamara	**Beyond compromise. Towards the Europeanization of NATO's Eastern Flank**

In the turbulent summer of 2025, NATO finds itself at one of the most consequential junctures in its modern history. The echoes of the Hague Summit have barely faded, yet the Alliance is already grappling with a rapidly evolving and uncertain strategic environment. Held against the backdrop of the new US presidency and the war in Ukraine, which despite efforts for peace appears to be intensifying, the summit starkly revealed the multiple and sometimes conflicting pressures reshaping the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. What emerged from the summit was a NATO both emboldened by new commitments and restless in the face of daunting internal and external pressures. As the world's pre-eminent security alliance stands on the threshold of its eighth decade, the central questions now revolve around how NATO will adapt to accumulating crises, retain its cohesion, and safeguard its core mission: deterrence and defence for the transatlantic community.

The stakes could hardly be higher. The return of Donald Trump has cast a long shadow, forcing European NATO members and Canada to re-evaluate their contributions, responsibilities, and strategic autonomy. Trump-era rhetoric, and the transactional approach to alliance politics that returns with it, has reignited per-

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ennial anxieties over burden-sharing and the credibility of America's commitment to Article 5, NATO's collective defence guarantee. The Hague Summit did extract historic pledges of increased defence spending from European allies and saw the Alliance articulate its clearest blueprint yet for the years ahead. Yet, beneath the public unity, there are rifts and doubts.

What is unquestionable is that NATO's margins for error are narrowing. Russia's war against Ukraine has fundamentally recast the Eastern Flank: what was once an arena for "assurance" has become a zone of "forward defence" with the implicit, if not explicit, recognition that a direct attack on Alliance territory is considered plausible by the late 2020s. The cumulative effects of Russian hybrid campaigns, from cyberattacks and disinformation to weaponized migration and sabotage, have brought "multi-domain" warfare out of military theory and directly into the daily realities of NATO policy. Intelligence assessments circulated in Warsaw, Berlin and Vilnius warn that Russia could regain conventional readiness to threaten NATO's front line by as early as 2027. Alongside this, the battlefield realities in Ukraine remain dire: this is an attritional struggle exposing both the strengths and weaknesses of the European defence industrial base, the challenge of long-term support for Kyiv, and the limits of Alliance unity when resources and (political) patience become strained.

Yet external threats are only part of the equation. The "360-degree" approach formalized in Alliance strategy, managing not just Russia, but also challenges from its southern neighbourhood and the growing global influence of China, requires a level of consensus and resources that is increasingly difficult to sustain. The emergence of non-traditional threats, from climate-driven instability in the Sahel to disruptive technologies and the systemic ambitions of Beijing, has layered complexity onto an already dense threat environment. These challenges test NATO's agility, but also its cohesion: sharp divergences between the strategic cultures of members on the Eastern Flank, those shielded by the Atlantic, and others focused on southern peripheries are becoming more pronounced. The debate on how much of NATO's attention, and investment, should be devoted to Asia-Pacific engagement, and at what cost to European deterrence, is not academic. Rather, it cuts to the heart of what NATO is, and whom it serves.

This tension between unity and divergence animated our seminar "NATO after the Washington Summit – Challenges and the Way Forward", which was held in November 2024 at the Jagiellonian University*. As both the public panel and

* The seminar was organized by the LSE IDEAS Central and South-East Europe Programme at the Jagiellonian University and LSE IDEAS, with support from *New Eastern Europe*, and was funded by the Future Democracy Lab Flagship Project of the Excellence Initiative at the Jagiellonian University.

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closed-door expert discussion panels attested, prominent scholars and practitioners analyzed NATO's ability to "hold together" under the weight of diverging threat perceptions. What became apparent is that sustaining transatlantic solidarity depends not only on shared assessments of risk, but also on ensuring that NATO adapts – organizationally, militarily and politically – to an era of simultaneous crises. Policy adjustments, from streamlining decision-making to fostering interoperability in new domains (cyber, space, artificial intelligence), are urgent if NATO is to remain "fit for purpose". The critical role of new members, most notably Finland and Sweden, was repeatedly emphasized as a source of renewed vigor and credibility on the Alliance's north-eastern frontier. At the same time, debates over the Southern Flank and the definition of "comprehensive security" reveal that long-term challenges such as migration, terrorism and fragile states are far from resolved.

Looking to the future, the questions before NATO scholars and policymakers have never been more acute: can Europe truly close the defence investment gap? Will the US commitment to NATO endure regardless of domestic political shifts? Should the Alliance recalibrate its global ambitions, or double down on its Euro-Atlantic core? And in a world increasingly marked by hard power competition and systemic rivalry, is NATO prepared not only to respond to crises, but to shape the security order over the coming decades? The answers will not be found in declarations or communiqués alone. They depend on a sustained, concerted effort to reimagine Atlanticism for a new era, one that matches solutions with resources, unity with flexibility, and ambition with realism.

This special section of articles on NATO draws on insights from both the public and private portions of our expert seminar, weaving together academic perspectives, practitioner experience, and the most current policy debates. It seeks to offer an honest assessment of NATO's current predicament and an informed guide to the hard decisions ahead. In doing so, our aim is to provoke a necessary conversation: how best to safeguard a Euro-Atlantic future in times of permanent crisis. NE

Wojciech Michnik, contributing editor, assistant professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

Adam Reichardt, editor in chief, *New Eastern Europe*.

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Built with doubt and worry

NATO in the second Trump presidency

ALEXANDER LANOSZKA

Declaring that NATO is on the cusp of dying is premature. It is far from moribund. However, while the Alliance will likely persist, this does not mean that it has a clean slate of health.

When leaders from across NATO met in Washington last year to celebrate the Alliance's 75th anniversary at its annual summit, a nervous energy was in the air. Then US President Joe Biden had recently delivered a disastrous performance in his presidential debate with his rival Donald Trump. For many observers, the future of the transatlantic relationship had become clouded in dark uncertainty. With Ukraine on the back foot against Russia and worries lingering over the pace and scale of European rearmament, would the Alliance survive yet another four years of populist tumult coming from the White House?

Shortly after that summit, Biden renounced his bid for re-election, paving the way for his vice president, Kamala Harris, to lose decisively to Trump in November. As president-elect, Trump wasted little time in provoking discord within the Alliance. He spoke openly of grabbing Greenland from Denmark, all while mocking Canada's political sovereignty and territorial integrity. He promised, and would later impose, large and sweeping tariffs on his countries' closest trading partners, including Canada, the European Union and the United Kingdom. Whatever constraints there had been on Trump during his first time in office were now gone.

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Worse, the officials surrounding him echoed his rhetoric in a manner largely unseen before, with Vice President JD Vance launching vitriol against European allies at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025. The first four weeks of Trump's restored presidency was a bad omen.

Surviving the turmoil

That said, declaring that NATO is dying is premature. It is far from moribund. To be sure, large baseline tariffs and annexation rhetoric are corrosive to the health of the Alliance. The tariffs intensify guns-versus-butter trade-offs that European countries already must confront amid a Russia willing and able to pursue revanchism. The annexation rhetoric makes fragile norms regarding territorial integrity even more delicate. However, we must remember the reason why NATO exists in a robust institutional form is precisely to survive the sort of turmoil that characterizes our present.

