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DEAR READER,

Twenty years ago, the European Union experienced its largest enlargement ever, the so-called Big Bang, with the addition of 10 new member states. This enlargement included many of the countries in our region – Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia and the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This momentous occasion marked the culmination of hard work by the EU and the post-socialist countries, which aptly referred to it as the final "return to Europe". With a newly united Europe (and more members on the way), it seems as that Euro-optimism had reached its pinnacle moment.

And since 2004, the new member states have certainly made some remarkable achievements. The GDP per capita in purchasing power parity of the new states grew from 59 per cent of the EU average in 2004 to 81 per cent in 2022. The income gap between the older and newer states has also narrowed over the last 20 years. Some countries' living standards, such as Czechia or Slovenia, have even surpassed those of older EU members.

Yet, at the same time, these past two decades were not without challenges. Issues related to democratic backsliding, the rule of law and corruption have tainted the legacy of the enlargement. Voices in many western European capitals began questioning whether the enlargement itself was too soon. After a series of crises hit the EU, which began with the 2008 financial crisis, a rise in Euroscepticism began to counter the accomplishments of the previous generation of Euro-optimists and putting a major damper on any future enlargements.

Thus, the question today is: how united is Europe after these past 20 years? Certainly, the east-west divide remains a point of contention. However, other issues have also emerged, such as the rise of far-right populism and the debate over support for Ukraine. These phenomena can be found throughout Europe, and especially worth considering following the elections to the European parliament this June. As geopolitics once again becomes a key factor in European decision-making, we can only hope that unity prevails over division. Otherwise, the legacy of the EU Big Bang will be lost to the history books.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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Give European democracy a chance

An enlarged Europe turns twenty

FERENC LACZÓ

Over the past two decades, the project of European integration has been moderately "failing forward". Many issues have accompanied this process and their sum calls for a reinvention of European democracy.

Two decades have passed since the European Union's "Big Bang enlargement" into Central and Eastern Europe. This anniversary prompts a reflection on the EU's evolution and where the European project stands today. The analysis below is based on the three main processes that have shaped the EU since 2004: widening and deepening, the impact of crises and the emergence of new political divides.

The first process involves examining the East-West divide and the trends towards convergence. Let me first outline some fundamental aspects of East-West relations within the EU. In terms of demographics, the "newer" member states account for approximately one-fifth of the EU's population. While some eastern EU countries have made notable progress since 2004, their overall economic contribution still falls significantly below their population share. At the same time, these states wield significant political power within the EU due to the nation-state distribution principle – on this basis, almost every second vote or seat now belongs to this group of states. Yet, the citizens of the eastern EU states are still underrepresented in European transnational elite circles.

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Easternization

Two conclusions can be made based on these basic observations. First, the Big Bang enlargement has created an imbalance in the EU. Second, it has led governments of eastern EU countries to prioritize intergovernmental cooperation over supranational integration. These shifts have prompted the "Easternization" of the EU, with both positive and negative outcomes.

Easternization has affected various aspects of EU affairs in the early 21st century, including allocation of funds, immigration numbers, as well as different attitudes toward Russia's increasingly radical and violent dictatorship. Perhaps most notably, this has also occurred regarding the debates surrounding democracy and illiberalism.

While EU funds have boosted Eastern European economies, they have not erased disparities within the Union. The EU's enlargement towards the East, driven by economic motives rather than social concerns, has perpetuated core-periphery inequalities. Additionally, the brain drain from Eastern Europe has reinforced conservatism in local societies.

The specific manner of the EU's Easternization can thus help explain why the growing threat of democratic backsliding has often assumed an Eastern European complexion. This threat has been widely linked to the rise of illiberal state-building projects in Hungary and Poland. Many right-wing populists in Western Europe admire the combination of sociocultural conservatism and ethnonational radicalism of Hungary's Fidesz party and the former Law and Justice government in Poland. If Europe continues to Easternize in this manner, it will undoubtedly challenge integration; in such a scenario, EU enlargement would ultimately come at the expense of deeper integration.

While EU funds have boosted Eastern European economies, they have not erased disparities within the Union.

Despite recent positive developments in Poland, it is still necessary to address the challenges of illiberalism today. Much of the concern stems from how the European Union has been reshaped and had its reputation tarnished by the series of crises that have unfolded since around 2008. As shown by Luuk van Middelaar in his insider account *Alarums & Excursions*, in this "post-post-historical phase" the EU's legalistic-consensual order – what the author calls "the politics of rules" – has been increasingly replaced by "the politics of events". The cascading crises of these years – the financial and economic crisis; the declining quality of democracy and respect for the rule of law; the tragedies connected with refugees and migration; the shambles around Brexit; the global pandemic; Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine (the last two had only begun when the Dutch scholar had completed his manuscript); not to men-

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tion worsening environmental degradation – often required shift responses and have logically prioritized the intergovernmental aspects of EU decision-making. These crises have also presented opportunities for European integration, some of which European elites have managed to capitalize on.

Failing forward

"Failing forward in European integration" – to employ the suggestive phrase by Eric Jones, R. Daniel Kelemen and Sophie Meunier – has been no small feat amidst a significantly worsened global environment. The EU's shortcomings have been notable but not catastrophic in comparison. While highlighting the Union's resilience is important, especially to debunk the narratives of the EU's decline and imminent collapse, it is equally crucial to probe further into how effectively the EU has functioned as a tool for crisis management.

> The EU can no longer be viewed as a union of liberal democratic states based on the rule of law.

Despite advancements in integration, the EU has failed to counter the fallout from these repeated crises and has not meaningfully reversed internal trends of socio-economic and increasingly political divergence. The measures the EU has implemented to address the crises, deepen integration and promote democracy have to be assessed as modest, primarily because the internal challenges have been mounting amidst a drastically worsening external environment. In this light, the EU has been failing forward only moderately, all too moderately.

What makes the story of the EU's moderate and relative successes more dramatic is that the Union can no longer claim to comply with its discourse of legitimation. EU crisis responses have contradicted its cherished self-image of a union of liberal democracies based on the rule of law and respect for human rights that has developed new forms of multilayered governance to reach beneficial compromises. In 2024 the European Union can no longer be viewed as a union of liberal democratic states based on the rule of law, as made evident by the concentration of power under the Orbán regime in Hungary. Secondly, the prolonged negative effects of the eurozone crisis on Greece show how the member states failed to develop new forms of multi-layered governance to reach beneficial compromises. Thirdly, the unexpected and admittedly also poorly conceived Brexit process testifies to the failure of the EU states to pool elements of their sovereignty in a directional process. Lastly, the avoidable mass tragedies along the Schengen borders speak volumes about the EU's solidarity and respect for human rights.

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It is hardly surprising then that recent years have further politicized European integration, prompting urgent questions about the exercise of political power within the Union and its legitimacy. It is true that a rather stagnant centre, preoccupied with crisis management at the expense of greater strategic foresight, has continued to dominate in EU politics over the past two decades. At the same time, the Union has entered a new phase in which the main political cleavage pits the liberal and conservative defenders of the status quo against their right-wing populist challengers. This division, in turn, marginalizes more ambitious reform agendas – whether progressive or otherwise – within the Union's complex architecture.

A stagnant centre, preoccupied with crisis management, has dominated EU politics over the past two decades.

What makes the current situation all the more concerning is that constructive and far-sighted reforms have become less likely just as the sharp decline of the centre-right in key member states (not only in the United Kingdom around the time of Brexit or in the notorious case of Hungary but also, and possibly even more consequentially, in countries like France or Italy) casts doubt on future adherence to liberal democratic norms and support for European integration. Moderately conservative, liberal-leaning and predominantly centrist forces, such as Christian democrat parties, played a significant role in shaping mainstream liberal democratic politics in Western Europe after the Second World War. The apparent decline in influence of these centrist right-wing forces at a time when the European political landscape is becoming more polarized between liberal and right-wing populist agendas deserves far more attention than it has received thus far.

Living up to the democratic promise?

This leads me to some more general considerations regarding democracy and European integration. As Kiran Klaus Patel has explained in his insightful *Project Europe: A History*, the new international organizations formed after 1945 which eventually paved the way for the European Union entered a crowded field. Their agendas were influenced by what other international organizations were not already addressing. The mandates of the European Communities, organizations with economic priorities and a legalistic DNA, were rather narrow and technical during those early decades. Norms, values or democracy were not really in their focus. Viewed through such a historically informed lens, European integration proceeded further as the European Communities succeeded in broadening their mandate and assuming responsibilities in unexpected new domains such as democracy – an area

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where any assertion of European competence is likely to be contentious given the EU's perceived "democratic deficit".

As Patel shows, it was only in the context of enlargement to the post-authoritarian states of southern Europe that membership in the EC was more explicitly linked to a liberal democratic regime. Predictably, Greece entering the EC possessed exceptional symbolic weight in this regard. When it comes to the post-communist parts of Europe after 1989, that direct link and claim to expertise were, of course, asserted widely and vocally.

Having made ambitious claims to being an effective supporter and even a guarantor of democracy – a democratic union par excellence – and having at least one country whose membership directly questions such assertions today, can the EU

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live up to the promise it once made, now that it has to confront illiberalism in its very midst? The ongoing illiberal challenge indeed raises pragmatic and theoretical questions. Pragmatically speaking, does the EU have appropriate instruments and sufficient willingness to employ them to defend and promote democracy in its member states? On a more theoretical note, can it truly succeed or are its attempts bound to be self-contradictory and maybe even self-defeating?

These moot questions ought to make us reconsider the fraught relationship between liberal democracy and nationalism that is at the heart of the current political polarization within the union. Nationalists these days are often illiberal or downright anti-democratic, whereas liberal democrats are often rather negatively disposed towards the nation-state, even though it has been the main frame for democratic rule in modern and contemporary Europe, not to mention the construction of welfare states. If the Big Bang enlargement has made the EU less balanced and fostered negative trends of convergence, this recent and ongoing parting of ways between nationalists and liberal democrats – for which post-communist Eastern Europe may be qualified as a "ground zero" – has greatly exacerbated the crisis of democracy across Europe.

How to survive

The Ukrainian people's valiant self-defence against Russia's brutal war of aggression can provide an instructive example in this regard and perhaps also a source of inspiration for all of Europe. After all, Ukrainians are currently fighting a war of national independence against their imperial neighbour and are thereby also defending their significant, if incomplete liberal and democratic achievements against an autocratic aggressor. It is impossible to disentangle the liberal democratic and national elements of Ukraine's struggle for survival.

> We ought to realize how much the "poly-crisis" has contradicted the bloc's cherished self-image.

The recombination of these two elements is precisely what the European Union and its member states may need the most these days – and can most hopefully still achieve without cataclysms. We urgently need nationalists to accept the liberal democratic framework, while liberal democrats ought to simultaneously recognize the democratic potential of the nation-state – without giving up on more ambitious plans of a more united, democratic Europe.

What I have argued above is that the EU has been moderately "failing forward" in the two decades since 2004. However, it is concerning how Easternization has

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gone hand in hand with negative forms of convergence. We ought to realize how much the "poly-crisis" has contradicted the bloc's cherished self-image, and consider how far nationalists and liberal democrats have parted ways.

Having arrived at this critical juncture two decades after the Big Bang enlargement, even moderate attempts to fail forward are likely to sharpen antagonisms in the near future. More positively put: the European project will need to foster positive forms of convergence (and not only between East and West within the EU), develop a more apt and convincing discourse of self-legitimation, and create a new, stable balance between national and liberal democratic commitments.

Only if the EU succeeds at those urgent tasks can European democracy have a reasonable chance in our lifetime. EE

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Adolescence is over

Time for updates to the Central European growth model

KONRAD POPŁAWSKI

The 20th anniversary of the 2004 European Union enlargement should constitute an occasion not only to celebrate the numerous economic successes of the last two decades, but also to reflect on upcoming development challenges. Although growth since the accession has been pretty solid and stable, its foundations are still not robust enough, especially given the current uncertainties concerning geopolitics and geoeconomics.

Twenty years of EU membership for the Central European countries have seen great success from an economic point of view. The dynamics of GDP growth have been relatively high, with the convergence process progressing and foreign trade developing at the same time. The inflow of direct investments has also been fairly intense, while unemployment decreased to the lowest levels in Europe. In addition, the region's countries have generally managed to maintain stability in their public finances.

This positive image, however, has been undermined in recent years since the convergence process has significantly slowed down in many countries in the region. In contrast, the EU itself as a whole is losing its development dynamics. It is worth noting that in the last decade, the dynamics of convergence with the EU average varied significantly in Central Europe. Its high pace was maintained in Romania (+8 percentage points), Poland (+11), Croatia (+9), Slovenia (+8) and Lithuania

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(+9) or Hungary (+9). In comparison, it was much lower in Estonia (+6), Latvia (+6), Bulgaria (+5), the Czech Republic (+4) and Slovakia (+3). In the last three years, these two last countries have been coping with the challenge to bring their economies back to pre-pandemic growth levels.

Lost decade

The last decade should have been a lesson that, unfortunately, the EU is not a club ensuring everlasting GDP growth. Errors in economic policy exposed by the global financial crisis (2008) and turbulence in the eurozone (2010–14) resulted in many years of stagnation in the development of many countries. The economic positions of France (-12 percentage points), Spain (-12), Greece (-20) and Italy (-23) have significantly weakened compared to the EU average. Reliance on debt and the absence of reforms in the context of growing competition in the world and the EU itself resulted in deep economic and social problems. An uncontrolled increase in production costs, such as the level of wages in the case of the southern countries of the eurozone, all with dependence on the inflow of capital from abroad, may lead to a sharp deterioration of competitiveness and a jump in unemployment to very high levels. As a result, there may be many years of stagnation. This is especially true for members of the monetary union, who are unable to devalue one's currency.

Another problem is that the EU faces problems with economic competitiveness and is losing its position as a technological leader in many sectors. While Central Europe is trying to catch up with the EU average in terms of GDP per capita, the EU is increasingly not a point of reference as it has ceased to be the locomotive of global growth in the last decade. The series of crises concerning the eurozone, Brexit, the pandemic and energy essentially cost the EU a decade in terms of GDP growth.

Before the global financial crisis, the EU and the United States were almost equal competitors regarding the size of the economy in dollar terms. Today, the US economy is one-third larger. A strong appreciation of the dollar explains part of this, though it cannot be ignored that the US scores better regarding digital technologies, the inflow of capital or demography. Whereas China and the US are crafting new concepts of industrial policy, the EU is still behind in this respect.

Challenging geopolitical environment

The question about the economic model of Central Europe becomes even more important when we look at the foreign policy challenges on the horizon. Looking

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at the trends in the international environment, it is not likely that the next two decades will be easier for Central Europe. The threats arising from Russia's increasingly aggressive policy will likely generate certain risks and significant fiscal expenditures for a prolonged period.

There is already a visible trend of a significant increase in military spending in the region's countries, constituting a substantial burden on national budgets. In 2023, of the ten NATO countries with the highest defence spending in relation to GDP, six were in Central Europe. Only four countries in the region, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, did not meet the NATO criterion of allocating two per cent of GDP for defence purposes. In contrast, only Finland and Greece met this obligation among the remaining EU countries. The region needs to keep on track with its economic growth to meet such challenges.

However, the increased uncertainty might provide some opportunities. The lower appetite for risk on the part of global business in the face of the growing labour shortages in Western Europe may encourage it to locate higher added-value activities in Central Europe. One condition for this would be a stronger tendency towards "friendshoring" in EU regulations. In other words, this involves imposing obligations on enterprises to diversify risk and limit dependence on supplies from countries that threaten interests related to European security. The EU should also start redeveloping its industrial policy. Bringing back some production to Europe could result in higher production costs for some goods. Still, the benefit-cost balance could be profitable due to the return of a significant part of added value to the EU. Central Europe could benefit from these trends and develop competencies in areas where Asian producers have so far dominated. The lesson here should be to ensure that the EU does not make similar mistakes, leading to industrial production in the region moving outside Europe.

Of the ten NATO countries with the highest defence spending in relation to GDP, six are in Central Europe.

Western countries are increasingly noticing the problems of losing added value in industrial production. Considering the location of supply chains only based on business criteria, without taking into account geographical or security requirements, leads to the EU or the US losing competencies (especially the necessary human capital) in the production of various components which, in many cases, leads to the domination of specific markets by manufacturers from Asia. An excellent example of this can be seen in the production of weapons. Since western countries have shut down their factories, they now have huge problems with resuming large-scale production. Russia has a significant advantage in this respect despite its generally much lower economic potential.

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Drawbacks of the growth model of Central Europe

Accession to the EU enabled Central European countries to integrate into the EU single market. In practical terms, this offered local companies the possibility of more robust expansion into the supply chains of many foreign global corporations. It facilitated the inflow of capital, technology and better methods of organizing production. As a result, Central Europe is most dependent on exports to the EU market. Four out of five EU countries with the highest export dependence on the EU market are in Central Europe. These are the Czech Republic (82 per cent of exports go to the EU), Slovakia (80 per cent), Hungary (78 per cent) and Poland (76 per cent).

Four out of five EU countries with the highest export dependence on the EU market are in Central Europe.

However, the price for this cooperation has been a subordination to the hierarchy in existing supply chains and the need to keep labour costs as low as possible. This was amplified by the fact that the countries of the region were exposed to intense mutual competition for incoming investments. This model will be hard to maintain in the coming years. Firstly, the weakening technological competitiveness of the European companies may limit the demand for the production of Central European suppliers. The beginnings of this process can be seen in electric vehicles, where many Central European countries, so far with a powerful position in the production of combustion cars, are having difficulties attracting electro-mobility investments. Secondly, the gradual increase in wages in the region to the level of Western Europe might reduce its attractiveness as a supplier of components.

If Central European countries mainly play a role as suppliers of cheaper components for the final products of global corporations, then profits from the sale of final products, as well as their marketing and distribution, go to the countries which own the overall products. They obtain much higher margins and retain control over the entire production process, particularly when it comes to product data and further development. Therefore, a question should be asked: does the path of being a supplier lead towards progress in innovation and technology? So far, intense competition conditions have limited the region's possibilities for combining local companies' competencies to develop more advanced components, products and services. Foreign investors in Central Europe are not related to the local market, so most often, they do not build research and development centres on-site, leaving such activities in the country of origin.

An additional burden may be the all-too-rapid pace of implementing the energy transformation and climate obligations, which may increase production costs.

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How important this factor is for competitiveness is perfectly reflected in the situation of the German economy, which, because of errors in the implementation of the energy transformation and excessive dependence on imports of energy resources from Russia, was forced to accelerate diversification. The costs have had a heavy impact on the economic situation in recent years.

All the Central European economies demonstrate significantly higher CO2 emissions intensity per percentage point of GDP. Thus, the green transition process will be costlier for this region. In addition, Central Europe is starting to experience problems with labour shortages. When entering the EU, the countries of Central Europe had one great advantage at that time – there seemed to be an inexhaustible reservoir of inexpensive and well-skilled workers. In 2003 in many countries of the region the unemployment rate exceeded ten per cent and in countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Croatia, it reached close to 20 per cent. After 20 years of EU membership, the countries of Central Europe are in a completely different place. Poland (2.8 per cent), Czech Republic (2.8), Hungary (3.9) and Bulgaria (4.6) are among the countries with the lowest unemployment rates in the EU.

Although the region experienced a substantial population decline already right after accession, it occurred in favourable demographic conditions and with a relatively young population structure. In 2004 the average median age, according to Eurostat, was 38 years, while this indicator for the entire EU was 39 years. Nowadays, the situation is much worse. In Central Europe in 2023 the median age was 44 years; in the EU, the result was similar and amounted to 44.5 years. According to Eurostat data, population ageing is the fastest in Central Europe compared to the already rapid process in other EU countries. Between 2012 and 2022 the percentage of people aged 65 and over increased by 3.6 percentage points in the region, while in the EU on average this grew by three points. The top ten fastest ageing countries include five Central European countries, with Poland being an inglorious leader.

Economic agenda. Rule-takers or stakeholders?

An in-depth analysis of the economic situation of Central Europe shows one thing. Adolescence is over. In the next decade, many countries in the region could become net contributors to the EU budget. Therefore, it is time to have more influence on EU decision-making to start building a new, more innovative growth model.

To fulfil this, several conditions must be met. First, Central Europe should keep improving its infrastructure with a particular emphasis on railways, which is crucial for matching ecological obligations. An important goal should be to increase the

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role of rail in freight transport and to construct critical cross-border investments (including sections of highways, railway lines, and opening new road and rail border crossings) between the countries of Central Europe, which could increase trade turnover between the countries of the region. It is also necessary for the region's countries to develop infrastructure for intermodal transport, especially networks of transhipment terminals.

Second, Central Europe should cooperate on common positions in EU sectoral issues, such as the negotiations for the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–34, creating a new EU industrial policy and modifying the Green Deal to adjust it better to the needs of manufacturing economies. Rebuilding the economic model of Central Europe is a task that goes beyond the capabilities of individual countries, as decisions made at the EU level are an essential determinant. Due to the similarity of development challenges, regional cooperation seems to be crucial for Central Europe in order to be a responsible stakeholder of the EU and ensure that de-carbonization plans do not lead to de-industrialization.

Third, Central Europe should be active in negotiations for Ukraine's accession to the EU. It will benefit the region if it co-shapes the entrance criteria to make the Ukrainian economy fit into the single market. This will help Kyiv to complement the Central European economies, all the while strengthening synergies with the manufacturing sectors in the region. Otherwise, there is a risk that the enlargement negotiation process will become a victim of various economic disputes, weakening societal support in the region for the accession of Ukraine. EE

Konrad Popławski is the project coordinator for the connectivity and regional integration programme at the Centre of Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw.

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Navigating new security threats requires a change in focus

ANNA DOHNALOVÁ

Czechia, together with its neighbours Poland and Slovakia, joined the European Union 20 years ago, a time when the security landscape in Europe looked completely different. Today the threats now faced by the Czechs and their neighbours require a completely new approach and mindset. Only then can the values enshrined in the EU treaty be truly protected.

The European Security Strategy was adopted in December 2003 and has become a landmark in the development of the EU's foreign and security policy. For the first time, the member states agreed on a joint threat assessment and set clear objectives for advancing their security interests, which are all based on shared values. Twenty years since the adoption of the security strategy, the EU carries greater responsibilities than at any time in its history as it faces new, increasingly complex threats and challenges. In fact, this article was written only a couple days after the President of France Emmanuel Macron declared that Europe is mortal and it can, as a matter of fact, die, if we do not choose to act against the current threats.

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe's security order has collapsed. This has been, however, only an escalation in a ten-year-long conflict

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and even longer process of Moscow's rejection of the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic security order. As Russia sees the EU and NATO's proximity as a threat to its security interests, their expansion that followed the end of the Cold War has been always viewed with suspicion by the Kremlin.

Complex security landscape

The security situation in Europe has become more complex and volatile over the last two decades, with Russia playing a central role in shaping regional dynamics. The leadership style of Vladimir Putin and Russia's assertive foreign policy have contributed to heightened tensions and increased uncertainty in the region. However, it is not only the changes in foreign policy alone – such as those that followed when Putin became president once again in 2012 – that have caused these unprecedented challenges in European security. The internet, cyberspace, social media and now generative artificial intelligence have managed to add a completely new dimension to the landscape.

What from the very beginning seemed to be a useful tool in disseminating information, now, in many cases around the world, shows more harm than good. The massive diffusion of technology has, for example, unavoidably reached the irresponsible hands of autocratic players such as those in Beijing or Moscow. These figures use it to interfere in international politics and try to affect major events to retain a subliminal international influence.

> Russia's assertive foreign policy has contributed to heightened tensions and increased uncertainty in the region.

The Czech intelligence agency, for example, recently uncovered a Russian-organized network that attempted to influence the European Parliament elections in various European countries. Cash was being handed over to anti-establishment politicians from Germany or Belgium in Prague, while other funds were directed towards the operation of a pro-Russian news website called the *Voice of Europe*. Estonia also faced a politically-motivated cyber-attack campaign lasting 22 days. In April 2007, a series of cyber-attacks targeted the websites of Estonian institutions, including the Estonian parliament, banks, ministries, newspapers and broadcasters. This was done in connection with the country's disagreement with Russia over the relocation of a Soviet-era monument, which became a point of tension between the pro-Kremlin and Estonian nationalist movements. An Estonian government official told the BBC then that evidence suggested the attack was indeed orchestrated by the Kremlin.

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Yet, Russian influence activities go far beyond the borders of Europe. During the 2016 American presidential election, US intelligence reported that it had evidence that Russian trolls had flooded the US information space with fake news about the election to urge African-American voters to not go to the polls. Multiple sources also say that evidence exists showing that Russia also attempted to persuade the British public to leave the European Union.

Countering interference

Certainly, the threat of disinformation and its destructive effects on democracies all around Europe have been vastly underestimated over the last ten years. Although the EU parliament has made attempts to adapt to these new challenges – for example by passing the European Media Freedom Act, which establishes a legally binding framework for national regulatory authorities that deals with providers that systematically engage in disinformation – it continues to battle Russian propaganda, as it is constantly evolving with new technologies. Today, Russian disinformation has grown to include deep fakes, falsified news footage and fake websites designed to disorient and outrage European voters. The days of clumsy "troll farms" are now long gone as disinformation campaigns are aided by artificial intelligence and localized support. Many governments and specialists too have been warning about the increasing volume and sophistication of Russian disinformation.

As Moscow is not afraid to show its unrelenting hostility toward European democracy, the upcoming election raises concerns amongst members of the European Parliament as they call on the political leadership across the EU to counter Russian interference attempts urgently and vigorously. This has been vocalized many times during plenary sessions and press conferences, especially now with regards to the exposing of the pro-Russian news network *Voice of Europe*.

However, this has rarely turned into action and especially in Central and Eastern Europe. As some countries try to clumsily adapt to these new threats, most of them have been demonstrably failing. In the Czech Republic, for example, when the recent government took office, it chose the fight against disinformation as one of its priorities. But as analysis by the Czech Interior Ministry concluded a year ago, it has made no progress. Czechia has not been able to counter disinformation attacks and this is still true today.

When the Czechs uncovered a Russian network that aimed to influence the EU elections directly from Prague, the government of Petr Fiala placed two individuals and one company on the sanctions list. But as usual, it was reacting to damage already done, as for a long time now, these measures have been unable to

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The threat of disinformation on democracies around Europe has been vastly underestimated over the last ten years. Although the EU parliament has made attempts to adapt to these new challenges, it continues to battle Russian propaganda which is ever evolving.

effectively prevent similar efforts to destabilize the state. New research shows that 58 per cent of Czechs believe disinformation, whilst as many as a third have even succumbed to conspiracies about COVID-19. Government analysis also discusses such low societal resistance and that there are no built-in mechanisms of social and institutional defence against the effects of disinformation.

Experts say that this puts the Fiala government in a similar situation to the previous cabinet of Andrej Babiš, which took the first steps in the fight against disinformation. While it is embracing this issue at least to a very surface-level extent, it is moving slowly and this is hardly enough. Its approach is leading it into what experts refer to as a security delay and speaks of the fact that despite its declared interest in the topic of disinformation, the government has completely different priorities.

Politics over substance

The question that now remains is what can actually be done to fight this without attacking free speech, which has been a keystone argument for many government officials in the Czech Republic. This also works as an excuse given the fact that they have done close to nothing when it comes to countering disinformation.

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The Russian activities in the Czech Republic, however, have gone far beyond the information space. In 2014, Russian spies carried out attacks which resulted in the explosion of two government-run ammunition warehouses and killed two Czech citizens. A police investigation confirmed that Russian intelligence members were responsible for the blasts. Yet, there continues to be hope, as contrary to its populist predecessor, we are still talking about a liberal pro-western government that understands that maintaining security in our own land is a top priority. There is fear, however, concerning what will come next, as a Babiš-Fiala rematch will take place in just a little over a year. It is no secret that the leader of the currently strongest political party in Czechia has sympathies with Kremlin-backed leaders.

Before the presidential election took place in Slovakia, Babiš not only personally supported the candidate Peter Pellegrini but continued to show affection for the autocratic governing style of both Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico. He admires them for how they have both managed to return to power in Hungary and Slovakia after years in opposition. This is, after all, a moment he himself longs for and that is why we should ask the question if re-elected would he be blinded by a desire for revenge like Robert Fico, or would he choose an Orbán-like pragmatic approach?

In both situations, the security of Czechia would be at risk. But there is even more at stake. Looking at the example of the Fico government's so-called "reforms" in Slovakia, which are undermining democracy and rule of law; reinforcing divisions in Central Europe and weakening transatlantic relations; the country is undermining the image of the region. Overall, these states – with the exception of Hungary – have provided comprehensive assistance to Ukraine. Now, if Ukraine loses the support it needs, only if just from a small European country or two, it can put the entirety of Europe at risk.

> There is fear in Czechia that a Babiš-Fiala rematch will take place in just a little over a year.

Thus, let us consider a possible series of events. Russia, powered by the imperialistic desire of the Kremlin, manufactures targeted disinformation. With the power of social media and generative AI, this problem spreads, especially if it is planted into societies with already pro-Russian sentiment. Again, this is best seen regarding the example of Slovakia. Populist governments and leaders then use the opportunity to gain power and with a little help of a good marketing strategy, they eventually end up winning the elections. If those leaders then, after taking office, continue to act upon their pro-Russian sympathies, like when the Slovak foreign minister met with Putin's right-hand man Sergei Lavrov in Turkey over a month ago, it presents a serious problem for Europe and the EU. This has been already demonstrated in the example of Hungary, as it regularly boycotts EU efforts to help Ukraine.

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However, the biggest event that will alter the course of European security is coming this November. There is nervousness in Brussels and in other European capitals as to how a potential Trump presidency could change US calculus. There are two separate concerns to bear in mind. One is whether the US will support Ukraine. If not, the European Union would have to spend twice as much money and it would have to buy weapons from America. The other question is if the next era of Trump's presidency would make the United States pull military support for Europe, which is a much larger issue. That would require not just money but the complete change of a mindset in Europe that has been in place since 1945.

By trying to adapt to these further threats of conflict, a recent analysis revealed that countries all around Europe have been supplying themselves with more arms. The Russian invasion has fundamentally changed the view of armaments in Europe as well. This shift in threat perception is reflected in the growing share of GDP going to military spending, with NATO's target of two per cent increasingly seen as a stepping stone rather than a limit. NATO's target was met by 11 of its 31 members last year, the most since the end of the Cold War. But will that be enough if we do not fight the conflict on all fronts, including in the digital space?

The Russian invasion has fundamentally changed the view of armaments in Europe.

Lessons from the region

Ultimately, the European security landscape is ever-evolving and increasingly complex. The EU and member states face hybrid threats and cyberspace and social media have become the new battlegrounds for state and non-state groups. There is also growing concern about the potential use of chemical and other conventional weapons. At this point, western strategy must be better adjusted to these new threats by actively countering malign players and creating better information resilience.

The tools for this have been discussed many times. Czechia, for example, might stand out as somewhat ignorant of the problem. However, it still has plenty of opportunities to change that. Other countries in the region have shown that it is possible. The Baltic states are heavily involved in the fight against Russian propaganda and are often seen by experts as a positive example of how the state can act against manipulation. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were part of the Soviet Union until 1990 and Moscow has tried to prevent their return to independence militarily. They share a long border with Russia and see it as a security threat. Lithuania identifies the spread of disinformation as one of the biggest risks. It believes that

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such threats could lead to far worse things such as open conflict. Since 2017, it has faced 55,000 cyber-attacks and tens of thousands of instances of disinformation. Citizens, the state and the military are all involved in defence. Latvia follows a similar approach and has enshrined information defence in its national security document. It strengthens the country's strategic communications, increases media literacy and supports public and independent media. Latvia has people working for various ministries who have the ability to identify disinformation campaigns.

This is where the Czech Republic could learn a lesson. The first step to effectively countering disinformation is to be able to recognize it. This is because in the absence of a firm and coherent deterrence strategy, Russia will continue to pose threatening challenges, and these will not stop. EE

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The Baltics have grown up

Do not call them new member states

STEFANO BRAGHIROLI

As the core of EU decision-making becomes more plural and less a monopoly of the Paris-Berlin engine – Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius have proven to have reached full adulthood as EU member states. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are no longer "new member states" aspiring to be good students in a never-ending exam. The idea of an old Europe looking down at a teenage new Europe has been surpassed by history.

Twenty years ago, on May 1st 2004, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania together with other countries from Central and Eastern Europe joined the European Union in what has become known as the "Big Bang enlargement"– the EU's most ambitious expansion. Since they regained their independence in 1991, after more than 40 years of brutal Soviet occupation, the Baltic states have spent almost two-thirds of their recent independent history as EU members. Despite this, along with their Central European neighbours, they are still often referred to as "new member states" both in public and media discourses. It is as if their full European adulthood is still an aspiration, rather than an achieved milestone. As a matter of comparison, no one would have called Finland or Austria "new member states" in the early 2000s, just a few years after their accession.

As we celebrate two decades since what has been called the reunification of Europe, it is probably the right time to look back and take stock of what has been achieved. This will help us to highlight where we are as a Union and what is still missing to move forward in our integration process.

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Know where you come from

Many argue that for the Baltics, the Second World War only ended in 1991 when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania regained their stolen independence after being impoverished and ruined by more than 50 years of brutal Soviet occupation. As they reappeared on the maps of a new Europe, the three countries were faced with the herculean challenge of rebuilding themselves from very little.

The idea of a "return to Europe" proved to be a powerful aspiration to bring the Baltics back to their natural home – the family of European nations, where their history and culture have been shaped over the past centuries and where, as proud independent nations, they had belonged for more than 20 years in the interwar period. European integration was not simply an abstract concept – an empty signifier – but also a concrete and tangible synonym of economic development, ontological security and democratic consolidation. The idea of return turned out to be a potent symbol uniting political elites and the public towards one common and shared goal.

Balts who fled their country out of fear of the terror of the Red Army in 1944, and their sons and daughters, returned to their homelands to help build a better future for their grandsons and granddaughters. The spirit of that time – a mix of hope and struggle, of economic poverty and moral richness – is epitomized by the famous words of Lennart Meri, the first president of the newly free Estonia, "the situation may be shit, but it is our fertilizer for the future."

The personal saga of Meri, who faced persecution and exile during the long dictatorship of Soviet communism, exemplifies both the experience and challenge of Estonia's young and freedom-minded political class. Thanks to their determination – backed by the strength of a whole nation that was united in the peaceful Singing Revolution – the movement that began in the late 1980s during Mikhail Gorbachev's era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* saw the tiny Baltic states play a crucial role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. This role was similar to that played by Poland in the collapse of the Kremlin-led Eastern Bloc.

Not an easy path

Despite the general perception of an unproblematic process, the Baltic accession to the European Union was all but a relaxed gala dinner and it has – from time to time – presented tangible challenges along the way. Since the signing of the Europe Association Agreements in the late 1990s, it took more than five years to finalize the accession negotiations. Key issues addressed in the negotiations in-

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cluded the legal adoption of EU standards in relation to company legislation and the operation of the financial system; the protection of intellectual property rights and competition policies; as well as the integration of the Russian-speaking minorities. Moreover, given the limited progress in Latvia and the chaotic political situation in Lithuania, only Estonia was considered among the prospective enlargement countries in the 1997 Luxembourg summit, together with Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Slovenia and Cyprus.

In addition to the issues directly related to the accession negotiations, geopolitical considerations were not absent in relation to Baltic membership and – in many cases – made influential circles in Western Europe particularly cautious. We cannot ignore that, despite the western policy of non-recognition of the Soviet occupation, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were the only territories of the former Soviet Union to be granted the status of candidates for full EU membership until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Estonia is an example of how EU membership served as a powerful multiplier of the country's successful transition.

Overall, the synergy of political representatives and represented citizens allowed the Baltic states to overcome the struggles of the 1990s and to start the new millennium as the poster children of a successful democratic and economic transition, exactly at the time when the EU accession became a reality.

The myth of the "Baltic Tigers" was now born. The case of Estonia is emblematic of how EU membership served as a powerful multiplier of the country's successful transition and – at the same time – provided the required motivation to undertake the necessary reforms to secure it. Being part of a borderless Europe has made Estonians freer, while access to the single market and to Brussels's financial support has boosted Estonian businesses and supported the country's infrastructure.

Estonia has now built an effective e-state and gained a reputation as one of Europe's most digital countries. Estonians can profit from one of the best educational systems in the world and have one of the highest incomes per capita in Central and Eastern Europe. Its capital, Tallinn, is home to countless start-ups and innovative businesses, including world renowned hi-tech unicorns.

However, it would be almost impossible to imagine all of this in a "lonely" Estonia, detached from global trends and outside of the EU. Estonians and their Baltic fellows have delivered – with their determination and courage – the seeds of the country's success. However, EU membership has provided fertile ground for them to flourish and prosper far beyond the borders of the nation state in a safe and secure environment. Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians know well what they were escaping from in the early 1990s – an oppressive and intrusive state; ubiquitous bureaucracy; a cripplingly centralized economy; and international isolation. They

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shaped their restored country in exactly the opposite way: digital, light, uncomplicated, business-friendly and open to the world.

Europe with a Baltic accent

This new openness translated into the Baltics' full return to the European family as committed members of the free world, determined to promote the values of international cooperation and multilateralism by advancing European (and transatlantic) integration. Who we are today is shaped by our history. The experience of the Baltics' troubled past, the painful liberal economic reforms of the 1990s, and the constant striving for individual freedom and regional security have also shaped the Baltics' priorities as EU member states and their concrete and long-term policy objectives.

Internally, from economy to new technologies, the Baltic accent has been making Brussels more effective and less bureaucratic – less big words and more tangible deeds. In terms of socio-economic policies, the focus has been on fiscal restraint and on smart solutions rather than interventionism. In terms of the single market, the Baltic priorities have been to move away from protectionism, while embracing open trade and integrated global markets. In foreign policy and security policy, an emphasis has been placed on stressing complementarity and the non-duplication of tasks between NATO and the EU, as well as containing Russia's imperialist temptations and focusing attention towards the Eastern neighbourhood.

Since 2004, the Baltic states have built a reputation in Brussels of being reliable, trusted and deeply committed members. Overall, they present some of the highest levels of compliance with EU rules and have among the lowest number of violations and infringement cases reported by the European Commission. It is also worth mentioning the fact that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania refrained from two temptations quite common in the Central and Eastern European region: the idea of flexible solidarity and illiberal tendencies. When dealing with very domestically sensitive policy packages, such as the allocation of refugee quotas and the Greek recovery plan, the Baltics did not follow the example of some of the Visegrad countries and instead contributed to agreed EU actions. They always preferred negotiations over exit. The rationale behind this attitude was that to expect solidarity from others, it is necessary to show solidarity towards others.

In terms of domestic political developments, while the Baltics have not been immune to populist or illiberal politics, they have managed to maintain a strong adherence to the values and norms of liberal democracy and have not experienced substantial erosions in the quality of their democracies comparable to Orban's Hungary or PiS-dominated Poland. Unlike Central and Eastern Europe, if anything –

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over the last 20 years – the quality of Baltic democracy has only grown, as a more empirical look at the indicators reveals. Nowadays, the Baltics outperform most of "old Europe" in terms of quality of democracy according to Freedom House's Freedom in the World and Freedom on the Net indices. They also present a lower level of corruption than their western counterparts according to the Corruption Perception Index, as well as a remarkably open information space according to the World Press Freedom Index. Finally, they have some of the most transparent judiciary systems according to the Rule of Law Index.

Playing by the rules has also gone hand in hand with learning fast how to play the game in Brussels, with Baltic officials proving to be – in many institutional contexts – valued negotiators, key deal brokers, and the natural bridge builders between Northern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. This combination of pragmatism, consistency and acquired trust among the partners has given the Baltics the chance to exert an influence over EU policy that is much bigger than their physical size. This has been clearly seen in their key role in shaping Brussels's support towards Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion.

New Europe, no more

Over the last 20 years as EU members, the Baltics have moved from the periphery of the Union's decision-making to its core and have a model to offer for the next 20 years characterized by the same pragmatism, consistency, reliability and can-do attitude that gained them full membership in 2004. The last two years, in the context of Russia's war of aggression, have proven that beyond any doubts the Baltics have a lot to offer the EU, far beyond digital solutions and smart economy. While the traditional Franco-German engine struggled to understand and react to the new geopolitical reality defined by the war in Ukraine, the Baltic leaders have been central to articulating a more coherent European response; to redefining the priorities of the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy; and to eventually making the EU a geopolitical actor. While we cannot attribute the merit of Brussels's direct military support to Ukraine and of the new momentum in the enlargement process exclusively to one single group of countries, it is hard to deny that the intensity of Baltic voices and their understanding of the geopolitical context have been key to shaking the sleepy capitals of old Europe.

In a recent address in Paris, Estonia's Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, paraphrasing Schuman's words, warned that "we must understand the threat – really understand it – to make the efforts proportionate to the danger" and stressed that "history is calling on us [Europe] to make bold decisions. Everything we do now will have

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real-life implications for all of us tomorrow." As I listened to Kallas's speech in front of a French audience, I cannot help but think back to when Jacques Chirac attacked, back in 2003, EU candidates from Central and Eastern Europe, saying that they missed a great opportunity to "shut up" with reference to their support for the US stance on Iraq.