Military alliances, after all, are unnatural. They do not simply exist because two or more countries decide to have one as they share enough interests with one another. In fact, military alliances of the sort based on written treaties like NATO are founded upon doubt and uncertainty. Countries enter these arrangements because they need assurances that their pledges of support will be neither abused nor unreciprocated. They develop a thicket of decision-making bodies, political and legal commitments, military exercises and exchange programmes, and other types of initiatives that allow them to coordinate with one another. They make these investments because they often can disagree on how to address a common security challenge, let alone on how to evaluate it. Since military alliances centre on questions of war and peace, the stakes involved in managing these disagreements are not trivial.

Military alliances of the sort based on written treaties like NATO are founded upon doubt and uncertainty.

That is why former British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston's oft-cited observation that his country had "no permanent allies but permanent interests" is misleading. Interests change, as do the allies themselves. The task of the institutionalized alliance is to absorb those changes in a manner that suits its membership. Generally, military alliances do not disintegrate rapidly in peacetime because of such changes. These cases are rare. Examples include when the US unilaterally ended its mutual defence treaty with Taiwan to placate a normalized China, or when Warsaw Pact members voted to remove themselves from the yoke of Soviet rule by disbanding their alliance.

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Other alliances have met their demise on the battlefield. The Dual Alliance of Austria-Hungary and Germany is one such example. Continuous battlefield defeat arguably brought about the end of the Franco-Russian alliance by placing too much duress on the tsarist regime and subsequently the Provisional Government. This was all to the benefit of the Bolshevik revolutionaries.

Not going into zombie mode

Other military alliances run down the clock because there had been too much hostility. This is seen in the case of the Sino-Soviet mutual defence treaty and its expiry in 1979. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization dissolved itself following much internal discord, but many of its members remained treaty allies with each other through different commitments, whether through NATO (France, UK and the US), the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand and the US) or the bilateral agreements that the United States has with the Philippines and Taiwan.

Would NATO similarly run down the clock and turn into a zombie in the meantime? Or would it meet a more abrupt end? To date, the Alliance remains robust despite the discord between Washington and several allied capitals. Trump could have easily paralyzed the organization by refusing to appoint a US Permanent Representative to NATO, but he decided against doing so by appointing a loyal friend – Matthew Whittaker – to the position. Since the UK and the EU have already signed a trade deal with the Trump administration, it is clear that trade

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will continue, albeit in a reduced form across the Atlantic. This will help spare the Alliance in its own compartmentalized space.

Many observers agree that some withdrawal of US military assets is likely to happen in the future, with key members of the Trump administration preferring to reorient the means of national security towards hemispheric defence and the problem set posed by China in the Indo-Pacific. Whatever the wisdom of such a withdrawal, especially given Russia's brutal military campaign against Ukraine, the Alliance as an institution will still have the assets to frame European defence in the years to come.

Navigating the future

That the Alliance will likely persist does not mean that it has a clean slate of health. The United States will not be taking Canadian land, but the rhetoric from the White House has stoked anti-Americanism inside Canada, with experts and politicians calling for defence procurement away from its southern neighbour. The silence from NATO's leadership on the status of Greenland is redolent of how NATO has tended towards silence when relations between Greece and Turkey have turned sour over their competing island claims. Because military-to-military cooperation thrives on trust and strong interpersonal relations, the recent dismissal of many senior officials in the US could create unease in many national defence establishments across the Euro-Atlantic space.

Nevertheless, optimism was never the reason for why politicians founded NATO in the first place and, over time, established various institutional mechanisms under its auspices. To the contrary, they had little hope that transatlantic cooperation would last long on autopilot. Out of their own fears and doubts, they built what is effectively a large container ship capable of enduring the roughest of conditions in the high seas. It falls on the current generation of leaders to steer the massive vessel of defence cooperation that is NATO through the choppy waters ahead. EE

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NATO during the second Trump administration

Actions speak louder than words

LUCA RATTI

Many recent assessments of US foreign policy suggest that the second presidential term of Donald Trump is having a disruptive and potentially destructive impact on transatlantic relations. This is particularly the case regarding NATO's future and the American commitment to European security. However, fears that the administration will renege on the US commitment to European security and NATO are simply misplaced.

Regardless of the political colour of the administration in the White House, the preservation of a secure and prosperous Europe remains an enduring American interest. In the future, there will be three critical theatres for the United States: Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. All these theatres are deeply interconnected and even more so than they were during the Cold War, as was acknowledged in NATO's last strategic concept adopted in Madrid in 2022. Although in recent years global competition from China and deepening tensions with Russia – especially over Ukraine – have raised concerns about Washington's ability to uphold its commitments in both the North Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific, the interconnectedness between Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East remains

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clear. This interdependence will ensure that the transatlantic partnership continues to thrive, though perhaps in a more transactional form.

Old and new warnings about NATO's impending crisis

The inauguration of Donald Trump's second presidential term in January 2025 quickly triggered a flurry of speculation by both policymakers and analysts about its short and long-term impact on relations between the US and its allies. More specifically, *Innenpolitik* scholars, explaining foreign policy primarily in terms of domestic variables and internal political processes, stressed that Trump's return to the White House would make US foreign policy fickle and quixotic, endangering the very survival of the transatlantic alliance – the bedrock of Europe's security for more than 75 years. Some even accused the administration of "neo-imperialist" ambitions, which might ultimately work in favour of Russia's revisionist agenda in the former Soviet space, allegedly triggering a new Yalta – a much-inflated metaphor to explain Europe's hypothetical division into spheres of influence.

The inauguration of Trump's second term triggered a flurry of speculation on relations between the US and its allies.

These analyses are fundamentally flawed and comparisons with Yalta are actually oxymoronic: participants in the 1945 Yalta Conference – the US, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union – never contracted a deal to divide Europe. Rather, they made a formal pledge "to the earliest possible establishment through free elections of governments responsive to the will of the people" in the liberated countries. US diplomatic endeavours were instrumental in prompting the Yalta Declaration on liberated Europe, which restated some of the key principles of the 1941 Atlantic Charter. While in the early 1950s the UK was inclined to acknowledge the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, the US firmly continued to adhere to the principles of the Yalta declaration: in 1959 the Eisenhower administration established the National Captive Nations Committee, designating the third week of July as "Captive Nations Week" to raise awareness about the plight of countries under communist oppression. Furthermore, throughout the Cold War the United States maintained a strict non-recognition policy with respect to the Soviet annexation of the Baltic republics in 1940.

Predictions that the administration will cause NATO lasting damage are based on the *Innenpolitik* model which, focusing on the role of personalities and political parties rather than systemic dynamics, privileges narrower frames of analysis and data collection over longer periods and timeframes. These assessments overlook

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Photo courtesy of the White House

Regardless of the political colour of the administration in the White House, the preservation of a secure and prosperous Europe remains an enduring American interest.

the fact that the Trump administration's attitude to NATO is not unprecedented. Both Democratic and Republican presidencies long expected Europeans to do more in transatlantic security, while it is well known that during the 1970s Nixon played hardball with European allies, pursuing at the same time bilateral diplomacy with both the Soviets and the Chinese on a number of issues, including arms control and Vietnam. Rather than being the product of domestic political variables or personal tantrums, the policies of both administrations led by Donald Trump are best understood as the outcome of a complex mix of both systemic and domestic dynamics.

Alarm bells old and new

The impact of Donald Trump's first administration on NATO between 2017 and 2020 triggered similar concerns and equally pessimistic evaluations. Trump's America First agenda and his emphasis on bilateralism and burden-sharing were seen as marking a U-turn from post-war US multilateralism and as a source of disruption in relations between the western allies. For the first time in more than 70

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years, a US president had publicly evoked the prospect of withdrawing from the Alliance, brandishing it as obsolete and publicly calling into question NATO's value for the United States.

Nonetheless, the bulk of Trump's arguments was hardly a novelty: burden-sharing disputes are as old as the Alliance, while accusations of freeloading periodically appear in transatlantic relations and were often made by many of Trump's predecessors, including Barack Obama. These accusations reflect a long-standing and cross-factional view in Washington that there exists a dysfunction when it comes to the contribution made by member states to the Alliance's management and operations.

In the months before the 2024 US presidential elections, *Innenpolitik* theorists rang their alarm bells loud about the potentially disruptive consequences of a new Trump administration. Their argument was that a new Trump presidency might take the opportunity to finish the process that began during its first term, fatally undermining NATO's purpose and internal cohesion. Before his return to the White House, Trump reiterated his threats to withdraw from the Alliance if other states did not spend two per cent of their GDPs on defence and then pressed for five per cent% as a new benchmark for defence spending at NATO's Hague summit in June 2025.

There are also fears that the administration will not be supportive of Ukraine and prone to achieve a bilateral deal with Russia without taking into account European and Ukrainian interests and concerns. Nonetheless, none of these catastrophic predictions have come true or have affected NATO in any significant way. There has also not been the slightest mention of the prospect of a US withdrawal from the Alliance in NATO's planning. Rather, after Trump's bilateral summit with Putin on August 15, the administration held firm on its commitment to maintain economic and military aid to Ukraine, although continuing to rule out the prospect of NATO membership. This is, however, hardly an element of novelty, as the previous Biden administration had been itself reluctant to invite Ukraine into NATO or to allow Kyiv to strike deeply into Russian territory.

Continuity rather than change

Regardless of the political colour of the administration in the White House, the preservation of a secure and prosperous Europe remains an enduring American interest. In future years there will be three critical theatres for the United States in the world. Europe will be one of them, with the other two being the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. All these theatres are deeply interconnected and even more so than they were during the Cold War. While security in the Indo-Pacific will be the

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US's utmost priority, no American administration will benefit from disengaging from Europe and the Middle East to focus exclusively on the Asian theatre.

Rather, the US will need to promote stability both in Europe and the Middle East to focus on the Indo-Pacific region and China's containment. For this and other reasons, the US will derive no benefits from NATO's hypothetical demise. On the contrary, in the future, Washington will continue to need the support of its European and Asian allies to deal with a number of pressing international issues, stretching from security in Eurasia and the enlarged Mediterranean, to relations with both Russia and China and – last but not least – to keep alive the prospects of a revitalization of the United Nations.

The interconnectedness between these different regions will make sure therefore that NATO will continue to endure. However, the US will need to make sure that things do not boil over in Europe or the Middle East in order to focus on the Indo-Pacific. Trump's frantic attempt to accelerate diplomatic momentum and bring about a settlement in Ukraine reflects this concern. The administration also pursued diplomatic initiatives in the 30-year-old dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the armed conflict between India and Pakistan, military skirmishes between Cambodia and Thailand, and the ongoing confrontation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza as well as over the Iranian nuclear programme. Many of the forecasts that NATO will wither away as a result of Trump's policies are therefore preposterous and based on an ideological evaluation of the administration's foreign policy rather than on its actual choices and actions. After all, the peace talks that ended the Vietnam war lasted more than four years, involved shifting strategies and experienced a number of setbacks. While the current administration will not disentangle the US from European security, at the same time, the European allies will not be able to turn their back on the Indo-Pacific, where instability and war will heavily harm European industries and economies. Although the Alliance has no formal role to play in Asia, it would be more difficult than during the Second Indochina War in the 1960s, to separate Europe and the Indo-Pacific today.

Many of the forecasts that NATO will wither away as a result of Trump's policies are preposterous.

Stuck together

Although being adamant about the need to pursue dialogue with Russia, Trump also made it clear that he will not abandon Ukraine, let alone withdraw the US from

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NATO. The president himself, Vice President JD Vance, and Secretary of Defence Peter Hegseth have been franker than their Democratic predecessors in denigrating Europe's lack of capabilities. The administration has also been less cooperative on economic and trade issues. Nonetheless, it also displayed awareness that Americans and Europeans continue to need each other. Equally, Europeans remain fully conscious of the indispensable role that the US has played and continues to play for European security. In the last three decades, wars in former Yugoslavia, the periodic reoccurrence of conflict in the Middle East and, more recently, the war in Ukraine have broadly demonstrated that Europe has neither the will nor the strength to deal with external threats without American backing and support. Hence, Europeans and the US are stuck together.

This is certainly not the first time that the end of NATO has been announced. Throughout its existence, the Alliance has faced and dealt with periodic crises. Many of the analyses that argue that the Trump administration poses an existential threat to NATO focus on unit-level variables and a narrow timeframe. They fail to account for broader systemic dynamics and to acknowledge that over its 75 years of existence the Alliance has lived through several "near-death" experiences. However, it has never stopped acting as a spiritual embodiment of the political West. EE

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When European security meets reality

ARTUR GRUSZCZAK

Russia's full-scale military invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory has flagrantly violated the fragile post-Cold War security ecosystem shaped by the transatlantic community. The intricate structure of European security requires bold and decisive action to establish an effective and credible mechanism of deterrence and response. Such a mechanism must rest upon a multi-level construction of the transatlantic security community.

NATO has long served as the mainstay of Europe's security and prosperity, underpinned by American military power and a permanent US presence on the continent. Although it has neither prevented conflicts in Europe nor effectively countered hybrid warfare, terrorism and violent extremism, NATO has consistently deterred large-scale military aggression by hostile states. Europe has thus lived under the Alliance's protective umbrella – largely upheld by the United States – but this reality may be subject to change.

The central question posed here concerns the foundations of European security in today's volatile and turbulent environment: is Europe capable of ensuring its own security without the US-led NATO shield? If so, do European ambitions to develop "strategic autonomy" or "sovereignty" strengthen NATO, or foreshadow a profound transformation of the Alliance in line with a multi-level governance model?

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Geostrategic shifts

War has returned to the European continent. In truth, it never disappeared, even during the post-Cold War era framed by the liberal international order. It evolved, assumed new forms, and migrated across the interlinked domains of modern warfare. This development has embarrassed political elites and security experts alike, both within international institutions (such as the European Union, NATO and the OSCE) and among the governments of European states.

The enlargement of the EU and the prospective expansion of NATO must be regarded as principal triggers for the overt confrontation with a neo-imperialist Russia. Georgia, Moldova and, most notably, Ukraine – following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity – pursued a fundamental geopolitical pivot away from the post-Soviet sphere dominated by the concept of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World). Their pro-western and pro-European choices, legitimized by citizens through free and fair elections, signalled a seemingly irreversible departure from Russian hegemony.

Moscow has denied its pro-western neighbours the sovereign right to determine their own security arrangements.

However, these developments, accompanied by increasingly close cooperation with NATO, were perceived by the Kremlin as incursions into Russia's sphere of vital interests. This is especially true with regards to Ukraine, which Russia considers the cradle of its statehood and nationhood. NATO's hard power, combined with the soft power of European political and economic integration, came into direct confrontation with a belligerent and revisionist Russia. Moscow has denied its pro-western neighbours the sovereign right to determine its own security arrangements and development paths, while simultaneously demanding the restoration of the pre-1997 geopolitical order in Europe.