Twenty years later, it is probably fair to say that – when it comes to the future of the European Union – the Baltic states and their Central and Eastern European fellows should not miss any opportunity to speak up and be heard.

Actions speak volumes and – as the core of EU decision-making becomes more plural and less a monopoly of the Paris-Berlin engine – Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius have proven to have reached full adulthood as EU member states. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are no longer "new member states" aspiring to be good students in a never-ending exam. The idea of an old Europe looking down at a teenage new Europe has been surpassed by history.

While this new reality is proven by facts and confirmed by actions, the state of things in Brussels and its institutions shows that the re-unification of Europe achieved in 2004 has not yet delivered all its fruits. Since the enlargement, we have witnessed only one representative of the region – Poland's Donald Tusk – rise to the top of EU decision-making. In the current term, none of the leaders of the top three EU institutions have come from the countries that joined the Union in 2004. If the voices of half of Europe are not properly represented in the top seats of Brussels's cockpit tasked with driving Europe forward, we should not be surprised if its citizens do not always understand where we are going and feel disaffected towards the European project.

As the recent European Parliament elections will shape the democratic state of our Union for years to come, we have the unique opportunity to take a decisive step towards the finalization of the process that we started in 2004. As Kaja Kallas reminded us, it is time "to make bold decisions" – to shape a Union for the next 20 years in which every voice is heard and in which there are no longer old and new member states.

As we celebrate Europe Day one year from now – on May 9th 2025, we can only hope to see a Lithuanian president of the Commission at the helm of Europe's executive; or an Estonian president of the European Council shaking hands with the US president; or a Latvian high representative shaping the Union's foreign policy. It will be the best way to celebrate genuine European Unity and to honour the true spirit of the Schuman Declaration. EE

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GDAŃSK

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

The Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, recently announced that Poland will introduce a programme called "Shield East". The aim of this programme is to fortify the country's borders with Belarus and Kaliningrad. Its implementation will be among the largest investments in national security and border defence in Poland's post-war history. For us in Gdańsk, this new policy, driven by the situation in the region, has become an impulse for reflection into the activities that our city has engaged in over the years and which we collectively called "Gdańsk Open to the East".

We started these activities upon the initiative of Anna Kieturakis, who worked with the Department of Foreign Affairs at the Office of the Mayor of the City of Gdańsk, and who, after years of public service, is now retiring. When in 2011 Anna introduced her ideas to the mayor's office her intention was to open Gdańsk's doors to our partners in the East. Below, we are publishing her short summary of these efforts. It includes a critical assessment of the activities undertaken as well as some insights into the initial intentions of their architects. Kieturakis also portrays the unfulfilled hopes and failures that came with the implementation of our idealist policies.

Naturally, just like in other states, local governments in Poland do not pursue their own foreign policies. Our activities focus on fostering friendly relations between different communities living in cooperating cities. We have always believed that contacts that are established at the local level are governed by slightly different rules than those in the realm of state-to-state relations. Unlike the latter, the former allow for grassroots activities, also with the societies who live in the countries where the ruling elite show an unfamiliarity with such concepts as morality and decency. This was the philosophy of many western European local governments during the Cold War. In Gdańsk we benefited from it in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time representatives of Western European local governments reached out to us, planting seeds for future democratisation and cooperation.

In repaying the debt that we incurred during this period, we also believed in a positivist approach when cooperating with our neighbours in non-democratic states. We wanted to allure our partners to the advantages of freedom, show them the value of democracy and solidarity. In other words, we wanted to present an alternative to the totalitarian vision of the world and the use of force in international relations.

However, time can be a merciless censor for high-minded ideas and perceptions. In the case of Russian partners,

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the reality has brought us painfully down to earth. The unwavering degree of support from the Russian public for Vladimir Putin's policies was a cold shower for us.

Evidently, we are not alone in this situation. In his assessment of Russia, former US President George W. Bush seriously miscalculated when he exclaimed that when he looked into Vladimir Putin's eyes, he "saw a soul". The Obama administration also miscalculated when pushing for a reset in relations with the Russian Federation. The German vision of changing Russia through trade (Wandel durch Handel) has also failed.

Thus, the reflections we present here are an attempt at hindsight. We believe that sometimes it is worth pausing for a moment to review the choices we made, the decisions we made and the lessons we have learned. As it turns out, and what is surprisingly often the case, what seems like a sensible idea and one worth supporting at one time, blows up in our faces.

This makes it all the more important not to be fooled this time and not to allow the responsibility for the crimes committed by Russian and Belarusian despots and their henchmen to be diluted. They must all remain accountable. The international community must adhere to the value of solidarity and remain consistent in its efforts to support a free, independent and democratic Ukraine.

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

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When we initiated our Gdańsk Open to the East programme in 2012, it seemed that we were acting in line with the then abiding trends in Polish and EU foreign policy. In line with the Eastern Partnership programme introduced in 2009, the attempt to normalise relations with the Russian Federation, aka reset, as well as the growing role of cities in shaping international cooperation, such a policy was considered forward-looking and necessary. Two Polish cities, Wrocław and Gdańsk, played a central role in promoting and pursuing such cooperation: Wrocław with Lviv as its partner city and Gdańsk with two partners in the Russian Federation: Kaliningrad and St Petersburg as well as Odesa in Ukraine.

Our late mayor, Paweł Adamowicz, whose parents had been relocated to Gdańsk in the post-war period from the territories of present-day Lithuania and Belarus, was particularly sensitive to the relations between our city residents and those who live across our eastern border.

He argued that after almost a quarter of a century had passed since the 1989 transformation, it was time to redirect our attention from an exclusive focus on Western Europe and start looking more carefully beyond our eastern border. 162 kilometres to the East is the Russian city of Kaliningrad, the closest major European city to Gdańsk.

Adamowicz believed, and shared this vision with us, that cooperation with cities to the East was a moral imperative and an obligation we had to fulfil. By helping countries aspiring to democracy, we repay the assistance and support that we had received from the free world in the past. Adamowicz wanted to open our city more widely to the citizens of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In the case of Ukraine, it was natural to welcome Ukrainians who came to Poland, especially after the start of the full-scale invasion but also earlier after the 2015 economic crisis in Ukraine, and provide them with favourable conditions to live, work and study in Gdańsk. It was the late Jerzy Giedroyc's (editor of Kultura magazine) idea of a democratic Ukraine, befriending Poland and separating us from Russia, that guided successive Polish governments and presidents, including our city authorities.

Cooperation with cities in the East began to play an increasingly important role in the foreign activities of the local government units of the City of Gdańsk. We saw our role as a liaison, a coordinator of this cooperation, but we also increasingly took the initiative, seeking new contacts and opportunities for cooperation. As a city of freedom we wanted to promote the ideas that reflect the legacy of the Polish Solidarity freedom movement which was born and developed here. Our aspiration was also to be a leader of the Eastern Partnership among Polish cities and to contribute to the opening of Europe to the East and the East to Europe.

Nonetheless, we never had any illusions in regards to the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime in Belarus. Thus, our activities towards Belarus were largely focused on supporting the Polish minority. For example, we wanted to help improve access to Polish language teaching. Regarding Russia, a country outside Eastern Partnership, our most important task was to contribute to the building of civil society structures there. We felt that we should – as much as we could –

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support our neighbours in the processes of democratisation and building social structures. This was one of the most important challenges for us.

We also saw an urgent need to respond to the populism and euro-scepticism already spreading in Europe. We recognised this threat at its early stage and emphasised the need to stand up for fundamental European values of democracy, freedom and equality.

The Gdańsk Open to the East programme was an endeavour of the Gdańsk City Hall to coordinate the activities of local government, organisations and entrepreneurs, with an aim to bring the inhabitants, organisation and institutions of Gdańsk closer to the inhabitants of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Through joint educational, academic, cultural, economic and social projects as well as multi-level professional cooperation, we wanted to promote the ideas that unite us. We wanted to eradicate those that divide us. Our focus was on fostering understanding and respect of cultural differences. We aimed to support people living in Eastern Europe, including Poles, in the process of creating strong civil societies, breaking down stereotypes and laying the foundations for a permanent and sustainable dialogue between communities and cultures.

Our objectives were implemented through specific actions, including:

1. Building a network of residents, associations and institutions in Gdańsk focused on the East: friends of Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian language and culture and providing them with places and opportunities to meet Gdańsk residents with similar interests.
2. Supporting the Polish minority in the East.
3. Renewing cooperation with Gdańsk partner cities in post-Soviet countries such as Kaliningrad, St Petersburg, and Odesa, through visits by city authorities, study tours and revival of cooperation between universities of our cities.
4. Nurturing Gdańsk's position in the world as a leader in shaping Eastern policy. This includes such tools as New Eastern Europe, the New Europe Ambassador Award which is organised by the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk and the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław, Belarusian and Ukrainian literary and translation seminars, and the organisation of a Polish-Russian School (with the Russian Philology department of the University of Gdańsk).
5. Initiating and/or supporting other projects integrating eastern and western parts of Europe, including European, economic, cultural and communication projects.
6. Creating a forum for dialogue between organisations and communities (e.g. Eastern Partnership Forum in Brussels), Gdańsk Talks on Russia in the Weta Hall of the Main City Hall, open lectures of the Polish-Russian School, annual civic debates in Kaliningrad (with the participation of the President of the City of Gdańsk, Polish film director Krzysztof Zanussi, participants of the Solidarity Academy, and the late Polish Ambassador to Russia – Jerzy Bahr).
7. Organizing visits of museum workers from Russia to Gdańsk and exchanges of exhibits between museums.

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This was our thinking and activities between 2009 and 2014. Everything changed after the illegal annexation of Crimea. This act left us with no illusions about the real ambitions of the Putin regime. For two more years, until 2016, the Local Border Traffic Act between the Kaliningrad region and Poland, so beneficial to local communities on both sides of the border, was still in operation. However, mutual hostility between Putin's government and Poland was rapidly growing.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the enormity of the crimes committed changed everything even more. Today, as the brutal war in Ukraine continues and Putin's regime wants to seize new territories in the north, we wonder whether our efforts to open our borders to the East, and especially to Russia, were not too naïve. By organizing conferences and debates in Kaliningrad and later in Gdańsk for both Poles and Russians, with the participation of the late Paweł Adamowicz, Krzysztof Zanussi and the late Jerzy Bahr, did we not leave a trace of goodwill in the minds of their participants and instil hope for a future free Russia?

We are still looking for answers to these questions.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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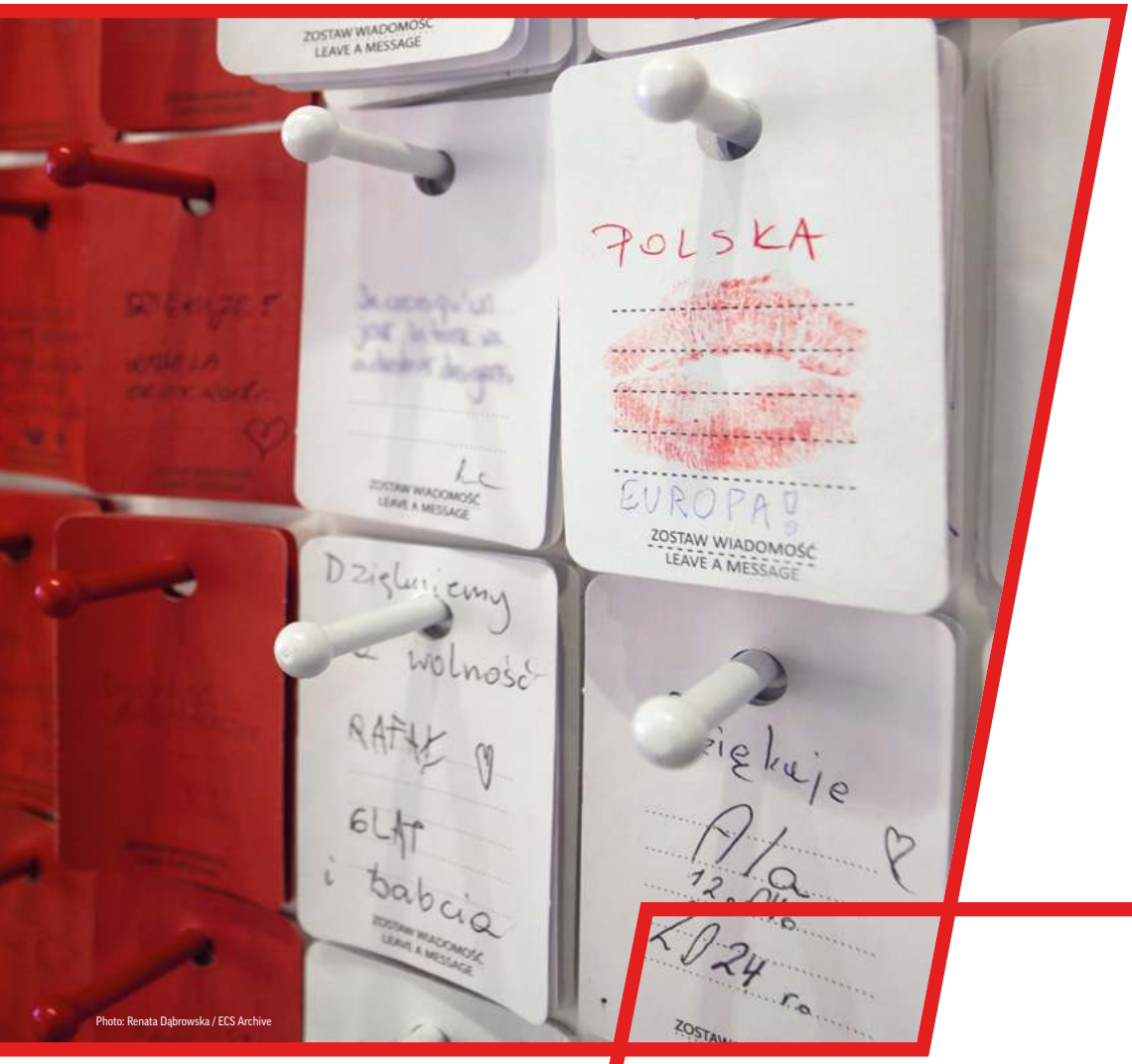

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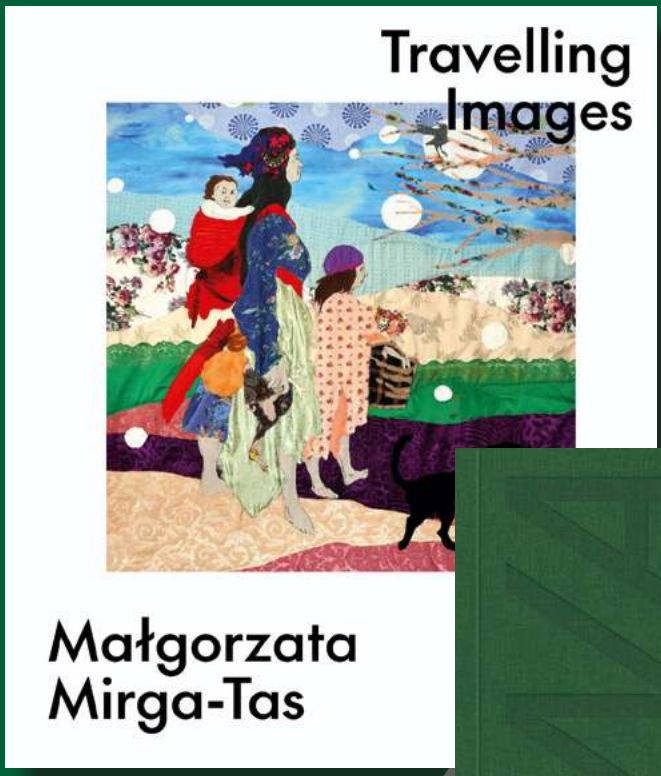

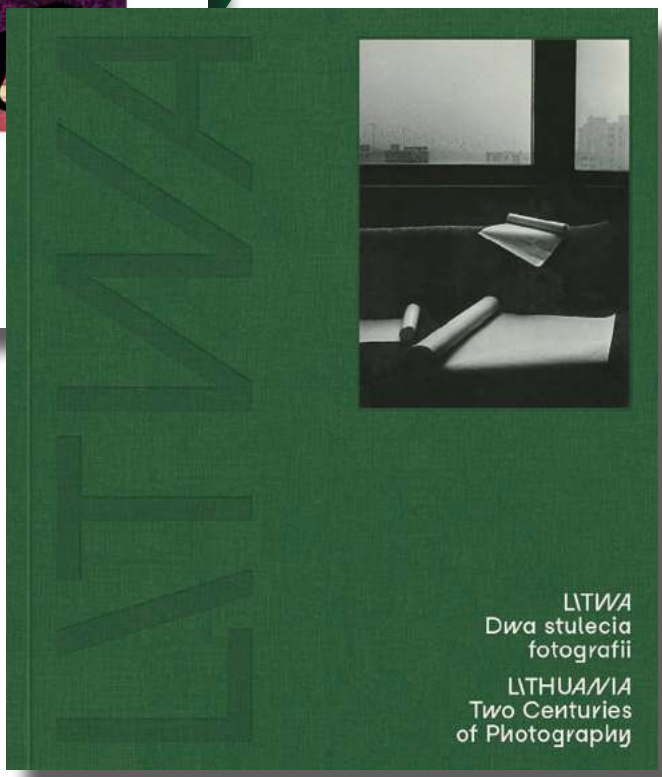

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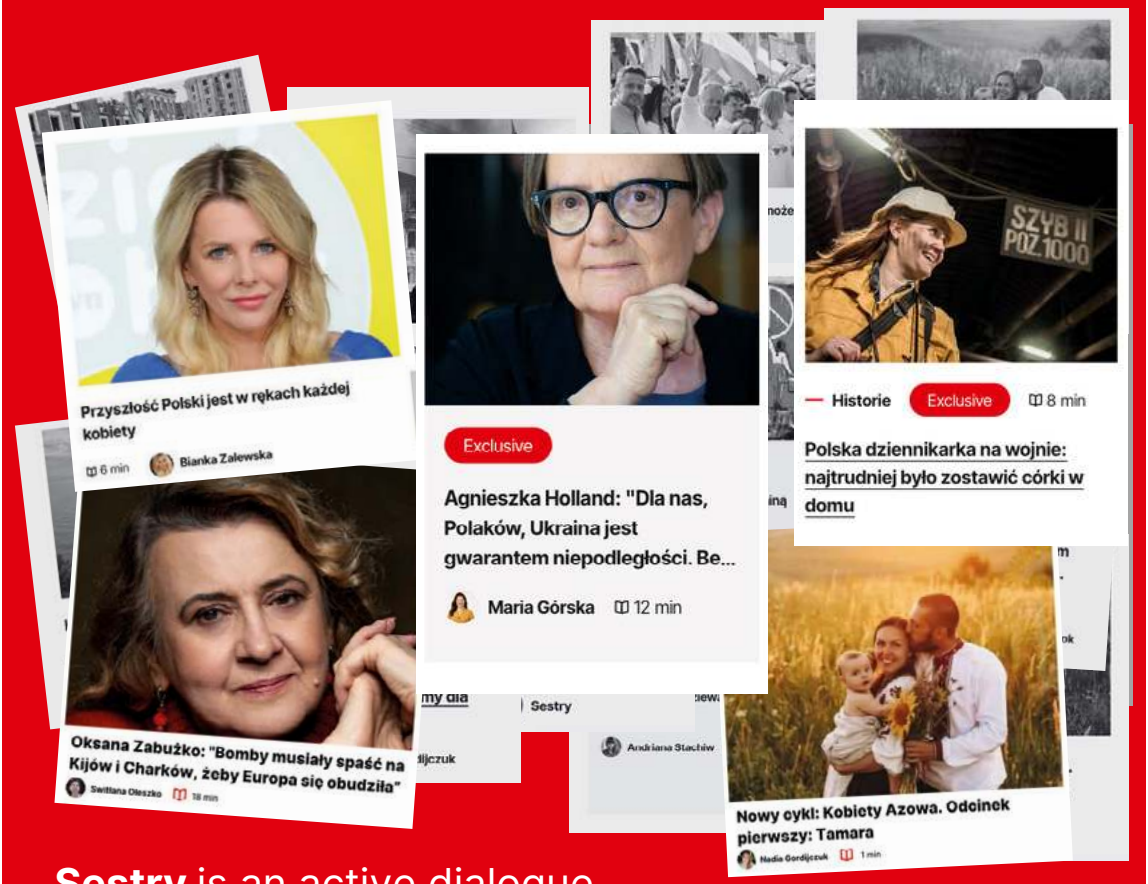

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Hungarian metamorphosis

From returning to Europe to occupying Brussels

ZSUZSANNA VÉGH

Hungary joined the European Union 20 years ago and became a member of NATO 25 years ago. Yet, neither occasion has been officially commemorated by the Hungarian government. As Viktor Orbán geared up for this year's European parliamentary election and the Hungarian EU Council presidency due to take place from July, he announced that he wants to "occupy Brussels".