The Kremlin's geostrategic countermeasures culminated in the 2022 military invasion of Ukraine, precipitating global tectonic shifts and a deepening rift within the European continent – pitting Russia and its allies against the western community. Admittedly, Hungary – and, more recently, Slovakia – have adopted pro-Russian positions within the EU, but they have not obstructed the adoption of sanctions against Moscow, the provision of substantial assistance to Ukraine, or the drastic reduction of Russian imports, including energy resources.

Moreover, Russia's attempt to re-establish Cold War-style divisions in Europe triggered a significant backlash against its geopolitical interests. NATO's enlargement, through the accession of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024, extended the Alliance's Eastern Flank northwards, completing the integration of the Nordic region into the North Atlantic community. Importantly, both Sweden and Finland

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are also EU member states actively engaged in the Common Security and Defence Policy, or CSDP, contributing to the Union's security governance and crisis management. As a result, NATO's European pillar has been significantly reinforced, yet simultaneously rendered more vulnerable to Russian threats. Consequently, European allies now bear increased responsibility for protecting their states and societies from hostile Russian activities and those of its proxies.

Can Europe deliver?

In light of these geostrategic shifts and within an increasingly uncertain security environment, the EU and its member states must effectively recalibrate their strategies, policies and instruments. This is no simple task. Formal decision-making within the EU is bound by the principle of unanimity, which is increasingly challenged by the so-called free-riding states, such as Hungary. Alternatives, such as "coalitions of the willing", risk complicating EU policymaking and calling into question the legal foundations of the CSDP. They also cast doubt on the plausibility of the concept of "strategic autonomy", a notion strongly championed by France and its president, Emmanuel Macron.

This concept is grounded in two interconnected premises: first, that the European Union is capable of gradually assuming full responsibility for its own security; and second, that the EU can enhance its global relevance through multilateral partnerships within an international order based on rules it has helped shape. In practice, however, EU member states have deprioritized defence infrastructure and capabilities since the end of the Cold War. The resulting gaps are considerable and necessitate a far-reaching transformation of defence systems, arms industries and military capabilities – a process likely to take many years, if not decades, assuming a relatively stable and predictable security environment.

Meanwhile, Europe must contend with the so-called fear factor: the spectre of a Trump administration. Its erratic and often unpredictable actions have generated confusion and unease among European partners. Beyond rhetorical threats (such as the proposal to seize Greenland), accusations that the EU has "screwed" and "cheated" the US on trade, and criticisms of alleged censorship and leniency towards mass immigration, the Trump administration has presented a major challenge to the credibility of the US as a reliable security provider for Europe.

Although President Trump and senior officials have declared continued US commitment to NATO and collective defence, significant doubts persist. Trump has repeatedly questioned whether the US should uphold its Article 5 obligations if a NATO member under attack has failed to allocate at least two per cent of GDP

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Photo courtesy of the European Commission

An employee at a German defence industrial facility repairing a Puma battle tank. The European Union and its member states must effectively recalibrate their strategies, policies and instruments to focus on their own security. This is no simple task.

on defence. He later raised this threshold to five per cent, chastising European states for falling short of even the original target of two per cent. This transactional, mercantilist view of collective defence places continuous pressure on European allies to accelerate their military build-up – presumably with substantial purchases from the US defence industry.

Bold and decisive action

The 2025 NATO summit in The Hague has added a new dimension to European security, propelling the continent into a decisive new phase of collective defence and strategic adaptation. With the unprecedented commitment from all allies (minus Spain) to raise defence spending to at least five per cent of GDP by 2035, European policymakers now face both opportunity and obligation: to overhaul their defence industries, reinforce the Alliance's Eastern Flank, and close critical capability gaps exposed by Russia's continuous aggression in Ukraine. This recalibration answers the urgent need for a Europe ready to shoulder greater responsibility, ensuring

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that both the Alliance and its European pillar remain credible and resilient in an era of persistent insecurity.

Russia's full-scale military invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory has flagrantly violated the fragile post-Cold War security ecosystem shaped by the transatlantic community. The intricate structure of European security requires bold and decisive action to establish an effective and credible mechanism of deterrence and response. Such a mechanism must rest upon a multi-level construction of the transatlantic security community. NATO should remain the principal military force provider, relying on key US capabilities such as rapid force deployment, air-lift capacity, ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance), and situational awareness building.

European states, forming NATO's European pillar and operating under the EU's CSDP, must be integrated into the Alliance's core strategic and operational functions. Ideally, they should develop the readiness to operate autonomously or assume specific roles and responsibilities in relation to NATO where appropriate. Finally, individual states must invest significantly – financially and politically – in their national defence systems and capacities. Ultimately, they are the ones most likely to absorb the first strike in any full-scale armed conflict and must be prepared to defend their sovereign territory independently, at least in the initial phase. EE

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NATO in times of crisis

Safeguarding the future of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance

WOJCIECH MICHNIK

At its 2025 summit in The Hague, NATO confronted a pivotal moment, agreeing on a historic pledge to spend five per cent of GDP on defence by 2035. The decision was welcomed by US President Donald Trump and signalled unity. However, it also exposed deep undercurrents of challenges facing the Alliance.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk cautioned during the 2024 US presidential election campaign that Europe must be prepared to shoulder far greater responsibility for its own security, regardless of who enters the White House: "Some claim that the future of Europe depends on the American elections," Tusk noted pointedly, "but in fact, it depends first and foremost on us … Whatever the outcome, the era of geopolitical outsourcing is over."

Fast forward to 2025 and those words appear strikingly relevant. Amid growing signs of US retrenchment and strategic ambivalence towards Europe, NATO allies have faced a sobering reality check. Yet, to a significant degree, they have begun to respond. The decisions taken at the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague, including increased defence spending and a stronger focus on forward deterrence, suggest a growing European willingness to step up and adapt to a shifting transatlantic balance.

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Bold commitment

As NATO gathered for the 2025 summit in The Hague, the Alliance found itself yet again at a crucial juncture, facing a maelstrom of both internal challenges and mounting external threats. The summit's most headline-grabbing outcome, a bold commitment by all 32 allies to invest five per cent of their GDP in defence by 2035, symbolized not only unity but also the acute sense of urgency permeating the Alliance. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, presiding over his first summit, implored allies to embrace a "wartime mindset", underscoring the need for rapid defence production and procurement. The decision, embedded in The Hague summit declaration, split the target: 3.5 per cent must support core military expenditure, such as salaries, weapons and munitions, while the remaining 1.5 per cent is loosely defined, a diplomatic compromise to safeguard consensus among divergent economies. This historic pledge was paired with a resolute recommitment to Article 5, the foundation of collective defence, and a reaffirmation of support for an embattled Ukraine, whose sovereignty remains under relentless assault from Russia.

> Trump's ambiguities regarding Article 5 and hints at US withdrawal from obligations have left European capitals anxious.