With today's Hungarian government being one of the staunchest critics of the European Union, the memory of the country's drive towards integration after regime change seems ever so distant. Still, joining the EU – as well as NATO – was one of the three key goals that underpinned Hungarian foreign policy throughout the 1990s and, except for the Eurosceptic extreme right's objection, was supported by all political forces. The stages of the accession process itself reflected this broad political consensus. In 1994, the national conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum-led government under József Antall submitted Hungary's membership application to the EU. From 1998 onwards, accession negotiations were conducted by the initially liberal but by this time increasingly right-wing Fidesz under the first Orbán-government. Finally, Hungary joined the European Union under the left-liberal governing coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Alliance of Free Democrats led by Péter Medgyessy.

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For its part, the EU supported Hungary's quest both politically and financially and then welcomed the country as one of the frontrunners of the democratic and economic transformation process that unfolded in Central Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hungary, just like its Visegrad partners – Czechia, Poland and Slovakia – was considered as one of the most prominent success stories of Europeanization. This accomplishment even inspired these new member states to commit to sharing their newly acquired transition experience with those in the Western Balkans and the EU's eastern neighbourhood, who aspired to similar goals.

Beyond the political class, joining the EU also enjoyed wide support within Hungarian society. Although only 45.62 per cent of eligible voters participated in the referendum about the country's EU accession in April 2003, an overwhelming majority, 83.76 per cent, voted in favour of membership. Thus, when on May 1st 2004, Hungary became a member of the European Union, it seemed it did so to the satisfaction of the vast majority involved on all sides.

High hopes

Joining the EU was also seen as a confirmation of belonging: the Central European countries' sovereign choice to "return to Europe" after decades of subjugation as the Soviet Union's satellites reinforced both their freedom to choose their geopolitical orientation and their European self-identification. At the same time, EU accession also promised tangible economic benefits for the new member states. Hungary, like other newcomers, hoped to catch up with Western Europe as it expected economic and social prosperity, modernization and higher living standards following membership. Nevertheless, fears that Hungarian businesses will face more difficulties upon entering the single market were initially also prevalent in society. This was clear in the first Eurobarometer survey conducted after accession in the autumn of 2004.

Through its agricultural and cohesion policies, the EU indeed provided significant financial resources for Hungary to support the country's agricultural sector; regional and rural development; the creation of new jobs; as well as territorial and social cohesion. According to the European Commission, Hungary has received over 83 billion euros since 2004, which on average means over four billion euros annually. Over the same period, it paid around 20.5 billion euros into the EU's budget, which is somewhat over one billion a year on average. The difference of over three billion annually has made Hungary one of the biggest net beneficiaries of the EU.

The EU was strongly associated among Hungarians not only with prosperity but with the ability to travel, work and study freely anywhere in the European Un-

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ion. Accession to the Schengen Zone opened the borders for Hungarians in 2007 to travel, while the Erasmus programme has provided the opportunity for tens of thousands of students over the past two decades to study abroad. What later became the most important destination countries – apart from the United Kingdom – for work migration for Hungarians, Austria and Germany, opened their labour markets fully in 2011, thus removing all limitations ahead of the free flow of the Hungarian workforce. Together with EU funds, freedom of movement continues to be the most highly regarded benefit of Hungary's EU membership to date. This shows that on the societal level, economic benefits hold greater value when it comes to support for the EU than shared values or the idea of a common European identity.

Falling short

The support provided by the EU offered Hungary an unprecedented opportunity to invest in its own development and competitiveness, and at first glance the country has indeed experienced significant growth over the past 20 years. But a closer look – and some regional comparisons – reveals a more nuanced and sobering picture. According to the World Bank, Hungary's GDP per capita grew from 10,301 US dollars in 2004 – one of the highest among the new member states – to 18,390 in 2022. That is, according to Eurostat, 61 and 76 per cent of the EU average respectively. Thus, while Hungary did not catch up with the West, it did make some progress toward it. At the same time, despite ranking lower in their development initially, most new member states managed to exceed Hungary's growth and are closer to the EU average today. Changes in individual purchasing power show a similar picture: from 63 per cent of the EU average in 2005, Hungary jumped to 71 per cent in 2022, which is still one of the smallest increases in the region. Except for Bulgaria, all countries that joined the EU during the "Big Bang" enlargement overtook Hungary, rendering it one of the countries with the lowest living standards in the EU today.

While Hungary did not catch up with the West, it did make some progress toward it.

Regional development also fell short of initial expectations: except for Budapest, the GDP per capita in all regions of Hungary continues to be under 75 per cent of the EU average. In fact, it was only in 2022 that all regions of the country reached the 50 per cent mark, and three – out of the eight altogether – continue to be among the 20 poorest areas in the EU. While all regions progressed over the past 20 years, differences, especially when comparing eastern and western regions, have not disappeared. Budapest's GDP per capita is

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158 per cent of the EU's, followed by 70 per cent in Central Transdanubia. Northern Hungary and the Northern Great Plain close the list with 50 per cent.

The reasons behind the slower than expected development are manifold. Some are external, like the impact of the financial or the eurozone crisis. These however do not explain why other countries of the region managed to even overtake Hungary. Internal reasons play a more significant role. These on the one hand include the non-strategic and inefficient use of funds, e.g. insufficient investment into human capital, or the financing of projects that ultimately have no multiplier effect. On the other hand, corruption surrounding the use of EU funds also plays a role. The country has some of the highest rates of corruption in the European Union according to the annual reports of the European Anti-Fraud Office. Over the past decade and a half, EU funds have been used to position and re-enforce a tight-knit business circle close to the governing Fidesz party, not only by favouring certain well-connected bidders but also by supporting overpriced projects while covering up blatant financial mismanagement.

By 2022, the European Commission considered the corruption risk so high and the existing mechanisms to sanction it so inefficient that it concluded that the Union's financial interests are endangered in Hungary. As a consequence, it froze a significant share of the cohesion funds allocated for the country with the help of the newly introduced conditionality procedure. The suspension of these payments is to remain in force as long as the Hungarian government does not implement a series of anti-corruption measures to improve safeguards. The Viktor Orbán-led Fidesz government, however, shows limited inclination to substantially remedy the situation as corruption is essential for it to uphold the system it gradually built following the 2010 parliamentary elections.

Not a one-way street

The conditionality procedure, which was introduced alongside the 2021–27 multi-annual financial framework, marks the EU's belated response to the abuse of the Union's budgetary resources. The fact that no such procedures were in place before testifies to the previously held assumption that once a country enters the European Union, it is willing and able to adhere to its rules and principles. The example of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, however, showed that bad faith actors may come into power even in countries that were regarded as consolidated democracies.

In fact, it is not only the EU's financial resources but also its values and principles that came under threat in Hungary, proving that democratization and Europeanization are not one-way streets. Long before the suspension of EU funds, conflicts

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Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, reacts at his arrival at the working meeting of the leaders from the European Council in Bucharest last April. Hungary will be taking up the presidency of the EU Council starting in July.

between the Fidesz government and the EU institutions became the order of the day and have intensified as time passed. Worries about the Orbán government's democratic commitments arose already in 2010 as the leading party curbed the rights of the constitutional court. This was followed by the unilateral adoption of a new constitution; the forced retirement of judges; the adoption of a new restrictive media law and the subsequent subjugation of state media to party preferences; the complete reform of the electoral system that disproportionately favours the largest party; and more. The European Commission tried to address many of these challenges with the tools it had, which were either insufficient or ineffective to deal with the systemic challenge democracy faced in Hungary.

Already in 2010 Orbán was critical of the West and considered it to be in decline, which is why Budapest announced the "Eastern Opening" policy that served to strengthen ties with emerging economies. It took until 2014–15 for the government to start pursuing explicitly Eurosceptic rhetoric and embraced topics like migration or gender, with which it decided to challenge the EU institutions. The "anti-Brussels" rhetoric continued throughout the 2010s and was ramped up as Fidesz's relations started to deteriorate with its political allies in the European People's Party.

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The Orbán government went so far as to organize so-called national consultations spreading falsehoods about the EU and its institutions, as well as billboard campaigns that directly attacked the European Commission's president with whom Fidesz used to share the same wider political party. The government's confrontational style led to Fidesz's departure from the European People's Party in 2021 and a search for a new political home among the parties of the Eurosceptic radical right.

Twenty years later, the party that once negotiated the country's accession to the EU is at fundamental odds with integration, and is highly critical of the political directions the group set out to take in keeping with the idea of an ever-closer union. Orbán considers the EU dysfunctional and is cultivating increasingly close ties with authoritarian powers like Russia or China. Budapest also blocks joint EU action that would seek to address the challenges they pose to Europe's security and prosperity. As such, Hungary, which was once a democratic frontrunner, is now regarded in the EU as a Trojan horse for autocrats.

Occupying Brussels

Hungary joined the European Union 20 years ago and became a member of NATO 25 years ago. Yet, neither occasion has been officially commemorated by the Hungarian government. As Viktor Orbán geared up for this year's European parliamentary election and the Hungarian EU Council presidency is due to take place from July, he announced that he wants to "occupy Brussels".

Like most radical right politicians after Brexit, he does not want his country to leave the EU anymore – with over 70 per cent of Hungarians supporting the country's EU membership, even Fidesz voters would resist a "Huxit". Instead of leaving the EU, Orbán wants to reform it from within and calls for turning integration into a union of strong, sovereign nation-states that would be little more than an economic union without any of the elements that seek to keep governments democratically accountable. As illiberal and Eurosceptic forces are gaining ground in the EU, his call does not fall on deaf ears. EE

Zsuzsanna Végh is a programme officer at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The views expressed here are those of the author.

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The ability to reconcile is a mark of a nation's maturity

A conversation with Milan Kučan,
the first president of Slovenia from 1991 to 2002.
Interviewer: Nikodem Szczygłowski

NIKODEM SZCZYGŁOWSKI: In 2004, at the time of the EU's enlargement, Slovenia was considered one of the most developed countries in the region – much more so than Poland, the Czech Republic or Lithuania. Now, 20 years later, we can see that the achievements of Poland or Lithuania were greater than those of Slovenia. Slovenia was at the highest level when it joined the EU, and it is still at a high level, but Poland or Lithuania have caught up much more and are much closer to Slovenia. What are the reasons for this?

MILAN KUČAN: Slovenia was ahead of all these countries in terms of development parameters at that time. But then, it actually developed more slowly. This was due to the specific features of the economic and privatization reforms in Slovenia, but also a number of other factors. At a certain point, Slovenia actually stopped or paid much less attention to economic development than to internal ideological debates, political divisions and so on. Of course, from an economic point of view, at that time the development gap between Slovenia and, say, Poland or the Czech Republic was significant, but now it has narrowed considerably. This is due to Slovenia's slower development. It is easier to achieve tangible results at a low level of development than it is to achieve the same tangible result at a higher level with the same development as others. I think that this momentum and the sense of catching up with the European Union has also meant that there has been greater mobilization in these poorer and less developed countries than in Slovenia. Slovenia was relatively successful, relatively developed and relatively sat-

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isfied that it had almost reached the European average when it joined, but then it started to lose this advantage.

This happened because we were unable to make good use of the advantages it gave us. This is because Slovenia did not have a well-crystallized development strategy of its own, which is still not entirely clear today. We are a stable democracy with all its attributes, our institutions function similarly to those in other western countries, the state is quite efficient, elections are held democratically, the principle of the separation of powers works, the courts and the media are independent. In short, what we imagine as a democratic state system has been almost fully realized in Slovenia. Whether Slovenia has actually been economically successful in recent years is another question.

Do you see things changing in this regard?

It has to be said that after a period in which we fell into the medium-term development trap, Slovenia has recently been enjoying high growth in our national product again, high living standards and also corporate profits, for example. Almost all the statistics for last year are very optimistic. Slovenia has done well in the EU common market. I think that the benefits of this for Slovenians are obvious, and that is the most important thing. Our country is living the life of a peaceful and stable country. Of course, there are various internal political upheavals that may be incomprehensible to an outside observer. For example, a part of Slovenian politics is still fighting communism, which, after all, has been gone for a long time. This negative conception – like other such visions of struggle – always needs an enemy to act, and this has its historical roots in the 19th century, in the so-called "division of souls", as this phenomenon was called in Slovenia, or in a kind of cultural struggle, which then intensified enormously during and after the Second World War. This division still has consequences for Slovenian society and, of course, it has an impact on the state of Slovenian democracy. Personally, I do not think that the negative concept can prevail, but it has its defenders. In fact, all such discourses are not based on ideas about how to make Slovenian society more modern and prosperous, but to a large extent on a return to the past.

Does this mean that the conflict between Tito's partisans and the Home Guard (the anti-partisan collaborationists during the Second World War – editor's note) is still taking place in Slovenia?

I think this has to do with our view of the future of the country. If that future is not conceptualized, it is much easier to build narratives about the past. The fact is that in Slovenia during the Second World War, part of the population collaborated with the occupier. This cooperation was, of course, not negligible. However, there was also considerable resistance to the German and Italian occupation, and after the war there was an

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unjustifiable punishment of those who opposed it. It is a crime, but the fact is that there were extrajudicial executions. And that still carries a certain weight in the collective memory of the nation. The problem is that as a mature nation we are still unable to accept our history and part of the political scene wants to bring it back into everyday social and political life. We are no exception in this respect, and other nations in Europe have had similar experiences. The ability to reconcile is a mark of a nation's maturity and shows that it is able to come to terms with its history. We have lived through it, it is a tragic part of our past, we have to live with it somehow, but we also have to look to the future – I think that is how we should build a narrative.

Photo courtesy of Milan Kučan

Many observers believe that the biggest problem in our part of Europe today has become the model of a polarized society based on populism. Populism, however, often operates with different kinds of nostalgia and scepticism. What does Euroscepticism and "Yugonostalgia" mean in Slovenia today?

I think it is a certain ideological formula. Most Slovenians today have no experience of life in Yugoslavia. Either they were children or they were not yet born. But it is true that there is something in the Slovenian collective memory according to which there are areas that were better organized in Yugoslavia than they are today. This is the so-called problem of social inequality, of access to the public sector, i.e. education, health, housing and so on. Indeed, the measures taken by the authorities at that time were done to reduce disparities. In Yugoslavia, and especially in Slovenia, there were hardly any social differences at that time. Or they were so insignificant that they were not crucial for integration into society. Today, when problems arise in a certain area, we think it was much better back then. I usually say that it was simply different. Whether it was better or not is, of course, another question. The question of political rights, pluralism, democracy and so on is also a separate question. But there are enough conversations about this which involve people who have no personal experience of life in Yugoslavia. They are usually operating on the inherited experiences of their parents, who at that time had a guaranteed job. They also had a

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guarantee that their children would go to school, that they would get an apartment, that they would spend their holidays in resorts that were owned by the trade unions. In short, Yugonostalgia is more of a political phenomenon, with the concept used primarily in broad and wide-ranging internal politics.

On the other hand, there is the idea, illustrated by a popular quote, that in Yugoslavia there was supposedly "no fruit yoghurt".

Yes, that's right. That is what one of our MEPs said even though he was only repeating the words of the Croatian president. It was not so bad. I think we did have these yoghurts. But this is a good illustration of what we are talking about. Part of the population has a feeling of dissatisfaction and scepticism. Perhaps, in seeking an answer to this, we should ask ourselves what the original expectations were of the changes that have taken place. For we Slovenes, for example, did not have to include in our expectations that we would be able to, say, travel freely abroad to the West because we were already guaranteed that in Yugoslavia. So the level of our expectations was higher than in Poland. Therefore, these unrealized higher expectations can also be a reason for a certain nostalgia or a certain scepticism. On the other hand, from a political point of view, I believe that the key reason for the spread of such phenomena is the current lack of solidarity in the European Union. In Yugoslavia, despite all the differences that we have talked about, which were really big and which mostly broke up Yugoslavia, there was still a certain solidarity. At the level of "mini societies", at the level of a republic, at the level of a country. In the European Union, on the contrary, there is talk of solidarity without solidarity. For instance, I have mixed feelings about the refugee crisis. If we are a community, we must share the burden. If we are not prepared, if there is no solidarity between us, then we are no longer a community. This begs the question – to what extent do the values on which European integration is based and for which it was founded still exist? Today, they seem to be much more diluted, watered down, less important, and less omnipresent in our lives. The less cohesion there is, the more the question arises – what unites us? Is the European Union just another European common market? In many areas it works like a common market. When we joined the EU, we had clear requirements that we had to meet. And we have met them, we have closed one chapter after another. I remember speaking to the Polish president at that time, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and he said to me: "Listen, Milan, Slovenia will be the first country to be fully ready for membership in the union. You fulfil all the conditions, but in reality the door will not open to all until Poland enters." Poland was important in this context as the largest and most important country in the group. So there was this kind of solidarity. The whole concept of the ten countries that joined the EU in 2004 was designed to say: well, Poland has

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fulfilled the conditions, so now we are all moving forward together.

Now let's look at the case of Croatia, which certainly did not meet all the conditions when it was admitted to the community in 2013. Attitudes towards the Serbian minority, the unregulated borders with Slovenia, Bosnia and Serbia. In short, it was a country that had no defined borders and had not even tried to resolve them in an appropriate way, in accordance with the requirements of membership. Romania was an even clearer example and Bulgaria even more so. In short, there was a certain lowering of the requirements, because it was an increase in the European market. I therefore repeat that the European Union has no future if it does not take major steps to strengthen the foundations of values as a binding tie. This is compared to attempts to establish itself only as a common market.

Where do you think Slovenia is today, in 2024? Is it an Alpine country, a Central European country, a country of the former Yugoslavia, a country on the border with the Balkans? Is Slovenia still a bridge to the West for the countries of the former Yugoslavia or vice versa?

I think that Slovenia, because of its location and history, is all of these things at the same time. But of course only if that is what it wants to be. There is no doubt that Slovenia is a Central European country. Although we usually think that we have nothing in common with the Balkans, we are in a way, to a lesser extent, a Balkan country. This question used to be asked more often and in those years there were several interesting conferences, meetings of Central European presidents. What was Central Europe then? It was physically impossible to define it precisely. You could include northern Italy, you could include Silesia separately from Poland, you could include the whole of Poland. György Konrád (a leading Hungarian intellectual – editor's note) had the best definition in my opinion – it was always about the state of mind of the people living in the area, he said. And although the Central European mentality did exist, as long as the world was divided into blocs, it could not be spoken of. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, this mythical European phenomenon began to reappear. Slovenia is a deeply Central European country, a western country in its structure and in its constitution. It is also linked to the Balkans, so that in a sense it is also a Balkan country, or at least a bridge to the Balkans. At the same time, it is also an Alpine country because it has the Alps and we have many links with the Alpine countries. Together with Hungary, it is also a Pannonian country, because we have part of the Pannonian Plain at home. All this also shows the cultural influences that Slovenian culture has absorbed. In my opinion, this is an advantage of sorts, and if only Slovenian politicians knew how to use it, I mean in the right way, Slovenia could very much strengthen its position as a mediator on many of these issues.

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I believe that despite the mistakes we have made, Slovenia has strong legitimacy to talk about respect for human rights, because no one is perfect. Our experience of economic transformation can also be a lesson for others, but we need to have the confidence to share it. Above all, Slovenia is not confident enough, not proud enough of its achievements. I am not just referring to the last 30 years, but let us not forget that we are a small nation living at the crossroads of interests, which has experienced wars and attempts at assimilation. Despite this, the country has preserved its culture, language and identity. In my opinion, we should be much prouder of that than we are. EE

This interview is a part of a wider conversation on Slovenian contemporary history. Read the full conversation online at www.neweasterneurope.eu.

Milan Kučan was president of the Presidency of socialist Slovenia 1990–1992 and president of the independent Republic of Slovenia 1992–2002.

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By allowing Western Balkans democracy to falter for two decades, the EU has trapped itself

ALEXANDRA KARPPI

In 2003, the year before its "Big Bang" enlargement, the European Union made a declaration in Thessaloniki: "The future of the Balkans is within the European Union." In the 20 years since, the EU has not made good on that promise of future membership, nor have leaders in the Western Balkans risen to the occasion.

The all-but-halted integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union has led experts and citizens alike to wonder why the transformative power of the EU, at its peak in 2004 when it admitted ten countries from Central Europe and beyond, has proven ineffectual in this region. The answer is a combination of EU and region-specific factors. The EU failed to put democracy at the centre of its policy towards the Western Balkans as it was able to for the "Big Bang" countries. Twenty years later, poor democratic governance is the main obstacle to the region's future membership.

Now, few regional leaders have demonstrated the political will to correct this deterioration, and the EU is losing credibility. Brussels will need to rapidly adjust

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its approach towards accession to account for the specific domestic factors that are stalling democratic consolidation and sidelining integration in these countries. The longer it waits, the greater the challenge will become.

A policy reversal in Brussels

In alignment with past phases of enlargement, the EU's initial strategy to integrate the Western Balkans was tailored to each country's circumstances. The stages of accession depended on each country's pace of reform, with progress in the accession process resting on the completion of key political and economic reforms in line with a principle known as "conditionality". This coincided with a period of dramatic democratic consolidation in the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s. To varying degrees, the countries of the Western Balkans successfully built basic electoral processes; formed media regulators; passed decentralization reforms; created strategic documents for working with civil society and fighting corruption; and improved the transparency of courts and integrity of judges.

Yet, overtime, the EU's policy towards this region has transformed. Prior accession processes proved to be too "hands on" and, ultimately, too expensive to replicate in an increasingly divided, inward-looking and post-financial-crisis Europe. Overtime, the EU applied the principle of conditionality more inconsistently and moved toward a "one size fits all" approach. For example, this was done by pairing the accession processes of Albania and North Macedonia or urging Montenegro to replicate Albania's judicial vetting despite Montenegrin civil society's recommended alterations. Practically, this meant that the EU began to de-prioritize democratic reform in the Western Balkans, allowing the status quo to persist under the guise of regional "stability".

Nowhere has the EU accession process failed more than in Serbia, whose democracy rapidly declined in 2023.

Two decades later, the EU is paying the price for losing its resolve: a regional crisis of democracy. Indices of democracy, such as Freedom House's Nations in Transit, tell a clear story. The Western Balkan countries have been stuck as "hybrid regimes" – governance systems with mixed features of democracy and autocracy – for years. Yet, it is especially the last five years that have seen democracy in this region not just stagnate but regress.

Nowhere has the EU accession process failed more than in Serbia, whose democracy rapidly declined in 2023 amid a decade of ongoing deterioration. Fraudulent snap elections in December represented the culmination of many worrying trends, including the ruling party's brazen capture of media and local governance

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and its smearing and evident surveillance of civil society and the opposition. Alongside the stalling of promised justice reforms and years of state influence over key judicial decisions, these trends point to the consolidation of power in the hands of the president, Aleksandar Vučić, and warn of a country headed closer and closer towards autocracy. Serbia's decline has reverberated throughout the Western Balkans, contributing in recent years to the reversal of the democratic gains made in these countries in the 2000s.

Back to square one

The supposed frontrunner of Western Balkan enlargement, Montenegro, is emblematic of the "stop and go" struggle for democracy in the rest of the region. Although voters successfully put an end to the single party rule of Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists in 2020, and then voted Đukanović out of the presidency in 2023, Montenegrin democracy has continued to struggle since. The country has been stuck in a protracted constitutional crisis that has marred basic judicial and parliamentary functions and allowed corruption and organized crime to thrive. A new political option and changes to the constitutional order in 2023 brought Montenegro back to square one when it comes to EU-mandated rule of law reforms. At the same time, it also left an inexperienced – and increasingly divided – political party with new obstacles to democracy.

In North Macedonia, 19 years in the accession process have not led to a different outcome. Following the country's ousting of strongman Nikola Gruevski in 2017, subsequent cabinets repaired some institutional damage by fighting media capture and shoring up electoral integrity. Yet in the last several years, North Macedonia has struggled to de-politicize the judiciary and corruption remains endemic. Both only worsened in 2023 due to politically motivated changes to the criminal code, one of the few amendments the parliament was able to pass without obstruction from opposition parties like that led by Gruevski, which triumphed in presidential and parliamentary elections in spring 2024.

While Montenegro and North Macedonia have struggled with political instability, Albania has seen the slow and steady consolidation of power by its ruling party following several dubious elections. The first party in recent history to win a third consecutive term in 2021, Edi Rama's Socialist Party has fostered an environment of virulent polarization and tense competition in parliament rather than one of healthy pluralism and consensus-building. At the same time, conditions for media and civil society have deteriorated. Albania's Special Anti-Corruption Structure, SPAK, is one of the few bright spots for democracy in this region, though its

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efforts have yet to make a dent in the lower-level corruption increasingly normalized in Albanian society.

The latest newcomer to the EU process, Bosnia and Herzegovina, remains the worst performing democracy in the region. The country's unique institutional framework has entrenched ethno-nationalist leaders and their corrupt patronage networks; allowed a discriminatory electoral system to prevail; threatened the safety of journalists and activists; and made political institutions from courts to local legislatures almost entirely dysfunctional. Milorad Dodik, the head of the Republika Srpska entity, effectively strong-armed laws against media and civil society into reality in 2023 and has only intensified his threats to secede from the Bosnian state in 2024. Chronic structural challenges, intensified nationalism and renewed security concerns put the future of Bosnian democracy in peril.

Kosovo is the last in line for EU membership, largely due to its protracted territorial dispute with neighbouring Serbia and the fact that several EU states do not recognize the country's independence. While many Kosovan institutions remain underdeveloped, the country has made progress in guaranteeing the peaceful transfer of power and in the overall stabilization of national governance. This was especially true after the 2021 snap elections brought a reform-oriented government to power. Still, as is true in many of the Western Balkan countries, progress on rule of law and anti-corruption reforms have been intermittent and slow moving. Some fear that the current government may intensify pressure against critical members of the media and civil society.

Misunderstandings and missed opportunities

The EU's neglect of institutional reform over the last two decades has left all the Western Balkan countries at the same endpoint of democratic recession and EU divergence. Yet, the last few years have revealed fundamental differences in these countries' democratic trajectories. Not only has the EU de-prioritized possible democratic reform, it has also misunderstood these different trajectories and, therefore, these countries' different prospects for future integration.

The EU's Serbia policy has been most heavily criticized, given the country's steep descent towards autocracy; its partnerships with illiberal governments across Eurasia; and efforts to destabilize its neighbours. Despite all this, the EU has continued to side with the United States in treating Serbia as a genuine partner in building regional democracy and security. This has not only shaken the EU's credibility but has had negative secondary impacts across the Western Balkans, including by lowering standards for the protection of human rights; sowing government disregard

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for international norms and actors; and allowing malign influence from Russia to proliferate across the continent.

The primary challenge to democracy for most of the Western Balkan countries has been to shrug off entrenched political elites and their long-term effects on would-be democratic institutions. Cycles of political instability, executive aggrandizement, and low-capacity judiciaries and anti-corruption bodies hang over democracy in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia, among others. In many of these cases, the EU has failed to spot "breakthrough elections", missing the chance to incentivize or support new reformist governments in their efforts at democratic consolidation.

The good news is that the window for meaningful democratic reform has not closed in all the countries.

Take North Macedonia for example, where the EU and US supported citizens in removing Gruevski from power in 2017. In the years since, the EU did not adequately push for needed rule of law reforms in the country, allowing historical identity disputes with Greece and Bulgaria to take precedent and stall North Macedonia's EU process instead. This, in part, allowed Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE party to block policymaking in parliament; change the criminal code to insulate its members from taking legal accountability for past abuses of office; and make a successful comeback in the consequential 2024 elections. Given VMRO-DPMNE's history and stated intentions to undermine the EU-brokered deal with Bulgaria, few predict that the party will steer the country towards democracy or the EU in the coming years.

The good news is that the window for meaningful democratic reform has not closed in all the countries. In Kosovo there is a real opportunity for democratic consolidation. Albin Kurti's government has shown that there is political will for institutional reform. And, over the last several years, we have seen progress in overhauling the judicial sector and providing stable governance despite the worsening security situation on the border with Serbia. The EU would do well to recognize this political will and institutional progress by working with Kosovo to resolve disputes with Serbia and fully recognizing the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty, thereby re-invigorating the country's accession process. The recent stalling of Kosovo's Council of Europe membership by the so-called "quint" formation of the US, UK, France, Germany, and Italy amidst Serbian pressure represents a significant step backward in this regard.

What watchers of this region have learned from the last 20 years, but especially the last several years, is that democracy in the countries of the Western Balkans is headed in disparate directions. These different democratic trajectories mean

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that each country has distinctly different prospects for EU enlargement. The EU, for its part, has not only failed to understand these nuances but it has also failed to make democracy in this region a real strategic priority for many years – to the overall detriment of both democratization and integration. The EU's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans may be the policy reset this region needs, but understanding these domestic nuances must be the basis of a new approach if the EU wants enlargement to be successful in bringing meaningful institutional reform to this region.

2024: a critical juncture

Many had hoped that Russia's full-scale invasion and the rightful moves to fast-track Ukraine's EU membership in its wake would catalyze a wider wave of European enlargement for the Western Balkans. However, this optimism has been misplaced. Democracy in this region has mainly regressed since February 2022, and Western Balkan political institutions have reacted in a negative manner to the seismic geopolitical shifts underway in the broader Europe and Eurasia regions. Rather than recommitting to institutional reform in the region, the EU has opted to prop up a risky status quo in the Western Balkans. Its inattentiveness to the region will only become riskier, as the Western Balkan countries will soon be forced to decide between sinking closer and closer into autocracy, or joining European democracies in shoring up political institutions in the context of Russia's authoritarian aggression.

As tense and precarious as the current moment may be, it poses an opportunity for the EU to revitalize its transformative power. To do so, the EU will have to craft a shrewd and realistic policy for this region that accounts for the main driver of non-existent integration – poor democratic governance – and openly recognizes specific regional leaders' role in it. In short, the EU will have to finally put democracy at the centre of its enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans. Failure to do so will make building democracy in this region – and in other aspiring members like Ukraine and Moldova – costlier in the future, all the while further undermining the European project at this critical geopolitical and normative juncture. EE

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The changing narrative of Chinese foreign policy

KONRAD SZATTERS

The messaging found in Chinese foreign policy is used for specific purposes. For the most part, China is presenting itself as a positive alternative to western domination and a country interested in peace and stability. Under the surface, however, a closer examination reveals different intentions.

After decades of a focus on the West in global politics and the dominance of "Westsplaining" therein, the focus of the international community is now, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, visibly shifting towards the East. This shift is of course dictated by Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine and the immediate threat that it poses to the European Union and NATO. However, the eyes of free world's public and policymakers are not stopping only at Russia's borders. They look further, all the way to China.

It is finally clear that, following that well-known metaphor, the "Russian bear" has, yet again, used its claws and revealed its viciousness and irrationality. However, the question western policymakers now ask themselves is what will the "Chinese dragon" do about it? China tries to project itself as a peace defender and a party willing to mediate between Russia and Ukraine to make the world a more stable and peaceful place. Yet, this seems to be merely a diplomatic façade, behind which China is trying its best to maintain positive relations with Russia (which are greatly beneficial economically) without potentially destroying its already very difficult relations with the EU and United States. On top of that, there are countries in the so-called Global South that are immensely important for China. In order to pursue these interests, China introduced numerous changes in the narrative of its

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foreign policy. The predominant result is a silent departure from its "Wolf Warrior diplomacy", which characterized its foreign policy following Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012.

The changing narrative

In its current foreign policy, China seems to be following the same approach as it does in its internal affairs. This is namely to appease, not just its population but also its international partners. After the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in China and could be perceived as a significant factor leading to growing global distrust towards Beijing, and after a period of harsh zero-COVID policies which affected the Chinese economy, the dragon has lost a great amount of its fire. It has started to act more leniently in its foreign policy, and the narrative therein followed accordingly.

China as a successful power

First and foremost, with China pursuing its ambition of becoming a global superpower, it needs the world to see how successful the "Chinese way" really is. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – a Chinese flagship infrastructure project – was meant to show precisely that. But its slowdown, problems and frequently disappointing outcomes have shown the complete opposite. Since the practical implications of the BRI's issues work against the interests of China, the narrative must fix that.

Take the example of the US-China summit in Anchorage, Alaska in 2021. This was the first high-level US-China meeting under President Joe Biden, which happened in the middle of the ongoing trade war between those two countries. The list of issues to be discussed during the meeting was overwhelming, yet Yang Jiechi, the director of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Foreign Affairs Commission, opened his speech highlighting Chinese economic success and the country's achievements in tackling COVID-19 and poverty (all thanks to the Chinese Communist Party, of course). Whenever China knows that the eyes of the world are watching, it will inevitably talk about its numerous successes and highlight the role of the Communist Party in achieving them. In the end, China must show that its non-western way of carrying out politics is a trustworthy one and what better way to show this than by highlighting its own internal achievements.

> With its ambition of becoming a global superpower, China needs the world to see how successful the "Chinese way" is.

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China as a peaceful power

It goes without saying that today's world is becoming more insecure. With the Russian aggression in Ukraine, war has come back to Europe, which is something many thought was impossible today. The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine only aggravated the pre-existing feeling that the planet is filled with chaos. In these labyrinths of conflicts and ongoing wars, China presents itself as a peaceful power that wants nothing but security and welfare for humanity.

In Chinese rhetoric, the previously mentioned BRI is frequently becoming an instrument through which Beijing can project its peaceful motives onto other international actors. The Third Belt and Road Forum organized in Beijing in 2023 was a great example of that. Even the musical piece that accompanied the international leaders' entry into the venue was entitled "Peace – a Community with a Shared Future". In his speech, Xi Jinping explicitly mentioned the BRI's "spirit of peace and cooperation", as well as its capability to "deliver a bright future of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit for future generations".

Furthermore, in its willingness to present itself as a peaceful power, China wants to create a feeling that its efforts do not stop only with the words uttered by its leaders. For example, during the G20 meeting in Bali in July 2022, Wang Yi put forward China's Cooperation Initiative on Global Food Security. It was an eight-point plan in which China presented its ideas and urged the G20, as well as the UN, to recognize and bear its responsibility to "establish a partnership on commodity cooperation".

One year later, on February 24th 2023, the second anniversary of the onset of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine, China released a document titled "China's position on the political settlement of the Ukraine Crisis". It is a 12-point plan in which China highlights the most important steps that need to be fulfilled to settle the so-called "crisis" in Ukraine. It would seem that the most important point therein was the one on "resuming peace talks". China seems to be predominantly a staunch supporter of mediation between Russia and Ukraine. As a matter of fact, it participated in talks organized in Saudi Arabia in August 2023. Now, it is also quite vocal regarding the organization of the high-level conference happening in Switzerland between June 15th and 16th this year. The aim of this meeting will be to discuss the possibility of a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine.

On the surface, everything adds up and China seems to be heavily interested in peace in Ukraine. However, if we look closely, we will notice that China was one of the countries that abstained from condemning Russian actions in the UN vote in March 2022. It has also refused to refer to Russian actions as "war" and instead talks about the "Ukraine crisis". It is also a supporter of Russian involvement in the

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peace talks. At this point, we also know that China is using loopholes in western sanctions and is providing Russia with drones, as well as non-lethal equipment. The picture painted by Chinese words and actions is one of a country that says one thing but does something else. This position questions whether China is really the peaceful power that it so desperately wants to be perceived as.

China as a different power

The post-Cold War world has been dominated by the West, as personified by the US and the EU. It goes without saying that numerous countries, such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, have benefitted enormously from this status quo and were great proponents of maintaining it. However, in their self-proclaimed quest to democratize, civilize and free nations all over the world, western powers clearly had some priorities vis-à-vis particular regions. This in turn created a vacuum in other regions of the world that fell outside of their focus. Such regions can be seen in Africa, Central Asia and Latin America. As Naomi Klein stated, "politics hates a vacuum." So, inevitably, the countries of those regions became very attractive for non-western actors, mainly Russia and China. Russia has not changed its methods and has been producing societal divisions, spreading disinformation and physically intervening in particular countries.

Yet, China's methods are different. It has entered the aforementioned regions with infrastructural projects and as part of intergovernmental organizations. These are mainly the BRI and BRICS in Africa and Latin America, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia. These projects and organizations, to this day, provide a platform for China to promote itself as a "different type of power" in those regions.

In a keynote speech at the China-Africa Leaders' Dialogue titled "Create a Great Future for China and Africa", Xi Jinping highlighted the BRI's role in meeting the goals of the African Union's Agenda 2063, which aims at "transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future". He also stated that China and Africa should cooperate to "practice true multilateralism". This phrase seems to be a clear blow to the US and EU, which are both actors known for promoting global multilateralism. In Xi's eyes, this is not true, as western policy supposedly only benefits the US and EU, rather than African states. He continued by stating that China and Africa should "unequivocally oppose vestiges of colonialism and hegemonism in all forms". The message is clear: China, in contrast to the western countries, is neither a colonial power nor a hegemon, and is willing to become an advocate for African countries in their defence against them. In other words, China wishes to be-

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come the self-proclaimed voice of the voiceless, which is something that the US and EU have failed to become.

Similar sentiment is also present in Xi's speech at the 15th BRICS Summit in 2023. Therein, a focus is put on the fact that China, as opposed to western powers, is not willing to impose any of its ideas or ideology onto its partners. He states that BRICS countries "choose development paths independently, jointly defend right to development, and march in tandem towards modernization" and adds that "BRICS countries invariably advocate and practice independent foreign policies". This constant repetition of the value of "independence" aims at strengthening the

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narrative of Chinese respect for its partner states' ideas regarding their own development, as well as their values.

Lastly, China's narrative seems to be the boldest among all those coming from the current superpowers. It does not only want to advocate for itself or for particular regions of the world. It goes one step further than anyone else as it wants to become an advocate for the entirety of humanity. During the 23rd Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in 2023, Xi Jinping advocated for "community with shared future for all mankind", a concept that was also referred to in numerous different speeches coming both from Xi himself, as well as from other Chinese officials. In the same speech, Xi also, once again, highlighted China's self-proclaimed promotion of "inclusiveness between civilizations", as well as its advocacy for "peaceful coexistence and harmonious development of different civilizations".

It is clear that China wants the world to see that it is "different" to the western superpowers. Its care for humanity as a whole as well as its respect for partners and lack of willingness to impose anything on them are what should convince us that China's intentions are indeed true. Interestingly, such an approach on the Chinese side could be connected all the way to a Confucian Sino-centric perception of the world, in which "through good government and internal peace and prosperity, China would play a leadership role in the world and serve as a universal paradigm for other nations." For now, this may sound unrealistic. However, China seems to be taking these words very seriously.

China as a power that does not tell you everything

Beneath all of these beautiful and promising ideas and slogans, there is unfortunately a thick layer of issues that China prefers not to talk about at all. These include Xinjiang and the violation of human rights vis-à-vis the Uyghur community there, as well as constantly rising internal struggles (such as demographic issues, youth unemployment and the ongoing housing crisis). China's maritime expansion into the South China Sea is also a key problem, alongside its alleged military build-up in the Indo-Pacific and especially concerning Taiwan.

All of these issues are swept under the rug and are virtually non-existent in China's foreign policy narrative. Yet, they are unravelling as we speak. Especially the military build-up and Taiwan seem to be the most concerning issues for global peace. Lately, Mackenzie Eaglen from the American Enterprise Institute wrote an analysis in which she stated that "after accounting for economic adjustments and estimating reasonable but uncounted expenditures, the buying power of China's 2022 military budget balloons to an estimated $711 billion – triple Beijing's claimed

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top line and nearly equal with the United States' military budget that same year." If the data provided by Eaglen were indeed true, it would mean that we should stop asking ourselves if there will be military confrontation between China and the US over Taiwan, but rather when it is going to take place.

One of Xi's biggest goals is to achieve the "dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049, which will mark the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. However, full rejuvenation is not possible without Taiwan. That is why China will not rest and will do its absolute utmost to get its hands on this island. This could mean conflict between China and the US; a conflict that neither of the sides could afford to lose.

Evolution of China's narrative

For now, China will certainly be eager to primarily present itself as a successful, peaceful and "different" partner. It seems that after a rough period for the Chinese economy, and taking into account the previously mentioned internal issues, Chinese foreign policy will be aiming at maintaining the status quo (vis-à-vis the EU), or at least not aggravating the already difficult situation (vis-à-vis the US). The narrative would then follow suit, and it would frequently touch upon the issues discussed in this article.