Yet, the overall atmosphere is far different and less festive than than it was over a year ago during NATO's 75th anniversary summit in Washington, DC. Now, within the Alliance itself, cracks are increasingly visible, exacerbated by the second Trump administration's acutely transactional approach to Euro-Atlantic security. President Trump arrived at the summit in The Hague demanding concrete results from European allies, who finally witnessed the realization of his signature policy demand: dramatic increases in European defence outlays. The summit was widely seen as a diplomatic win for Trump; he publicly claimed credit for bringing about an unprecedented commitment that had eluded his predecessors. Yet this apparent unity masks persistent mistrust. Trump's earlier ambiguities regarding Article 5 and faint hints at US withdrawal from Alliance obligations have left European capitals anxious, prompting frenetic diplomatic manoeuvring, especially from allies like Spain who have resisted the steep five per cent target. While Rutte's leadership and deft consensus-building secured agreement, the broader transatlantic relationship remains fraught.

The current political climate in Washington DC – boosted by the Trump administration – questions NATO's continued relevance and seeks to recalculate burdens, pushing allies to rearm at record-breaking scales or face American disengagement. Although the summit ended on an optimistic note, the transactional

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dynamic at the Alliance's heart and looming danger of US plans to scale down its military presence in Europe, represent a profound internal challenge for NATO in the years ahead.

European members, meanwhile, are struggling to balance soaring defence obligations with already stretched public finances. Decades of underinvestment, combined with deindustrialization and regulatory fragmentation, have left Europe's defence industrial base ill-prepared for the demands of the new NATO standard. Even prior to The Hague summit, most European allies hovered near the former two per cent spending benchmark – a goal agreed upon over ten years ago during the NATO summit in Wales.

Triple challenge

Thus, raising that to five per cent represents a seismic budgetary shift, which is politically and economically quite difficult to achieve. Governments must now contend with the triple challenge of boosting defence budgets, supporting Ukraine's war effort, and negotiating future EU fiscal frameworks. Political leaders face mounting pressure, as painful budgetary trade-offs threaten to crowd out other priorities. Austerity fatigue among European publics could weaken political will, while the slow pace of the industrial ramp-up risks undermining NATO's newfound resolve.

Critical capability gaps, particularly in air and missile defence, artillery, drones, and military mobility, remain acute. Realistically, it will take years of sustained, credible investment to address these vulnerabilities.

These internal challenges are heightened by the unyielding external threats that frame current NATO's strategic landscape. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, in its fourth year, is intensifying. Moscow's military has adapted, increasing the pace and scale of missile and drone strikes, with recent months seeing Russia's net territorial control in Ukraine expand alongside devastating attacks on major cities. Kyiv's resilience depends acutely on continued western support, especially advanced air defence systems, which Moscow's military has adapted, increasing the pace and scale of missile and drone strikes.he Hague summit pledged to maintain. Even though the summit did not result in further commitments to bring Ukraine into NATO, the allies reaffirmed their "enduring sovereign commitments to provide support to Ukraine" that will "include direct contributions towards Ukraine's defence and its defence industry when calculating Allies' defence spending".

Moscow's military has adapted, increasing the pace and scale of missile and drone strikes.

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As if the current security landscape was not demanding enough, NATO must now contend with the growing possibility of a direct Russian attack on Alliance territory. According to several recent assessments, such an event could occur as early as 2027. While few anticipate a full-scale invasion on the scale of Russia's war against Ukraine, alternative scenarios, ranging from hybrid operations to cognitive warfare tactics designed to spread disinformation, incite panic, and undermine political cohesion, are increasingly plausible. These threats warrant serious consideration and coordinated preparation across the Alliance. Recent warnings from NATO commanders and European leaders, most notably Poland's prime minister and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, underscore that Moscow could be militarily prepared for such a confrontation as early as in 2027. This is a timeline recently echoed in intelligence and policy assessments from multiple allied capitals.

Reshaping Euro-Atlantic security

The risk spectrum is broad: Russian hybrid campaigns against NATO territory have already accelerated, with nearly 150 documented incidents since 2022 involving cyberattacks, sabotage, weaponized migration, and election interference across the Alliance. As recently as mid-2025, the intensification of these campaigns has prompted a strategic shift within NATO, spurring investment in multi-domain defences, from hardening critical infrastructure on the Eastern Flank to developing robust cognitive warfare countermeasures designed to protect decision-making processes and strengthen societal resilience. The cumulative effect is a constant, low-level shadow war intended to destabilize the Alliance from within and test its ability to deter further escalation, making an urgent case for unity and vigilance at every level of Euro-Atlantic security.

> China's economic diplomacy, technological ambitions, and targeted investments have positioned it as a potential geopolitical rival.

As Valerii Pekar recently pointed out in an essay for *New Eastern Europe*, from the point of view of "European security, the question arises whether the continent's countries are ready for such a war – high-tech, multi-domain, liminal, postmodern. This means that there must be readiness of not only armies, but societies".

At the same time, China's steady ascent as a global power looms large over NATO's future. Beijing's economic diplomacy, technological ambitions, and targeted investments across Asia, Africa and beyond have positioned China as both a sys-

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temic competitor and a potential geopolitical rival. Its "Made in China 2025" and "China Standards 2035" initiatives signal an intent to set international standards in key domains. While Beijing has yet to challenge NATO militarily, its growing influence is shaping Alliance planning and resources, particularly as some European and American states worry about a diverging world order. From this perspective, NATO cannot only adapt to hybrid and conventional threats from Russia by strengthening its defence and deterrence. Instead, it must also manage transatlantic uncertainties and recalibrate its long-term strategy for a multipolar era increasingly shaped by China's assertiveness, thereby reshaping Euro-Atlantic security architecture for the decades ahead. Whether the leaders of NATO member states can withstand the surge of populist sentiments within their societies, and whether these societies are patient enough to bear the burdens of security and economic transformation required to safeguard a resilient Alliance in times of crisis, remains uncertain, if not increasingly doubtful. EE

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Not all quiet on the Southern Flank

MICHELE TESTONI

The 2025 NATO summit in The Hague marked a strategic turning point for European and Mediterranean security, compelling Allies to commit to a substantial increase in defence investment. This renewed focus is not solely about countering Russia on the Eastern Flank. It should also provide fresh resources to address enduring vulnerabilities and asymmetries across the South.

Three years have passed since the adoption of NATO's latest Strategic Concept at the Madrid Summit in June of 2022. Facing an overall reconfiguration of its strategic scenario – the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's rise as a major global actor, and the exponential growth of hybrid threats – the Alliance embraced a 360-degree security approach. While NATO's "core tasks" remain valid, its priorities have shifted.

First of all, the territorial defence of frontline states in the East and the strengthening of deterrence mechanisms have taken centre stage. Simultaneously, cyber – a relatively new domain in security – is an indisputable reality: a "grey zone" populated by different attempts to spread fake news and hostile propaganda and to undermine critical infrastructures. Last but not least, the resurgence of great power politics has not removed the persistence of non-traditional security threats such as climate change, transnational terrorism, migration flows, or pandemics.

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Three neighbourhoods

As the Alliance's centre of gravity has moved North-East, NATO's Southern Flank risks being marginalized. In order to maintain a somewhat balanced approach, in May 2024 NATO released a report on how to improve cooperation with its Southern partner countries. Covering four main axes – regional specialization; specific thematic areas; cooperation with other organizations; and the streamlining of NATO's internal structures – the document consists of 114 policy recommendations whose goal is to strengthen the Alliance's "political dialogue about and with the region". This is to be done in particular through "a sustainable long-term commitment … [and] deeper understanding of partners' needs and perceptions".