However, one has to keep in mind that China's foreign policy and its narratives are immensely flexible, and they can change over a very brief period, depending on the needs and ideas of the government. Therefore, in case of escalation in Taiwan, the narrative could change into a much more assertive and perhaps even aggressive one. An old Chinese proverb states "把钥匙开一把锁, " which translates as "one key opens one lock." This could be interpreted as "there is a separate solution for every problem." The narrative of Chinese foreign policy could follow this idea in the future and undergo transformations whenever new problems would need to be solved. EE

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Lessons about cyber warfare from Russia's war against Ukraine

MARIA BRANEA AND LEON HARTWELL

The war in Ukraine serves as a stark reminder of the diverging approaches to establishing red lines in the realm of cyber operations, accentuating the complexities inherent in establishing normative frameworks for governing cyberspace. The intersection of cyber warfare with traditional kinetic conflict further exacerbates the complexities of norm development, underlining the urgent need for sustained efforts to bridge gaps and address grey areas in international law.

In the contemporary landscape of warfare, the lines between traditional kinetic operations and cyber warfare are increasingly blurred. Last year alone, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) thwarted over 4,500 major cyber-attacks. Many of these cyber-attacks were coupled with scores of conventional missile strikes. This underlines the urgent need for international cooperation to confront cyber threats.

This article delves into key lessons gleaned from the intersection of cyber operations and conventional warfare in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. These provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of warfare in the digital age and the challenges posed by cyber threats to global security and stability.

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Russian cyber capabilities

Russian cyber capabilities, once deemed formidable, are now perceived as regressing to a great extent. Shortly after the February 2022 escalation of the war, some cyber experts pondered whether Russia was going to launch some form of "cyber Pearl Harbor" on Ukraine, but that never happened.

"[Russian cyber operations] had initial success because they had literally years to prepare for this," notes Professor Alexander Crowther, a non-resident senior fellow at the Transatlantic Defense and Security Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), "but as the battle became flexible, their amount of success has dropped off significantly".

Cyber-attacks can have life-and-death consequences, especially when used in conjunction with conventional attacks.

Resorting to basic tactics like information operations and denial of service attacks, Russia's cyber strategy reflects a backward and unimaginative approach. "They're not going up the ladder of sophistication," Crowther remarks, "they're going down the ladder back to the basics … if you want to compare it to weapons … they don't have nukes, they're back to using rocks and bayonets."

To support his argument about the ineffectiveness of Russia's cyber operations, Crowther stresses that "the failure of the Russian cyber campaign is one of the reasons that they started a heavy-duty missile and rocket campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure." At the same time, it is not merely a matter of Russia's lack of cyber capabilities that is resulting in weak performance on the battlefield, as Ukraine has also beefed up its cyber defence and cooperation with NATO and NATO member states. This is particularly true in response to the heightened frequency and severity of Russian cyber assaults, which escalated in 2013.

While Russia's cyber capabilities may have been overestimated, one should still recognize that cyber-attacks could have life-and-death consequences, especially when used in conjunction with conventional attacks. In a chilling demonstration of this symbiotic relationship between cyber and kinetic warfare, Russia's cyber warfare unit, Sandworm, which forms part of the military intelligence service (GRU), orchestrated a coordinated assault on Ukraine's power grid in October 2022. Timed to coincide with a barrage of missile strikes, the assault plunged four regions of Ukraine into darkness, leaving millions of civilians grappling with the perilous absence of heat and electricity during the harsh winter months. The convergence of cyber and physical attacks underscored the vulnerability of essential civilian infrastructure and the human toll exacted by such tactics.

Moreover, the insidious reach of cyber-attacks extends beyond infrastructure, endangering even the sanctity of healthcare systems. In Ukraine, the World Health

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Organization has sounded the alarm, warning that sustained assaults on the country's health and energy infrastructure rendered hundreds of hospitals and medical facilities inoperable, placing the lives of countless patients at grave risk.

In December 2023, Ukraine once again found itself in the crosshairs of cyber aggression, as Kyivstar – a mobile cell phone operator servicing half of the nation's mobile and internet services – succumbed to a crippling 48-hour onslaught. Beyond disrupting communication channels, the attacks compromised air raid sirens, endangering millions by depriving them of vital alerts in the face of potential Russian incursions.

These harrowing episodes underscore the need for robust norms and laws to govern the evolving landscape of cyber warfare. While it is essential not to overstate the primacy of cyber operations, the inherent destructiveness of such tactics demands a concerted effort to establish clear guidelines and mechanisms for accountability in this increasingly contentious arena.

Tech giants in warzones: a new frontier

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has thrust tech giants into the spotlight, sparking debates over their roles in contemporary conflicts. Since the escalation of hostilities in February 2022, major tech companies have found themselves navigating complex terrain, from providing direct assistance to adversaries to safeguarding data integrity and offering intelligence support. This multifaceted engagement exemplifies a paradigm shift in the influence wielded by private sector entities in global conflicts.

Nadiya Kostyuk, an assistant professor at the School of Public Policy with the Georgia Institute of Technology, highlights the growing significance of the private sector in the cyber domain, with particular emphasis on Elon Musk's Starlink initiative, which has emerged as a linchpin in sustaining communication on the Ukrainian front lines. However, the intervention of private actors in conflict zones raises profound ethical and strategic questions. Tanel Sepp, Estonia's Ambassador at Large for Cyber Diplomacy, advocates for enhanced collaboration across public, private and civil society sectors to effectively confront cyber threats while upholding shared values.

Yet, the actions of tech giants are not uniformly aligned with ethical imperatives. Elon Musk's refusal to activate Starlink services in Sevastopol, as revealed in a September 2023 post on the portal X, illustrates the potential for private decisions to have life-and-death consequences on the ground, impeding vital communications during critical military operations. The lack of coverage over Sevastopol directly

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impeded a Ukrainian naval raid and put soldiers' lives at risk once communications broke down in the newly liberated territories.

Moreover, the intertwining of private sector interests with geopolitical dynamics complicates the landscape of technological engagement in conflict zones. While some companies, like Microsoft, Amazon and Google, have demonstrated allegiance to Ukraine by bolstering cyber protections, others have forged strategic partnerships with adversarial states. The burgeoning collaboration between Chinese technology firms and Russia, despite claims of neutrality, underscores the intricate web of alliances shaping contemporary conflicts.

Following the February 2022 escalation and the onset of western sanctions, several Chinese technology firms signed partnership agreements with Russia. Some of those China-Russia partnerships have undoubtedly aided Moscow on the Ukrainian battlefield, despite claims of Chinese neutrality. Moreover, a new report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) warned that "Ukraine and its Western partners should prepare for a potential expansion of Russo-Chinese technological collaboration on the battlefield."

As the lines between cyber warfare and commerce blur, questions emerge regarding the moral and legal obligations of industry actors operating in the grey areas of conflict. Sepp contends that "the war against Ukraine, it's really kind of a black and white situation. If it happens to be a bit more of a greyish area … how should the industry actors then act? What should the governments or the victims expect from these countries?" As such, while the war in Ukraine presents a stark dichotomy, future conflicts may introduce shades of ambiguity, necessitating a reevaluation of industry conduct and governmental expectations.

The convergence of technology and conflict heralds a new frontier in global affairs, wherein the actions of tech giants carry profound implications for the course and conduct of warfare. In navigating this uncharted terrain, stakeholders must grapple with the ethical imperatives of private sector engagement in matters of war and peace.

Navigating the role of hacktivists in conflict zones

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, hacktivists on both sides of the conflict have been increasingly operating in support of their respective nations in a clandestine manner, shaping the digital battleground in unprecedented ways.

Amid the chaos of war, volunteer Ukrainian hacktivist organizations have emerged as key players in defending their nation against cyber threats. Entities like the Ukrainian Cyber Alliance, the IT Army, and the Cyber Regiment have transi-

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tioned from ad hoc operations to strategic collaborations with governmental bodies, such as the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation and the military. Their efforts, exemplified by the takedown of the Russian ransomware gang Trigona in October 2023, underline the evolving role of hacktivists in modern warfare.

However, the actions of Russian hacktivist groups, such as Killnet, reveal a darker side to hacktivism. Killnet claimed to be responsible for the December 2023 attack on Kyivstar, which left millions of Ukrainians vulnerable as they did not receive alerts of potential Russian assaults. While defending one's country is a legitimate endeavour, engaging in offensive cyber operations, especially those with potential war crime implications, raises ethical and legal quandaries.

> Volunteer Ukrainian hacker organizations have emerged as key players in defending their nation against cyber threats.

Historically, governments have exploited paramilitary organizations to execute heinous crimes while maintaining plausible deniability. The emergence of closer ties between hacktivist groups and state actors underscores the need for governance mechanisms to regulate their conduct. In October last year, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) took a significant step forward by issuing the "Geneva Code of cyber-war", outlining rules for hacktivists. However, adherence to such codes remains voluntary, highlighting the limitations of self-regulation in the absence of enforceable international laws.

The proliferation of hacktivist activity reinforces the urgent need for the codification of laws surrounding hacktivism, particularly concerning potential war crimes and questions of state responsibility. As the digital battlefield evolves, addressing the actions of hacktivists becomes imperative to upholding principles of accountability and humanitarian law in times of conflict. Only through concerted efforts to establish clear legal frameworks can the international community effectively navigate the complex terrain of hacktivism in the 21st century.

Challenges in establishing cyber norms

Russia's war against Ukraine serves as a stark reminder of the diverging approaches in establishing red lines in the realm of cyber operations, underscoring the intricacies of normative frameworks governing cyberspace.

Kostyuk notes that US President Joe Biden has "identified 16 critical infrastructure target objects of critical infrastructure, and he said … this should be off limit for the Russian attacks, but nothing like this has been done by the Russian president at least [not] publicly". The absence of similar declarations from the Russian

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leadership complicates efforts to foster mutual understanding and adherence to internationally recognized norms.

Interestingly, Sepp states that it is recognised by "all the countries around the world that international law is applicable in cyberspace," even by the current aggressor, Russia. However, he asserts that significant challenges persist in interpreting and enforcing these norms.

Sepp adds that "I have to argue in the same room with the Russians present and this is just unbelievable what comes out from their statements but one of the core issues is that Russia with its current aggressive behaviour is violating even the UN Charter." Russia's ongoing actions in Ukraine, including serious violations of the UN Charter and other international norms, undermines the prospects for constructive dialogue and consensus-building on matters of accountability and responsibility.

The intersection of cyber warfare with traditional kinetic conflict further exacerbates the complexities of norm development, underlining the urgent need for sustained efforts to bridge gaps and address grey areas in international law. In this context, the International Criminal Court (ICC) emerges as a potential avenue for prosecuting cyber-crimes of a particularly egregious nature.

The question of prosecuting cyber-crimes

In the wake of escalating tensions fuelled by destructive cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, Illia Vitiuk, Ukraine's chief of cyber and information security, is calling for a robust response through international legal channels. Vitiuk advocates for the referral of such attacks to the ICC, highlighting the gravity of the threat posed by hostile cyber operations.

As the international community grapples with the challenges presented by cyber warfare, the pursuit of normative frameworks and mechanisms for accountability remains paramount. By leveraging existing legal instruments and fostering dialogue among stakeholders, efforts to address the divergence of cyber norms can pave the way for a more secure and stable cyberspace.

Similarly, Tanel Sepp acknowledges that the "ICC should be one of the places that should take cyber investigations on board." However, he highlights the lack of competence as a significant hurdle in addressing cyber-crimes effectively.

While the Rome Statute does not explicitly reference cyber offences, ICC Chief Prosecutor, Karim Khan recently asserted that cyber-attacks could "potentially fulfil the elements of many core international crimes as already defined". In other words, cyber-attacks could constitute crimes against humanity, genocide, war

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crimes, and crimes of aggression, which signifies a recognition by the ICC of the evolving threat landscape and the imperative for legal accountability.

Henceforth, it may be possible to prosecute, for example, not only those who propagate genocidal messages, but also the shadowy actors who engineer their dissemination through cyber means. Khan, for example, acknowledges that the ICC remains cognisant of "the misuse of the internet to amplify hate speech and disinformation, which may facilitate or even directly lead to the occurrence of atrocities."

Still, the ICC operates on the principle of complementarity, and more importantly, it will have to rely on states and corporations to provide it with the support that would enable the ICC to prosecute cyber-crimes. Encouragingly, the ICC hosted a roundtable jointly with Microsoft in January in order to discuss how cyberspace can be used to commit crimes under the Rome Statute. Khan and his team are also planning to launch an ICC policy paper on cyber-enabled crimes, which will be published later this year.

Ambiguities surrounding NATO's Article 5 in cyber warfare

In the absence of legally binding frameworks, and in the absence of international custom with regards to the actual prosecution of individuals for cyber-crimes in accordance with the core crimes defined by the Rome Statute, NATO, both collectively and at the member-state level, should simulate more exercises on how they will respond to cyber-attacks.

In the realm of international security, NATO's Article 5 – which states that an attack on one country is an attack on all – stands as both a beacon of collective defence and a testament to the Alliance's unity. Yet, as the digital age redefines warfare, the question of whether a cyber-attack can trigger Article 5 remains shrouded in ambiguity. The recent escalation of the war by Russia in February 2022 amplified internal debates within NATO, stressing the urgency of clarifying the Alliance's stance on cyber warfare. NATO's Article 5 is a sacred concept and the epitome of collective defence among the 32 allies.

Since its inception, Article 5 has been invoked only once, during the September 11th terrorist attacks in the United States. However, recognizing the evolving nature of threats, NATO members expanded its scope in 2014 to encompass cyber-attacks. Yet, defining the parameters of such attacks remains elusive, raising critical questions about the practical application of collective defence in the digital domain.

Following the February 2022 escalation, one NATO official reiterated that "Allies … recognize that the impact of significant malicious cumulative cyber activities might, in certain circumstances, be considered as an armed attack." Yet, the key

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question remains, what type of cyber-attack would constitute a big enough event so that allies would come together and decide to trigger Article 5?

Amidst the deliberate maintenance of strategic ambiguity regarding the activation triggers of Article 5, compounded by the absence of clear legal frameworks and established norms for addressing cyber-crimes, NATO finds itself compelled to intensify simulated exercises. While preserving ambiguity remains crucial for strategic flexibility, these simulations are imperative. They offer invaluable insights into the complexities of cyber warfare, providing policymakers, often lacking in technological expertise, with essential tools to navigate the complex terrain of international security. EE

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Is Klaipėda worth a war?

OLEH DUNDA

In all the eight years since 2014, Moscow has spent time challenging the vigilance of its democratic victims. Despite the sanctions, joint strategic projects with Europe still flourished. One of them, Nord Stream 2, speaks volumes today. Everything was done to destroy the western democracies' ability to resist.

Walking along Nowy Świat Street in Warsaw, everything speaks of prosperity and comfort. Couples in love sip coffee in restaurants, radiating happiness. Families with children stroll, enjoying the weekend. Everyone lives their own life – the government, the opposition, farmers and transporters. The war with Russia is not visible in peaceful Europe, although it is already underway. However, the population of Europe and the political elites of the EU try not to notice it. They are not ready for it. An abstract question could therefore be asked regarding this relative calm: "Is Klaipėda worth a war?"

Klaipėda is the largest port in Lithuania (a NATO member state) and a popular resort on the Baltic Sea. The question of Klaipėda being worth a war, or more precisely, will Article 5 of the NATO Treaty work if Russia decides to "help the fraternal Lithuanian people" by occupying the territory of Lithuania is deeply concerning to Lithuanians. Also, it troubles other nations that share a border with the "Russian Empire", such as Latvia, Estonia, Sweden, Finland and Poland. However, the European Union, NATO and the United States are hesitant to voice an answer. It is easier to simply brush the question off.

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End of history

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama's essay "The End of History" was published in *The National Interest* and later evolved into a popular book. In Fukuyama's view, the end of history meant the end of an era of ideological confrontations, global revolutions and wars. In 1991, despite the resistance of the US and its allies, the "evil empire" – the Soviet Union – collapsed. The golden age of western democracies thus began. The slogan of the new era was eloquently voiced by German Chancellor Angela Merkel with a discernible Russian accent: "Let's trade."

The Cold War ended, the shabby Russian bear retreated to some distant corner of the taiga, and NATO emerged victorious. The western world believed that threats no longer existed and went full throttle. Russia acquired a certain aura as a mythical country in the East, where bears with balalaikas walk the streets and pour vodka into matryoshkas, while good-natured locals exchange oil and gas for jeans and democratic values. Defence budgets were slashed and national security ceased to be a priority in politics. The democratic world embarked on an exciting journey to earn money with anyone and in anything. Politics turned into a championship of who could promise more social goods to the voters.

The West enjoyed two decades of relative peace and prosperity with cheap energy resources and no military expenses, while Russia spent 20 years on rearmament and preparing for invasion. Seeing how western politicians, businesses and expert circles eagerly embraced the financial needle, Vladimir Putin opened the floodgates. Money from Russia flowed like a river into western democracies.

Official sponsors of this unprecedented generosity were the Russian oligarchs, who remained loyal to Moscow and were greatly responsive in satisfying the desires of western elites. All these figures like Abramovich, Fridman and Vekselberg were ready to finance any humanitarian and social projects – a hint was enough. Think tanks, journalists and NGOs in Brussels, Berlin, London and Washington were swimming in Russian money. However, this was just the beginning of a new war.

Hybrid war

The Cold War was formally declared by Winston Churchill after the end of the Second World War. In reality, combat actions began in the 1920s with the appearance of Soviet representatives in the West and the active work of the Comintern. Just one hundred years ago, the sources of financing were looted treasures of "exploiters of the working people" and Ukrainian grain. Now it is income from oil and gas. Yet the principles of the NKVD/KGB/FSB operation remain unchanged, as

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do their methods. Western democracies were so intoxicated by the financial "drug" that they essentially created an entirely transparent house without coverings and load-bearing walls.

The new religion, hastily woven from democratic values, multiculturalism and hyper-tolerance, gained new followers on both sides of the Atlantic. Russia actively financed and promoted it among the masses with the goal of disorienting and dividing society. Freedom of speech boiled down to everyone being able to promote any narrative without facing any responsibility. And security services in national security matters found their hands tied.

After 15 years, the Russian empire decided that Europe had fallen into its hands. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia. Western democracies allowed for this invasion – trading was more pleasant – only expressing deep concern. In 2014 this scheme worked again with Ukraine. Russia threw a multitude of narratives into the information field: about the historical fate of Crimea, the war in Ukraine, and the downing of Flight MH17 in Donbas. And again, the West took the bait. Sanctions were toothless, as trading was more pleasant. Thus began the era of fake news.

In all the eight years since 2014, Moscow has spent time challenging the vigilance of its democratic victims. Despite the sanctions, joint strategic projects with Europe still flourished. One of them, Nord Stream 2, speaks volumes today. Everything was done to destroy the western democracies' ability to resist. The main weapon in this war has been the "friends of Putin", whose main leitmotif became personal comfort above all. Comfort, which was masked by the apparent concern for national economies. The key was to ensure that the price of a glass of beer remained unchanged. Stability was paid for in the blood of Ukrainians, Georgians or Chechens.

By the end of 2021, Moscow decided that western democracies were completely incapacitated. The friends of Putin, led by Merkel, had done their job. And on February 24th 2022, the great war in Ukraine began. The state of the western establishment at that time is best seen in a statement made by the assistant to Olaf Scholz, the new German chancellor: "If catastrophe is destined to happen, let it happen quickly." However, Ukrainians had a different opinion and gave western democracies a second chance, sacrificing the lives of soldiers, women, the elderly and children.

New hope

Meanwhile, Germany, France, Italy and the United States fail to notice that the war with Russia is already being waged on the streets of their cities. Moscow,

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claiming the title of the "Third Rome" or even the "Fourth Reich", employs the old principle of divide and conquer, sowing discord and confusion in western societies. Everything is used to push democracies to the brink of civil war: radical movements of both right and left; pressure through migrants; protests by farmers and truck drivers, generously paid with Europe's own petrodollars; rhetoric from opinion leaders among the useful idiots; and the escapades of "friends of Putin" like Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán or Slovakia's Robert Fico.

This is all in line with the century-old methodologies of the NKVD/KGB/FSB. The main task is to divert the ordinary citizen's attention to internal contradictions and introduce as many disagreements as possible between society and the political class. This is precisely what "democratic values" and the incompetence of intelligence agencies are being used for. Next, Europe will completely lose its existing comfortable world. A future of internal conflicts and absolutely fake democracies, like those in Russia and its satellites, await it. Orbán is already demonstrating a demo version of the "new Russian world" in Europe. Many are ready to follow in his footsteps.

Viktor Orbán is already demonstrating a demo version of the "new Russian world" in Europe.