However, not all that glitters is gold. The gap between announcements, planning and implementation persists. NATO's South remains plagued by a number of unresolved issues, which require a higher degree of strategic awareness and policy activity. There are three major problems: the geopolitical ambiguity of the Mediterranean basin; the structural weaknesses of the South and the inherent difficulties in stabilizing the region; and, a problematic coalition-building process among Mediterranean allies.

Geography is a powerful stimulus in shaping defence policies. The Southern Flank is not a homogenous region and enjoys the lack of a clearly identifiable threat. The experts' report speaks correctly of three "Southern Neighbourhoods": the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa. Each of them is characterized by a specific combination of actors and factors that cannot be grouped under one single label. Also, unlike the North-East, the South does not need to cope with an existential threat at its gate: while the interdependence of all flanks and domains is a fact, it is true that Russia does not share borders with any NATO allies in the Mediterranean. Thus, the threat perception is more diluted and, therefore, weaker.

> Unlike the North-East, the South does not need to cope with an existential threat at its gate.

Yet, this absence of a direct menace is offset by two further features. First, NATO's South is characterized by a maritime – not terrestrial – divide. While this looks safer, in reality it creates more ambiguity and uncertainty. In the Cold War, Mediterranean security was outsourced to the United States' Sixth Fleet, whose major task was to protect naval routes by minimizing the role of Soviet squadrons. This led to a constant lack of strategic planning, which still endures. Second, the Mediterranean is a waterway connecting the Red Sea, the Black Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. In a world that is becoming multipolar, the increasing maritime activities of Russia and China may lead to a militarization of

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NATO's Southern Flank and a new naval build-up – a scenario we are unprepared for at the moment.

The asymmetries of NATO's South

Another crucial difference between the Southern Flank and NATO's North-East are the many and deep asymmetries that separate allies from Mediterranean partners who, not to be forgotten, cannot join the Alliance as they are not Europeans. NATO's three Southern neighbourhoods are characterized by a lingering number of endogenous weaknesses and a growing set of exogenous factors concerning destabilization. On the one hand, we must cope with the disruptive consequences of inherent state fragility, violent non-state actors, illegal traffics, desertification, demographic pressures, food shortages, and sanitary deficiencies. Simultaneously, we shall not underestimate the toxic potential of several frozen conflicts, as well as the humanitarian disaster of Gaza. On the other hand, Russia and China are very active in the region by, respectively, fuelling military coups or promoting trade agreements and infrastructural projects. Their intention is to weaken the transatlantic relationship.

> NATO's Southern neighbourhoods face a lingering number of endogenous weaknesses and exogenous factors concerning destabilization.

Circumstances are further thwarted by the many failures to stabilize the region. This is the case when it comes to many multilateral peacekeeping or state-building missions, whether under United Nations or EU auspices; the attempts to engage with African institutions (e.g., ECOWAS and the former G-5 Sahel); or France-led operations in the Sahel and Central Africa. Partial exceptions can be seen in NATO cooperation frameworks like the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, as well as the US-sponsored "Abraham Accords" between Israel and a few Arab states.

A third issue refers not to NATO's partners but its member states. Unlike the North-East, allies in the South are characterized by different threat perceptions; an overall lack of cohesion and shared views over the Alliance's goals; and the absence of common planning. Relations are based on the persistence of a fragmented – if not conflicting – coordination, in which Mediterranean allies usually advance their national interests and favour unilateral solutions instead of promoting the development of a homogeneous "Southern caucus" alongside the strengthening of "mini-lateral" initiatives.

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Collaboration is generally positive at the diplomatic and bureaucratic levels. NATO is seen as an instrument led by an "offshore balancer" (the US) which guarantees that no Mediterranean ally takes the upper hand. This was the case, for instance, with "Operation Unified Protector" in Libya (2011), or other sea patrolling missions such as "Operation Active Endeavour" (2001–2016) and the ensuing "Operation Sea Guardian" (2016-present).

Yet, frictions may arise at the political level. The recent appointment of Javier Colomina as the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood was a case in point. Instead of negotiating a consensual solution, the Italian government campaigned (and lost) for its own candidate and reacted with outrage against the nomination of the Spanish diplomat. By the same, yet opposite token, in past years Spain's conservative People's Party tried unsuccessfully to move the US Sixth Fleet from Naples to Cadiz.

Bringing NATO's Southern Flank back in: a proposal

The 2025 NATO summit in The Hague marked a strategic turning point for European and Mediterranean security, compelling all allies – including Southern members, although Spain voiced its political disagreement – to commit to a substantial increase in defence investment, aimed at reaching five per cent of GDP by 2035. This renewed focus is not solely about countering Russia on the Eastern Flank. It also provides fresh resources to address enduring vulnerabilities and asymmetries across the South. For NATO's Mediterranean allies, the challenge is now to translate financial pledges into tangible capabilities, including reinforcing maritime surveillance, countering hybrid and irregular threats, and investing in advanced technologies central to the Alliance's new deterrence posture.

The Hague Summit reinforced NATO's 360-degree approach, explicitly reaffirming the need to balance Alliance priorities.

Importantly, the Hague Summit reinforced NATO's 360-degree approach, explicitly reaffirming the need to balance Alliance priorities across both the Eastern and Southern theatres. The summit's call for technological modernization, i.e., joint initiatives on AI, cyber resilience and intelligence-sharing, offers Southern allies new tools to address non-traditional security risks, from irregular migration to malign external influence.

If the goal of NATO allies in the Southern Flank is to stay strategically relevant, especially in a moment in which transatlantic relations are strained by President Trump's erratic policies, the most feasible solution seems to be a two-folded course.

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The first lies in their own hands: fostering synergies among themselves in areas such as common threat awareness, strategic planning, and the acquisition and harmonization of capabilities. NATO allies in the Mediterranean must develop a new attitude grounded in an understanding that the Southern Flank is a strategic ecosystem that requires a common vision and joint solutions. They should look at, and learn from, NATO's Nordic countries: the newest, yet among the most best performing, allies.

The second policy lies at the heart of NATO itself: executing the 360-degree security approach as envisaged in the Strategic Concept. Only by recognizing the fact that a division of transatlantic security in flanks and domains is a simplification of a much more complex and interdependent reality will prompt a greater sense of inter-allied solidarity and, therefore, effectiveness. Reducing our dependence on global supply chains, increasing European competitiveness, and reforming Europe's single market, especially in the defence sector, are three core objectives if we want to achieve greater strategic autonomy. This is expensive and takes time; but this is a lesson that should be crystal clear for all policymakers in any NATO country. EE

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Beyond nuclear gradualism

Pathways for NATO to enhance deterrence

ALESSANDRO LEONARDI

NATO faces an increasingly complex security environment, marked by Russia's advanced missile capabilities and persistent coercive strategies. How can the Alliance adapt its deterrence posture, integrating both nuclear and conventional means, to remain credible and unified in an era of significant geopolitical flux and evolving strategic stability concepts?

NATO's relevance depends on its capacity to maintain a credible and adaptive deterrence posture. This task has grown more complex due to the twin challenges of renewed Russian aggression and the potential for transatlantic political volatility. Russia's expanding arsenal and demonstrated willingness to employ advanced missile systems in conflict increasingly test European security. The sustained and diverse nature of Russian missile attacks in Ukraine, involving dozens of unique missile models and significant daily launch rates, underscores the scale of this challenge. These systems, ranging from hypersonic weapons to new intermediate-range capabilities, present a multifaceted threat capable of placing a wide array of European targets at risk. This blurs the lines between conventional and strategic domains, and underpins Moscow's coercive foreign policy objectives.