Exploiting absolute freedom and permissiveness, with the use of financial support from Moscow, it is quite easy to win elections, even with a minimal advantage. Subsequently, with the aid of the same Russian funding and the utilization of the state apparatus, control is gained over opposition parties, media outlets and civil society. Threats from Brussels will have no effect on this. Similarly, almost 100 years ago, Europe allowed Adolf Hitler to come to power. And there were local "Führers" of a smaller calibre.

The theory of the "invisible hand of the free market" was once fashionable, promising to fix and regulate everything. However, in practice, it turned out that without government restrictions, the invisible hand leads to chaos and the rule of the strong over their prey. This is similarly true regarding the existing invisible war in Europe. Without government intervention and changes in national security policy, there is only a path to defeat. If the greatest extent that democracy can oppose Russian fascism today is a policy of non-interference and expressing deep concern, then tomorrow the Baltic countries and Poland will be drowned in blood, while Russian tanks will once again appear on the streets of Budapest and Prague. And in Paris, Madrid, Rome and Berlin, stormtroopers will march with torches in support of a new Franco, Hitler or Mussolini.

This apocalyptic scenario can still be changed. Ukraine, which the self-confident Russian bear underestimated, has given western democracies new hope. To begin with, it is necessary to realize that the West is already involved in a war, not in a

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"pre-war state". And the only support it can rely on for now is the Ukrainian army, to which all efforts should be directed. Europe is currently unable to defend itself independently.

There must be a correction of mistakes and a change in the ruling elites' attitudes towards internal politics and national security issues. Freedom of speech must be separated from the permissiveness of propaganda. The European Convention on Human Rights explicitly states that freedom of speech can be restricted if it contradicts national security. In the end, European democracies must stop financing media, NGOs and social and cultural programmes from Moscow. Otherwise, it turns out that for places like Bratislava, Russian money means more than the freedom of Slovaks. But, to begin with, the leadership of the EU, NATO and the US must answer the question: "Is Klaipėda worth a war?" They must now be willing to answer this question in the affirmative. EE

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Russian aggression against Ukraine

No peace in sight

YULIA KAZDOBINA

Negotiations concerning Russia's war in Ukraine have been going on for many years at this point. While there have been almost continuous discussions regarding peace, it has become clear that Moscow does not place any real value in such talks. The war will therefore be decided on the battlefield.

Peace talks between Ukraine and Russia broke down completely on September 30th 2022, when the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council made a unanimous decision that it was impossible to negotiate with Vladimir Putin and approved Ukraine's symbolic application for NATO membership. The decision was preceded by seven years of fruitless attempts to settle the conflict between the two countries through diplomatic means, which was followed by the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine and several more fruitless negotiation rounds.

Russian demands kept escalating to the point that Ukraine had to recognize the Russian annexation of four additional Ukrainian regions, which the Russian army had even failed to occupy, as a prerequisite for any further talks. In March 2023 Russian officials claimed that the goals of the "special military operation" in Ukraine could not be achieved by diplomatic means but continued to call for the recognition of their interests. Ukraine does not reject the idea of negotiating with Russia in principle, but says it needs to roll back Russian violations of international

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law and restore control over its entire territory, including the Crimean Peninsula, before peace talks take place. As Ukraine's position gains more traction in the world, both sides are bracing for a prolonged confrontation.

The start of the war

Although the world's attention fully turned to the Russian-Ukrainian war on February 24th 2022 when Russia launched its full-scale invasion, the war had started eight years earlier in February 2014. Putin himself admitted that the plan to annex Crimea was launched on February 22nd 2014, about a month before the farce referendum intended to legitimize the annexation. The Russian military medal for the seizure of Crimea places the starting date of the aggression even earlier – on February 20th 2014 – the exact date when unarmed protesters were being shot by riot police in downtown Kyiv.

With the central Ukrainian government in disarray after a major popular uprising followed by the flight of the country's president, the takeover of the peninsula was relatively easy. By March 18th 2014, the date when the annexation was sealed by Putin's decree, Russian soldiers bearing no insignia had managed to capture the peninsula's government institutions, airports and military units and seal it off from the Ukrainian mainland with checkpoints manned by Russian soldiers and former members of Ukrainian riot police. The peaceful rally on February 26th 2014 by the Crimean parliament in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity managed to delay the Russian plans but was powerless to stop them.

As Ukraine's position gains more traction in the world, both sides are bracing for a prolonged confrontation.

Emboldened by its success, Russia launched another hybrid operation in the east of Ukraine. Although the events of the early spring of 2014 are often described as a separatist uprising, Russia had a direct role in fomenting and leading it. Based on the evidence provided by the Ukrainian government, the European Court of Human Rights established in its January 25th 2023 ruling that Russian military personnel were present in Donbas from April 2014 and that senior members of the Russian military were present in command positions in the separatist armed groups and entities from the outset. The court also found that from May 11th, all areas in the hands of "separatists" had been under direct Russian control and that the Russian large-scale invasion in the Donbas region began in late summer 2014. By that time, the conflict escalated to the level of intense hostilities and attempts to resolve it by diplomatic means had begun.

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The Minsk deal

The Normandy Format was made up of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France and was launched by their respective heads of state on June 6th 2014, when the leaders met for the 70th anniversary of D-Day in France. The leaders also established the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) consisting of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE as a venue to seek a political solution to the conflict. The Minsk Protocol, the key document that was supposed to serve as a roadmap to resolving the conflict, was signed on September 5th 2014 by members of the Trilateral Contact Group and Russian proxies. Two weeks later, it was followed by a memorandum outlining the parameters for implementing the ceasefire.

The 12-point Minsk Protocol stipulated the "immediate bilateral cessation of the use of weapons" and its monitoring by the OSCE. It called for an "interim status of local self-government" (law on special status) for the occupied territories; the release of all hostages and illegally detained persons; the removal of unlawful military formations and military hardware, as well as militants and mercenaries, from the territory of Ukraine; and finally the holding of early local elections.

The very creation of the TCG; the fourth point of the protocol which called for "constant monitoring of the Ukrainian-Russian state border"; as well as the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation by the United States, the European Union and their allies; indicated that Russia's role in the crisis was clearly understood. Yet, illogically, the protocol left Crimea out of the equation, despite Russian aggression being behind both the occupation of Crimea and the hostilities in the Donbas.

The political part of the deal hit a roadblock immediately. The claims of the so-called republics rested on Russian propaganda narratives about civil war in Ukraine and the legitimacy of the so-called separatist leaders. In addition, Russia feigned being an intermediary, speaking of peace while supplying arms and military equipment to its proxies and letting the so-called rebels voice more extreme demands and violate agreements.

On the other hand, there was very strong domestic opposition in Ukraine to the idea of autonomy for the occupied territories. The conflict was seen as international rather than internal and the autonomy advanced Russia's goals. It was also clear that no peace was possible while Russia kept the hostilities going by supplying mercenaries and arms. Holding a fair election in accordance with Ukrainian law in the territory controlled by Russia also did not appear possible either.

While the talks in Minsk were underway, Russia consolidated its grip on the occupied territories. It started by shutting down alternative information sources and persecuting everybody supportive of Ukraine. Shortly, the Russian rouble became the main currency, schools switched to the Russian curriculum, etc. And while

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everybody's attention was focused on Minsk, Russia was replacing the population and building up its military presence in Crimea.

As Petro Poroshenko's presidency was coming to a close in 2019, no progress had been achieved. The ceasefire did not hold and the contact group and its subgroups kept meeting, but the meetings yielded no results. There were no meetings of the Normandy Format after the October 2016 Berlin Summit, which failed to resolve the political deadlock. Russia, meanwhile, continued to escalate. It imposed an inspection regime in the Kerch Strait for vessels going to and from Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov. On November 25th 2018, it used force against Ukrainian navy personnel and vessels on their way from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. On April 24th 2019, Putin also issued the decree allowing Ukrainians residing in the areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts under Russian control to obtain Russian citizenship in a simplified manner.

Death of the Minsk "peace process"

When Volodymyr Zelenskyy became president in May 2019 he started making efforts to resolve the conflict. On July 18th 2019, a comprehensive ceasefire was agreed upon and forces were disengaged in three places. Two prisoner exchanges took place in September and December that year. The Crimean film director Oleh Sentsov and Ukrainian sailors captured in the Kerch Strait on November 25th 2018 were released. The Normandy Format was revived and Zelenskyy met Putin one-on-one on December 9th 2019. It was the first meeting since the 2016 Berlin Summit. French President Emmanuel Macron remarked at the summit's press conference that the very fact that the meeting had taken place marked progress.

Although Putin said that he was generally happy with the meeting, old differences re-emerged immediately. Zelenskyy said that he and Putin had a different understanding of the border control issue. Zelenskyy also insisted that security had to come before the implementation of any political measures. In a continued attempt to present Russia as an intermediary and the conflict as a civil war, Putin said that "the parties to the conflict" must talk to each other directly because this is the only way conflicts are resolved. In December 2019, however, both proxy states adopted laws on the border unilaterally claiming that their respective territories included the entire Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Both hostilities and negotiations continued.

Another set of "Measures to strengthen the ceasefire" was adopted in July 2020. Overall, according to Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, under Zelenskyy's presidency, Ukraine held 88 rounds of negotiations with Russia. In the spring of

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2021 Russia started massing troops on the Ukrainian border. The crisis dissipated at first but was rekindled in the autumn. Western countries intensified their negotiation efforts. US President Joe Biden held a summit with Putin in June 2021 attempting to resolve the issue. In December 2021 Russia submitted a draft treaty stipulating that NATO should withdraw all forces deployed on Alliance territory since May 1997. It wanted guarantees from the western countries that NATO will not expand eastward anymore, meaning that Ukraine was not going to join NATO. The demands were unacceptable.

The Minsk process and the Normandy Format became irrelevant on February 21st 2022 when Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the proxy states, known as the Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic. Importantly, the recognition concerned not only the parts of Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia at that time but the entire territory of the Ukrainian Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, including the parts controlled by the Ukrainian government. Yet, Putin continued to talk about negotiations between Ukraine and "the leadership of these republics". On February 24th Russia then launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

Negotiations after the start of the full-scale invasion

The negotiations that followed the start of the full-scale invasion had an even shorter lifespan than all previous attempts. The first round took place almost immediately after the start of the assault on February 27th 2022. There was nothing fundamentally new among the 12 points the Russian side brought to the table. The demands were the same as Russia had repeatedly voiced publicly, i.e., "de-nazification", "de-militarization", neutrality and the non-alignment of Ukraine, etc. The Ukrainian side sought an immediate ceasefire, an armistice and humanitarian corridors for the evacuation of civilians from destroyed or constantly shelled villages and cities.

On March 3rd Putin, in a telephone conversation with the French president, said that the tasks of the Russian "operation" will be fulfilled in any case, regardless of the results of negotiations. In a clear demonstration that this was an ultimatum, the Kremlin said that "attempts to buy time by prolonging the negotiations will only lead to additional demands on Kyiv appearing in our negotiating position."

Negotiations soon moved to Turkey, where the first meeting between Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov took place on March 10th. Kyiv sought a 24-hour ceasefire and a humanitarian corridor from besieged Mariupol according to Kuleba, but Lavrov refused. In addition, Lavrov denied that Russia had attacked Ukraine. Kuleba said Lavrov had

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brought the same old narratives to the table and that Lavrov's demands amounted to Ukraine's full surrender.

The conditions that Ukraine was ready to accept at the negotiations provided for a refusal to join NATO in exchange for receiving "international security guarantees" and the withdrawal of Russian troops to the February 23rd borders (rather than December 1991). The status of Crimea was supposed to be discussed over the next 15 years and Ukraine pledged not to restore control over the peninsula by military means. Russia received the Ukrainian proposition and said they would consider it. Meanwhile, the Russian assault on Ukraine continued.

On March 25th the Russian defence ministry announced that Russian troops would leave the area around Kyiv and the north of the country as a "goodwill gesture" to support the peace talks. In reality, the Russian war effort in the north of the country had failed and was no longer sustainable due to logistical issues. By the end of the month Ukrainian forces cleared the territory north of Kyiv and uncovered the extent of the Russian atrocities committed in Bucha and neighbouring villages, effectively killing all negotiations prospects.

Many observers had hoped that Russia and Ukraine would hold peace talks after Ukraine liberated Kharkiv Oblast in September 2022, but this did not happen either. Putin moved on and announced partial mobilization on September 21st, held farce referenda in the occupied territories between September 23rd and 27th, and on September 30th annexed four Ukrainian regions: Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. This even included areas that his army had failed to capture. In response, Ukraine declared that it was impossible to negotiate with Putin and submitted an application for NATO membership. Regardless of this, Russian officials kept calling for negotiations from time to time, saying, however, that Ukraine would have to recognize "realities on the ground" as a prerequisite.

During the November 2022 G20 summit, Zelenskyy unveiled a formalized ten-point peace plan that later became known as the "Zelenskyy Peace Formula". "I want this aggressive Russian war to end justly and on the basis of the UN Charter and international law," Zelenskyy stressed. The formula calls for ensuring radiation and nuclear safety; food security; energy security; and the release of all prisoners and deportees, including POWs and Ukrainian children deported to Russia. A non-negotiable point is restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and Russia reaffirming it according to the UN Charter; a withdrawal of Russian troops and cessation of hostilities; and the restoration of Ukraine's state borders with Russia.

The formula also calls for justice, including the establishment of a special tribunal to prosecute Russian war crimes. Prevention of ecocide and protection of the environment, with a focus on demining and restoring water treatment facilities, is another necessary step. It is also necessary to build a new security architecture

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in the Euro-Atlantic space, including guarantees for Ukraine. And the final step is confirmation of the war's end, including a document signed by the parties involved in it.

Lavrov characterized Zelenskyy's speech at the summit as "aggressive", full of "bellicose rhetoric" and "Russophobic". Russia rejected the initiative and said it would not withdraw its troops from the Ukrainian territory. The spokesman of the Russian president Dmitry Peskov insisted Ukraine must recognize the "territorial reality". He said that new subjects have appeared in the Russian Federation "following referendums that took place in these territories. Without taking these new realities into account, no kind of progress is possible".

An impossible situation

This short overview of Ukraine and the international community's attempts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict show that since the very start of its hybrid aggression against Ukraine, Russia has been using a combination of deception, manipulation, lies and coercion in order to achieve Putin's vision of the European

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security order. Ukraine's place in it would be as a little brother and a part of the Russian sphere of influence.

Although Russia has participated in negotiations since the very start of the conflict, its refusal to take responsibility for its actions and its persistent attempts to present the conflict as a civil war prevented a resolution of the crisis. As the war progressed from its hybrid stage to the full-scale invasion, Russia did not change its false propaganda narratives. Its constantly escalating demands were voiced primarily via Putin's subordinates and proxies. As Ukrainian negotiators indicated, Russia used military escalation to raise the stakes and to make Ukraine agree to otherwise unacceptable conditions at the negotiating table, which in turn led to Ukraine's refusal to implement them. The escalating demands did not depend on Ukraine's willingness to comply with the agreement, as evidenced by the decision of the proxies to set the border of the "republics" unilaterally. At the same time, Russia kept blaming Ukraine and the West for the conflict and for their supposed refusal to resolve it.

The Russian use of negotiations can be best understood from Igor Ryzhov's book "*The Kremlin School of Negotiation*. In addition to the five types of and motives for negotiations, described by Fred Charles Iklé, an American sociologist, political scientist and author of books including *Every War Must End* and *How Nations Negotiate*, Ryzhov describes two more, which he believes are appropriate for the 21st century. One is negotiations with a view to misleading an opponent: "These are, quite simply, an imitation of the negotiation process. Opponents often enter the negotiation process and deliberately draw it out, safe in the knowledge that time is on their side. In this type of negotiation, every one of your proposals will be met with a "maybe", a "we'll need to consult on this" or similar."

Russia blames Ukraine and the West for the conflict and for their supposed refusal to resolve it.

The other one is provocation: "negotiations with a view to showing the other party's inability to negotiate". According to Ryzhov, this process has the following stages: 1) initiate negotiations; 2) declare you want to settle the matter constructively; 3) put forward absurd demands; 4) blame the opponent for the breakdown of the negotiations.

The prospects of a peaceful settlement remain grim. Putin has just secured another term in power and Russia continues to fight the war, regularly attacking peaceful Ukrainian cities in the rear. The Russian authorities kidnap Ukrainian children to Russia and give them to foster parents. Occupation authorities pressure residents into getting Russian passports. Putin is getting rid of critics of the war and prepares the country for a long war of attrition. His forces have directly and

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indirectly escalated pressure on western interests in different parts of the world, trying to weaken western support for Ukraine.

As the defending party, Ukraine is fighting a war of necessity. Its right to self-defence is enshrined in the UN Charter. Kuleba, the foreign minister, has said that Ukraine does not reject the possibility of negotiating with Russia at some later time. However, negotiating with Putin is impossible. One of the reasons is that on March 17th 2023, the ICC issued arrest warrants for the Russian president and his children's rights commissioner for the "unlawful deportation" of Ukrainian children. Russia, on the other hand, "does not need negotiations to end the war. It simply needs to withdraw all of its forces from Ukraine, unblock Ukrainian ports and stop all attacks on land, in the air and from the sea".

The West currently supports the Zelenskyy Peace Formula and this is the basis for a just and lasting peace. The formula stipulates the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Ukrainian territory. Yet, as the US State Department has reiterated, there is no evidence that Russia is ready for serious diplomacy. This means that the conflict will have to be settled on the battlefield. And only then serious negotiations may start. So far, nobody can predict when this will happen. EE

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Ukrainian media at war

Battles behind, battles ahead

ALEKSANDER PALIKOT

The media landscape in Ukraine has been heavily impacted by the ongoing Russian invasion. While the centralization of media to build a common message and fight disinformation made sense at the beginning of the war, critics now argue that the president's office is abusing its control of the media while discrediting independent journalists.

Over two years into the all-out war with Russia, Ukraine is bound to face further stress tests. Nowhere do these come into view so strikingly as in the Ukrainian media, where the authorities' desire to maintain control; civil society's calls for scrutiny; the opposition's political ambitions; and Moscow's attempts to gain influence all clash.

In the initial phase of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian media unified in resistance against the invaders and gave the authorities their trust. But as soon as the dust of the first battles settled, independent outlets returned to scrutinizing the government and uncovering corruption. The authorities, in turn, eagerly continued to exploit their new wartime prerogatives and influence. The explosive rise of alternative media, most importantly Telegram, made the media landscape less transparent and less resistant to Russian influence. While the resulting status quo has more and more critics, the battle over the national psyche is intensifying and it could prove decisive when it comes to societal acceptance of the war's outcome.

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The showman on his own stage

Arguably, no other contemporary political figure has explored the relationship between power and media more radically than Volodymyr Zelenskyy. In 2019, in a stunning display of political technology at work, the widely popular actor and scriptwriter stepped into the presidency straight out of a political sitcom. He lost much of his record-high support after two years in charge. However, to the amusement of observers both at home and abroad, Zelenskyy regained it as he transformed into a wartime leader and a global media icon in response to Russia's invasion.

The impact of Zelenskyy's undeniably charismatic persona and communication skills on popular sentiments in Ukraine and abroad cannot be dismissed. His bold and empathetic narrative of Ukrainians' plight defined the understanding and experience of the war for millions. His daily updates in the form of short videos, cinematically produced clips and constant engagements with the people kept audiences focused on the war. Nonetheless, as Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale argue in their book, *The Zelensky Effect*, many observers fail to understand that Zelensky's role in the beginning of the invasion is "less about the man himself than about the civic nation he embodies".

Direct, emotional messaging; everyman rhetoric; calls to unity; and promises of a new Ukraine have been the backbone of Zelenskyy's political repertoire since he announced his presidential bid during the Kvartal 95 New Year's Eve concert in the last minutes of 2018. On the other hand, the president/showman, as the American journalist Simon Shuster described him in his recent book, has always kept his distance from independent media outlets and has preferred to get his message to the public first via social media and later via state-controlled TV. Critics have noted that after the full-scale invasion, he also preferred foreign journalists, ensuring his star continued to shine bright without Ukrainian peers asking him difficult questions. Most importantly, however, since before the full-scale invasion, and especially after it, Zelenskyy, whose comic image overshadowed his careers as an influential producer and media manager, has been carefully constructing an increasingly tight media apparatus. This has given him more control over the media than any of his predecessors.

Telemarathon

For the Ukrainian public, this approach is epitomized by the so-called "Telemarathon". On the first day of the invasion, the main Ukrainian TV channels came together to broadcast the same round-the-clock programming co-produced with

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The war has put Ukrainian journalists at risk. As of April 2024, ten Ukrainian journalists and media workers have died during their assignments, while 76 have died serving in the army or as a result of hostilities.

state officials. When Russian troops were attempting to invade Kyiv, the move was widely seen as vital for ensuring order and countering disinformation. In a conversation back in July 2022, the then-Minister of Culture Oleksandr Tkachenko told me that the "unified information policy" pursued by the government is "moderate in its philosophy", as it does not fully use the provisions of Ukrainian martial law legislation allowing the authorities to take over media outlets, stop their work and introduce military censorship.