This evolving missile threat landscape was vividly illustrated by Russia's deployment of the advanced "Oreshnik" intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM)

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against Ukraine in November 2024. Furthermore, uncertainty regarding the future trajectory of the United States' foreign policy and its commitment to European security – a period some have termed "the age of Trump" – could impact Alliance cohesion and the perceived credibility of its security guarantees.

Evolving missile threat

Russia's commitment to modernizing and diversifying its missile arsenal, including the development of new strategic systems and its extensive use of varied missile types in Ukraine, represents a significant and deliberate strategic signal. The Oreshnik launch, leveraging technology reportedly derived from strategic missile programmes, demonstrates not only an enhanced capability to place European targets at risk with advanced, hard-to-intercept systems, but also a willingness to blur the lines between conventional and strategic domains. Subsequent intelligence assessments in early 2025 further highlighted the system's sophistication, suggesting it incorporates advanced countermeasures designed to penetrate existing missile defence systems.

This pattern aligns with broader concerns regarding Russian coercive strategies designed to intimidate adversaries and achieve political objectives. The sustained high level of missile launches observed in Ukraine at various stages of the conflict reflect a drive by Russia to exert pressure and potentially destroy critical infrastructure. Moscow might perceive such coercive strategies as more viable if it views NATO as internally divided or hesitant. The employment of novel systems and sustained firepower can thus be interpreted as Russia testing NATO's unity and resolve, aiming to leverage military pressure for political gain.

> The Alliance remains reluctant to make substantial changes to its nuclear posture, partly due to internal sensitivities.

Against this backdrop, NATO's post-2014 approach of "nuclear gradualism" – predominantly focused on modernizing existing assets rather than fundamentally altering its posture or broadly expanding nuclear sharing – appears increasingly insufficient. The Alliance remains reluctant to make more substantial changes to its nuclear posture, partly due to internal sensitivities and concerns about "provoking" Russia. However, NATO's adaptation is not solely nuclear; the US development of new intermediate-range conventional missiles, such as the long-range hypersonic weapon, nicknamed "Dark Eagle", marks a notable shift. These systems offer conventional counterforce capabilities against hardened targets. However, their introduction and forward deployment in Germany introduces a crit-

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ical debate concerning the trade-offs between defence effectiveness, deterrence credibility, and what is now a more complex understanding of strategic stability.

While advanced conventional precision-strike systems can enhance NATO's ability to degrade key Russian military capabilities, thereby strengthening defence and bolstering deterrence by denial, they also risk harming strategic stability. Highly effective conventional counterforce capabilities could be perceived by Russia as enabling a disarming strike against its own strategic assets, even if employed conventionally. This perception could incentivize Russia towards destabilizing actions, especially in an environment of heightened uncertainty. Finding the right balance is crucial: appearing militarily ineffective harms deterrence but appearing overly threatening in ways that trigger instability could fracture Alliance consensus and lead to dangerous miscalculations.

Forging a resilient deterrence

Navigating this complex dilemma requires an integrated approach that enhances both the nuclear and conventional dimensions of deterrence, all while managing risks through robust Alliance cohesion and clear strategic communication. A baseline of credible nuclear deterrence remains essential, but it must adapt beyond mere gradualism. This includes improving the survivability of NATO's dual-capable aircraft through concepts like adaptable basing (agile combat employment, dispersed operating bases, and unpredictable operating bases), seriously considering the expansion of nuclear certification, and potentially hosting arrangements involving more allies. Such steps would strengthen resilience and foster the shared responsibility vital for Alliance cohesion.

Concurrently, the introduction of advanced conventional strike systems necessitates careful management within a strategic framework. Rather than pursuing maximum theoretical effectiveness at the expense of stability, NATO needs an agreed Alliance doctrine defining specific roles, limitations and targeting priorities. This doctrine should clarify that such systems are aimed at conventional military targets – for instance, Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems or long-range fires – while strictly controlling strikes that could be misperceived as targeting Russia's strategic deterrent.

This managed approach allows NATO to leverage conventional enhancements for defence and deterrence while mitigating stability risks and reinforcing unified political will. Future arms control efforts, however challenging to envision currently, would also need to adapt to incorporate these cross-domain capabilities to enhance predictability and reduce miscalculation.

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A new boost for the Alliance

NATO's quest for continued relevance and effective deterrence in an age marked by sophisticated Russian missile threats and sustained firepower, compounded by a complex strategic stability environment and transatlantic uncertainties, demands a sophisticated and integrated response. Simply continuing the path of nuclear gradualism appears insufficient, while an unmanaged rush towards new conventional counterforce capabilities introduces significant risks.

The Alliance must adapt its overall deterrence posture to be more resilient, flexible and visibly shared. This involves not only modernizing capabilities but also evolving doctrines for both nuclear and advanced conventional systems to ensure they are mutually reinforcing and strategically coherent. Success hinges on maintaining unwavering political cohesion; clearly communicating resolve and the intended limits of capabilities; and ensuring that the posture is unequivocally credible. Therefore, to ensure NATO remains relevant and its deterrence credible, the Alliance must enhance its nuclear posture's resilience through broader, more visible shared responsibility while concurrently developing a clear doctrine; stringent command and control procedures; and transparent communication strategies for new advanced conventional long-range precision-strike capabilities.

From this perspective, the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague marked a turning point in the Alliance's approach to deterrence and resilience. With the adoption of The Hague Defence Investment Plan, Allies have pledged to increase defence spending to five per cent of GDP by 2035 (including 3.5 per cent of GDP on core defence requirements and 1.5 per cent on defence- and security-related investments like infrastructure and industry). If paired Fwith dedicated investments in advanced missile defence, AI, and integrated command systems, it could signal a clear recognition that gradualism is no longer sufficient in the face of Russia's expanding missile arsenal and hybrid tactics. This shift could aim to close critical capability gaps, ensure credible deterrence on both nuclear and conventional fronts, and support forward deployments and infrastructure on NATO's eastern and southern flanks. EE

This paper expands upon insights initially presented by the author at the closed-door expert seminar, "NATO after the Washington Summit – Challenges and the Way Forward" held at the Jagiellonian University on November 28th, 2024.

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Beyond compromise

Towards the Europeanization of NATO's Eastern Flank

EOIN MICHEÁL MCNAMARA

NATO's post-Cold War enlargement promised a stable and prosperous future for Central and Eastern Europe. Yet compromises meant to accommodate Russia left the Alliance's Eastern Flank exposed for years. Today, with renewed uncertainty in transatlantic politics, European allies face the challenge of strengthening deterrence without relying too heavily on the United States.

NATO's post-Cold War enlargements in 1999 and 2004 were unprecedented milestones for security in Central and Eastern Europe, or CEE, where destabilization from intense geopolitical competition by external empires has historically undermined development. Imperial interference was central to the human suffering, political instability and economic degeneration experienced in the region during the 20th century. When communism fully collapsed in the 1990s, the following era was famously billed as "the end of history", where liberal democracy would stand unrivalled to foster peace within an expanded western security community "from Vancouver to Vladivostok". Great power jostling to consolidate "spheres of influence" would take a backseat. This optimistic vision saw NATO's collective security guarantees as a lynchpin enabling prosperity for CEE states. Once security was assured, political reform and economic development would be nurtured by concurrent membership in the European Union.

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Failed accommodation

More than 30 years later, much of this optimism has been realized. Assured by NATO's Article 5, stable security conditions have supported liberal democracy and economic prosperity in the CEE region, even if progress has sometimes been flawed. At certain periods, accusations of democratic backsliding have been levelled at some governments. Nevertheless, the attempted post-Cold War partnership between NATO and Russia has undoubtedly been the most consequential failure of diplomacy to reform Europe's security architecture. Russian propaganda routinely blames NATO's "open-door" enlargement policy as a "root cause" for its aggression in Ukraine since 2014. Moscow justifies this as a preventative necessity against a hostile and expansionist western alliance.

Allied forces were not stationed to guard NATO's eastern borders until after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.

These claims are historically inaccurate. Instead, the record emphatically illustrates that western compromises consciously accounting for possible Russian concerns were central to NATO's enlargement deliberations, even when the knock-on consequences were disappointing for security in the CEE region. The first landmark compromise came in the 1990s with US President Bill Clinton's so-called Russia-first policy. NATO's 1999 enlargement to include the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland was finalized at its Madrid Summit in 1997, but Clinton still cautiously prioritized keeping President Boris Yeltsin's fragile Russian Federation close to the western fold. Recognizing Moscow's priority to remain an independent great power, Washington supported Russia's faltering democratic reforms and backed its integration into western-led global institutions like the G7 in 1998 and the World Trade Organization, which Russia joined in 2012.

NATO's partnership with Russia was combined with caution on the military contingencies accompanying enlargement. These sentiments defined the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, when the Alliance declared little need for "additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" in eastern member states in "the current and foreseeable security environment", a pledge informally dubbed as "no troops, no nukes". Aiming to foster strategic stability, "mutual vulnerability" was a prominent principle in the 1980s US-Soviet nuclear arms control negotiations. If one side could shield itself from an attack, then stable nuclear parity could become obsolete.

Broader "mutual vulnerability" logic continued to latently guide NATO's compromises to Russia during post-Cold War enlargement. However, this accommodation was hardly "mutual". NATO held little insurance against future Russian aggression.

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Conventional allied forces were not stationed to guard NATO's eastern borders until after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. While the escalated war in Ukraine after 2022 has depleted Moscow's military resources, the military balance in the NATO-Russia border regions has overwhelmingly favoured Moscow.

Establishing deterrence

With Poland joining NATO in 1999 and the Baltic states entering the Alliance in 2004, NATO could only depend on their modest national forces for an immediate frontline response before 2014. Accommodating Russia created strategic hesitancy. Fearing a Russian backlash, western governments were even reluctant to supply the military equipment necessary for defence modernization in the Baltic states until the late 1990s. Discussing NATO's departure from the traditional strategic maxim that military alliances maintain strong borders, the military historians John Lewis Gaddis and Paul Kennedy criticized NATO enlargement, not out of concern for a Russian rebuke, but because both perceived it as unwise to increase membership without stronger military and financial provisions to defend new members. Spurred by Russia's assault on Georgia in 2008, Poland and the Baltic states needed to wait until 2010 for a NATO defence plan, named "Eagle Guardian".

The failure of western compromises seeking to encourage strategic stability was starkly revealed with Russia's aggression in Crimea in 2014. NATO responded with "tripwire" deterrence for its Eastern Flank when the US and UK decided to rotate units and strengthen air policing in the Baltic states and Poland through Operation Atlantic Resolve. This soon evolved into NATO's "Enhanced Forward Presence", with larger multinational battlegroups of more than 1,000 troops in each frontline state. This was supported by a 5,000-strong rapid reaction taskforce, a spearhead generated from within the larger NATO Response Force.

NATO aimed to balance protection for its Eastern Flank with a preference to avoid provoking Russia.

These arrangements significantly improved NATO deterrence for the Eastern Flank, but this "tripwire" posture was still a compromise when stronger alternatives were available. NATO aimed to balance protection for its Eastern Flank with a preference to avoid provoking a tense military build-up with Russia. NATO stationed a skeletal forward presence in frontline states but remained dependent on larger military mobilization from west to east as a contingency against security deteriorating further.

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Poland's prime minister, Donald Tusk (right) meets with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte in 2024. Poland leads European spending in defence, with nearly five per cent of GDP already in 2025.

Stronger measures

As Supreme Allied Commander Europe between 2022 and 2025, General Christopher Cavoli developed NATO deterrence through a system of regional defence plans. The original four battlegroups of the Enhanced Forward Presence were increased to eight to form NATO's Forward Land Forces, with additional forces stationed in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. Another battlegroup is planned for northern Finland, where Sweden will lead. In 2024, the NATO Response Force was restructured into the Allied Response Force (ARF), which is both more capacious and flexible than its predecessor. The taskforce could previously mobilize a 5,000-strong spearhead force in approximately four days, but questions remained on response times for the reinforcements supporting it. These doubts over reinforcement strength are eased by the ARF's ability to transition from spearhead elements to a 100,000-strong force in ten days.

This military progress risks being undone by President Donald Trump's plans to reduce US forces in Europe, abruptly signalled in the spring of 2025. Details remain unclear and European allies fear that a chaotic US withdrawal might leave them in the lurch without critical enablers for collective defence previously provided by

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Washington. Before NATO's summit in The Hague in June 2025, Matthew Whitaker, the US Permanent Representative to NATO, confirmed that Washington would coordinate its drawdown plans with European allies to avert major upheaval and that discussions would soon commence. While US capabilities are very important, NATO's deterrence posture remains multinational. With US forces leading the FLF battlegroup in Poland, the coordinating Framework Nations in the Baltic states are Germany in Lithuania; Canada in Latvia; and the UK in Estonia.

Past compromises aiming to manage tensions with Russia have made military mobilization a priority in NATO's deterrence posture. Minus US capabilities, NATO's European allies retain a combined 1.5 million troops. There is no significant shortage in military manpower, but European forces are often slow or static without US assets linked to logistics, advanced technologies and command and control. The continuing availability of US military assets for NATO's European allies will depend on further transatlantic bargaining with an unpredictable Trump administration. European allies will find it difficult to replace US enablers in the short term, creating cause to again rethink how NATO deterrence is done.

When stronger European leadership is required, a shift in emphasis from mobilization to stronger on-site readiness must be considered. Germany's plan to station a brigade of 4,800 troops in Lithuania by 2027 might indicate an early move in this direction, marking the first time that *Bundeswehr* units will have been deployed abroad "permanently" since the Second World War. When complete, this will make Germany the nation with the largest contribution to the Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states.

NATO was once acutely conscious of compromises to accommodate Russian concerns – efforts that have been proven futile. Combining with Putin's threats, Trump's unpredictability means that NATO's European allies must change tack to match decisive political conviction with stronger defence resources to ensure deterrence for the Eastern Flank remains credible. EE

This research is part of the Reignite Multilateralism via Technology (REMIT) project, funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 101094228.

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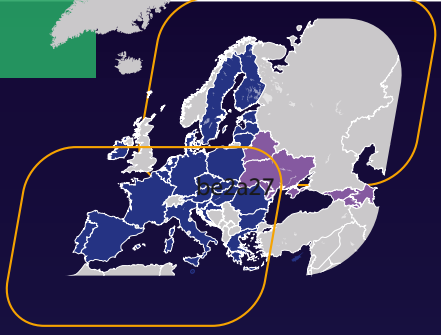

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