It is not clear how the Telemarathon was exactly created despite several accounts from various sources. From the onset, it included the parliamentary channel Rada, the public broadcaster Suspilne, and four commercial channels: ICTV/STB, 1+1, Inter and Ukraine 24. These last four groups were controlled by or closely tied to the tycoons Viktor Pinchuk, Ihor Kolomoyskiy, Dmytro Firtash and Rinat Akhmetov respectively. According to Tkachenko, who had been a long-time manager of the 1+1 media group, the idea of the Telemarathon came from "the head of one of the channels". However, many in the media industry doubt this and say that it was initiated by Zelenskyy's office. Svitlana Ostapa, a chairwoman of the supervisory board of Suspilne, told me that on the first day of the full-scale invasion, Tkachenko informed her that the public broadcaster's airwaves would be taken over by the

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state-run Rada TV. This was done without providing any official decision about the takeover.

Not all the big commercial channels joined the Telemarathon – most notably Channel 5 and Pryamiy, linked to former President Petro Poroshenko, and opposition-oriented Espresso TV. According to Tkachenko their managers "failed to find a compromise" with the ministry. Espresso TV's editor-in-chief Anastasia Ravva told me that the channel did not receive an offer to join at the start of the full-scale invasion. Later, in April 2022, these three channels were taken out of the national system of digital broadcasting, which further limited their outreach.

Meanwhile, several close associates of Zelenskyy from his pre-political career as a comedian and actor in the Kvartal 95 Studio aired their own shows on the Telemarathon. Yevhen Koshoviy and Oleksandr Pikalov, Zelenskyy's friends who were involved with *Servant of the People*, the sitcom about an accidental president played by the real world's future president, run a satirical news programme called "Bayraktar News". It mocks Russian propaganda and airs political talking points that go far beyond the ostensibly apolitical and unifying spirit of the Telemarathon. Koshoviy admitted to me that he regularly meets with Zelenskyy to "discuss tasks ahead" and he also said he believes that Ukraine is "not countering Russian propaganda well enough".

The Kvartal 95 Studio, which was co-founded by Zelenskyy and is known for its sharp political humour mixed with slapstick sketches, continues to produce and air comedy shows that praise the authorities and ridicule their opponents during the Telemarathon's prime time hours. Their producers have told me that promoting studio's work through the Telemarathon allows them to compensate for the war losses inflicted on their business.

> It is not clear how the Telemarathon was exactly created despite several accounts from various sources.

The Telemarathon was initially focused on providing information on current events and promoting patriotic attitudes. But over time, the public has started to view it as a public relations operation for the president and the authorities, rather than a reliable source of information. The share of total viewership dropped from 40 per cent in March 2022 to 14 per cent by the end of 2022, according to Ukrainian media monitoring organization Detector Media. Now it is down to around ten per cent. It is widely criticized by independent journalists and often dismissed among soldiers, with both groups viewing it as potentially harmful "propaganda of success". The trust in the Telemarathon dropped from 69 per cent in May 2022 to 36 per cent in February 2024, according to Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. In April 2024, the US State Department said that the Telemarathon negatively impacts press freedom in Ukraine.

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Tkachenko, now a former minister, told me in July 2022 that the project "won't run for another year or many years, because the war will be over". Almost two years later, the Telemarathon continues and is still strongly valued by Zelenskyy. With more than 1.5 billion hryvnias (37.8 million US dollars) of state funding given to the Telemarathon and foreign broadcasting in 2024, the channel owners and managers are determined to keep the project going, Svitalan Ostapa told me recently.

Decline of oligarchic influence?

Some praise the Telemarathon for diminishing the influence of the oligarchs on television, which had been a key source of information and entertainment as well as the main arena for political infighting in independent Ukraine. Like never before the state has become a central media actor in Ukraine. Despite this, such an optimistic view has few backers. According to the Ukrainian political commentator Vitaliy Portnikov, what we are observing is better described as a transformation of the oligarch-controlled oligopoly into a state-controlled cartel. In a conversation with me, Mykola Knyazhytskiy, a lawmaker from the opposition European Solidarity party and former media manager, expressed a view that "the deal that is mutually beneficial to oligarchs and authorities will end once the financing is over and we may see a comeback of oligarchic television."

For now, the oligarchs have preserved their indirect ownership of the TV channels but refrain from impacting editorial lines. One exception is Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man who announced the closure of all his channels in July 2022. Several months later, former employees of his Ukraine 24 created a new channel – My-Ukraina – which reportedly has a warm relationship with Zelenskyy's office. The Telemarathon has been criticized for giving space to journalists formerly associated with pro-Russian positions. Some of them left after a petition calling for their removal was signed by dozens of big names in Ukrainian media.

Looking back, the Telemarathon gave Zelenskyy an unexpected opportunity to achieve the aim he previously pursued through the so-called "anti-oligarch law". Back in November 2021, after the biggest peacetime political battle of his presidency that resulted in some deputies, including the then Parliamentary Speaker Dymytro Razumkov, leaving his party, Zelenskyy pushed through a bill aimed at crushing the influence of the oligarchs in the media. The law did not take effect due to Russia's invasion but it was received with criticism both in Ukraine and abroad. The Swedish economist Anders Aslund argued that this bill emulates the policies of Vladimir Putin in the early 2000s, when media assets were snatched up from oligarchs and handed over to more loyal businessmen.

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The law was not the first radical decision in the media domain taken by Zelenskyy before the invasion. In February 2021, the president shut down three pro-Kremlin television networks controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk, a friend and associate of Putin. The Venice Commission voiced concerns but the United States backed the decision. A month later, Ukraine launched a Russian-language state TV channel called Freedom (FREEДOM, formerly UATV), which continues to work and influence Russian-speaking audiences both in and outside of Ukraine.

Under fire, under pressure

While Zelenskyy and his team gained control over much of the country's television, Ukrainian independent media outlets remained vibrant despite unprecedented wartime challenges. The war has put Ukrainian journalists at risk and turned many of them into war reporters. As of April 2024, ten Ukrainian journalists and media workers have died during their editorial assignments, while 76 have died serving in the army or as a result of hostilities, according to the Ukrainian Institute of Mass Information. Moreover, 14 have gone missing, 34 have been wounded, and there have even been 25 instances of kidnapping recorded. Russia has been also continuously targeting media outlets and telecommunications infrastructure to cut the Ukrainian population off from independent information. It has shelled 19 TV towers, including on the territory of Babyn Yar in Kyiv in March 2022 and in Kharkiv in April 2024. It has switched off Ukrainian broadcasting 29 times and seized or ruined 19 editorial offices. In the occupied territories it has been replacing Ukrainian media with Kremlin propaganda.

The war has led to the closure of 234 Ukrainian media outlets. In its initial phase, the work of newsrooms was disrupted and some came under economic strain mainly due to the collapse of advertising revenues. Over time, however, many of the journalists who initially left endangered cities, including Kyiv, got back to their offices. Income from grants alleviated the initial shock and it is now a vital source of funding for some outlets. Media have adapted and even many new projects have taken off. In March 2023, a new media law went into effect, bringing Ukraine's media market regulations in line with European legislation.

Although war reporting and the investigation of Russian war crimes dominated coverage in the wake of the invasion, independent outlets quickly returned to their traditional watchdog role. They soon found themselves on a collision course with the authorities. This conflict erupted in full force in January 2024, when a video aimed at discrediting journalists from an investigative outlet Bihus.Info appeared online. The recording published by "The People's Truth" YouTube channel, a fake

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channel created for this occasion, showed the company's camera operators allegedly taking drugs during a corporate event. In an investigation following the scandal, Bihus.Info established that cameras were installed in the vacation lodge where the company held the event by agents of the Security Service of Ukraine. According to Denys Bihus, the founder of Bihus.Info, his employees had been under surveillance by as many as 30 individuals for at least several months. He told me that in his view authorities' behaviour was "aimed at intimidating the entire independent media community with various degrees of pressure"

Another top investigative journalist, Yuriy Nikolov, the chief editor of *Nashi Hroshi*, an anticorruption outlet monitoring government spending, was targeted just two days earlier. Unidentified men tried to break into his home and vandalized his door with graffiti demanding he enlist in the military. The move was preceded by a smear campaign on anonymous pro-government Telegram channels. Nikolov broke the biggest corruption story of the war when in 2023 he reported that the defence ministry had been buying eggs and other products for troops at inflated prices. The investigation sparked questions about military spending and prompted Zelenskyy to fire several top officials, including Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov.

Both events sparked outrage among Ukraine's media community. Mediarukh, an independent media association, said that pressure on journalists undermines Ukraine's democratic credentials and stated that other outlets, including *Ukrayinska Pravda*, NV, *Tsenzor*, *Vavilon*, and Liga.net, were also targeted. Oksana Romanyuk, director of the Institute for Mass Information, said that the situation resembled the times of President Viktor Yanukovych, when many journalists were prosecuted and targeted by similar campaigns.

Attacks on independent media marked a definite end of the media's extraordinary wartime trust in the authorities.

In response, Zelenskyy said that such pressure on journalists was unacceptable. Ukraine's Security Service said it had opened an investigation into the actions that targeted Bihus.Info. Moreover, ambassadors of the G7 countries met with leading Ukrainian journalists to address concerns about the decline of press freedom in Ukraine.

These attacks on the media marked a definite end of the media's extraordinary wartime trust in the authorities. Bihus told me that in his view the story of surveillance showed that the Ukrainian authorities are prone to rely on "manual control" and "act emotionally". Nikolov has in turn pointed out that with an absolute majority in the parliament; extraordinary prerogatives granted to the president under martial law; and the manual control of the judiciary; all power in Ukraine is in the hands of Zelenskyy and his confidants, such as the head of his office Andriy

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Yermak. "With no balance of power in Ukraine, media are the last instance able to control the authorities," he said.

Ukraine's independent media are under pressure but they do fight back and feel powerful. As Sevgil Musayeva, the editor-in-chief of *Ukrainska Pravda*, put it during the media conference organized in Bucha in May 2024, investigative journalism became "a powerful factor of political life" throughout the decade following the Maidan protests of 2014. Dozens of top officials lost their jobs due to critical domestic coverage and even the conduct of military operations is increasingly scrutinized.

Social media of war

The Ukrainian wartime media landscape does not consist solely of government-controlled TV and independent quality-driven outlets. Far from it. Most Ukrainians get their daily news from social media: above all from Telegram, which became a leading news source in Ukraine due to its quick access to unrestricted information, as well as YouTube, which turned into a popular alternative to television.

As many as 73 per cent of Ukrainians use social media to get their news as compared to 41 per cent relying on news sites, 30 per cent on television, ten per cent on radio, and three per cent on printed newspapers, according to a study conducted by independent media development organization Internews in late 2023. The popularity of Telegram has surged since the invasion, with as many as 72 per cent of Ukrainians using it to get their news in 2023, compared to 20 per cent in 2021. It is followed by Facebook with 19 per cent and YouTube with 16 per cent. The usage of largely uncontrolled TikTok rose from one per cent to five per cent during war time.

Primarily a messaging app, Telegram owes its success as a news source to its straightforward design. Users can easily set up channels and post content to an unlimited number of followers in a top-down manner with no algorithms interfering and almost no advertising. Ihor Lachenkov, the creator of one of Ukraine's most popular Telegram channels, told me that the platform "out performs the alternatives" not only because it is most efficient in terms of audience outreach but also because it does not filter out some popular war-related content as too graphic or purportedly promoting hate speech or violence. Other social media outlets such as Facebook or Instagram often end up doing this.

Ukrainian officials and institutions, for example President Zelenskyy, Ukrainian railways, or the popular Mykolaiv regional Governor Vitaliy Kim, run their own hugely popular channels, all contributing to Telegram's boom in the country.

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However, only 12 of the app's 100 most popular channels belong to established media, officials or public figures. Many popular channels mix news with speedy half-official information about air attacks and sensational content. Despite having millions of followers, they often ignore journalistic standards. Unlike official media in Ukraine, many Telegram channels are in Russian, and some are widely regarded as pro-Moscow. Ukraine's Security Service published a list of channels it said "carry out special information and psychological operations in the interests of the Russian Federation" in March 2022 and later expanded it. Ukraine's main intelligence directorate said that Russia has spent 250 million US dollars to promote its narratives on the platform in Ukraine. On the other hand, some influential Ukrainian channels such as "Vertical", "Joker" and "House of Cards" are likely secretly tied or close to the Ukrainian presidential administration, according to the Detector Media. They publish unverifiable insider information and dark PR targeting critics, including independent journalists and political opponents.

Telegram's founder, Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov, vows that Telegram aims to be a "neutral platform" and not a "player in geopolitics". Critics in Ukraine, however, accuse it of ties to the Russian state and contributing to its war effort. Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, has registered a bill that aims to regulate the workings of the platform, but it is unlikely that lawmakers will try to shut the popular application down altogether.

How has the war changed Ukraine's media? Despite multiple challenges, Ukraine jumped from 106th to 61st in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index between 2022 and 2024. But this judgement, if warranted, shout not overly reassure us. In the wartime reality, Ukraine constantly needs to strike the right balance between preserving unity, mobilizing resources and enabling criticism and freedom of speech. Moscow appears determined to show the western world that its political system is superior, and that Ukraine's fragile democracy is destined to fail. Ukraine's media are fighting to prove this wrong, and they won many battles, but most likely many still lie ahead. EE

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A parallel world of co-existence in Montenegro

SVENJA PETERSEN

The beautiful country of Montenegro caught me by surprise during a recent weeks-long research trip. But it was not just the natural beauty and historical sites, but also another picture which astounds in times of war in Ukraine: a large Russian and Ukrainian diaspora which settled mainly on the Montenegrin coast. living together peacefully by an overwhelming majority. This lasting experience led me to write this article, analysing the lives of the two diasporas belonging to two states waging a brutal war against each other.

Already before the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, Montenegro was always a country of longing and emigration equally among Russian and Ukrainian citizens. Linguistic similarities and the common Orthodox faith serve as the basis of this attraction. Yet, linguistic and religious interplays were by far not the only reason for Russian and Ukrainian emigration to Montenegro.

For a long time, the Adriatic country attracted Russian and Ukrainian citizens with its passport-by-investment programme, which ran until 2022 and offered the prospect of Montenegrin citizenship if investments were made in Montenegro, already from amounts of 250,000 euros upwards. This programme was mainly used by Russian but also Ukrainian citizens, so that they received a passport with more freedom to travel and the possibility to settle in Montenegro. Russian citizens are said to have bought 19,000 properties in Montenegro alone before the outbreak

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of the war in Ukraine. Russian investments therefore account for a good quarter of Montenegro's GDP.

Until the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, it was by majority wealthy Russian and Ukrainian citizens that were drawn to the small Adriatic country. On average, every third registered yacht in Montenegro belongs to a Russian national. Russian and Ukrainian immigration to Montenegro was a policy that was consciously chosen and supported by the Montenegrin government. Through this policy it expected a boost in investments from abroad, as well as a growing tourism sector and an increase in human capital.

The fact that the small Adriatic state thus also became home to dubious individuals and promoted money laundering and tax evasion due to extremely low tax rates was not only accepted by Montenegrin politicians but in principle actively encouraged – Montenegro's economic development relies on this model to a large extent.

Russian and Ukrainian emigration post-2022

Since the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, approximately 30,000 Russian nationals and slightly more than 10,000 Ukrainian nationals have fled to Montenegro, together now making up ten per cent of Montenegro's overall population of 620,000 citizens. Since 2022 however, it has not been only wealthy Russians and Ukrainians that have come to the country but also ordinary citizens of both countries that fled the horrors of the war, potential military conscription and sanctions. Since February 2022, over 5,000 new Russian-owned businesses were registered in Montenegro, with the majority of them having settled in Budva, Podgorica and Herceg Novi. Montenegro equally opened its doors to Ukrainian refugees wishing to settle in Montenegro, thus making the country a safe harbour for both Ukrainians and Russians.

Approximately 30,000 Russian nationals and slightly more than 10,000 Ukrainian nationals have fled to Montenegro.

One day during my several-week long trip through Montenegro, when I was walking along the Adriatic coast and underestimated the distance back to the small coastal town where I was staying, I signalled to a skipper's boat. The skipper, who kindly gave me a lift on his medium-sized electric boat, was also carrying a large group of children and teenagers. When I entered the boat, I noticed that all of them, without exception, spoke Russian and have just returned from a summer camp organized by their private international school. I asked the young people where exactly they came from. To my surprise, they came from Russia and Ukraine

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in almost equal numbers, sitting together in a colourful mix, seemingly without any tensions. These and similar images were repeated again and again during my trip. Cars with Russian number plates parked next to those with Ukrainian number plates – no sign of punctured tires. These two images are only a few among many similar impressions and experiences during my time in Montenegro.

Many of the wealthy Ukrainians who settled in Montenegro before the invasion often acquired their wealth in Russia.

At this point, however, it should be mentioned that many of the wealthy Ukrainians who settled in Montenegro before the full-scale invasion very often acquired their wealth in Russia, through Russian business partners and companies or under the old Russia-friendly Viktor Yanukovych regime in Ukraine. This means that many Ukrainians who have lived in Montenegro for a long time are those who often have personal or business relationships with Russia and are therefore less in conflict with the Russian diaspora in Montenegro than those who had to leave their country because of the Russian attack on Ukraine. The political attitudes of Ukrainians who have built up their wealth in or with the help of Russia are often not very different from those of their Russian neighbours in Montenegro. There is greater potential for conflict between the Ukrainians who had to leave their country because of the war and Ukrainians who belong to the new political and economic elites that emerged after the Maidan revolution in 2014 on the one hand, and Russians who are loyal to the government on the other, who park their wealth in Montenegro and enjoy an easy life on the Adriatic coast.

Russian citizens who have left their country since February 2022 and emigrated to Montenegro represent a heterogeneous group. Some left their home country out of political conviction and as a protest against the war, while others simply did to save themselves from military conscription or the economic disadvantages of the sanctions. This part of the Russian diaspora can therefore not be clearly categorized politically. The fact is, however, that there are almost no incidents between the Ukrainian and Russian diaspora in Montenegro and that protest marches or social activism for one country or the other are relatively low.

At the same time, it was also noticeable that – unlike other European countries – there were no flags pledging allegiance to either Ukraine or Russia anywhere in the country in public institutions. Although Montenegro is strongly affected by the war in Ukraine due to immigration and sanctions against Russia, the war only seems to concern the small activist scene. These impressions are no coincidence in a country whose domestic electorate is heavily polarized when it comes to foreign policy and yet seeks to integrate and reconcile both their Ukrainian as well as Russian residents alike.

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Domestic convergence versus foreign policy polarization

The Montenegrin government is keen to ensure that the Russian and Ukrainian diasporas coexist peacefully, as the Montenegrin state greatly benefits economically from the presence of these foreign citizens and simultaneously wants to hold the country together socially and politically. At the same time, however, the country's population is polarized in terms of foreign policy and characterized by a strong duality, which is mainly divided into pro-European, pro-NATO attitudes on the one hand and pro-Russian attitudes on the other.

After the start of the war on February 24th 2022, the then president, Milo Đukanović, and former deputy prime minister, Dritan Abazovic, immediately condemned the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. However, then Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić and the then parliamentary speaker, Aleksa Bečić, were hesitant to condemn the aggression, or they did not condemn it as clearly as many western observers and Ukrainian politicians would have liked. There were similar reactions from representatives of civil society, a large part of the media, intellectuals and the majority of the Montenegrin public. Despite the condemnation of the war of aggression, a part of the political elite and society remained cautious in their assessment or even positioning regarding the war. There were also repeated public justifications or partial justifications of the war against Ukraine.

This political reticence also reflects the impression I had during my field trip through Montenegro. In conversations with Montenegrins, ranging from cab drivers to restaurant owners and local politicians, I repeatedly encountered a lack of or reserved condemnation of the Russian war against Ukraine. While these informal conversations are certainly not representative of the entire Montenegrin population, they are still striking to someone coming from a country where the public display of Ukrainian flags as a sign of solidarity has become common.

The reasons for this restraint or even partial justification of the war are manifold. Russia and Montenegro share close historical ties. Over the centuries, the Russian and Montenegrin aristocratic families repeatedly intermarried. The still revered and remembered Prince and King of Montenegro Nikola I Petrović Njegoš sought close ties with Russia and was even described by the Russian Tsar Alexander III as the only true friend of Russia back at the time. In addition to historical ties, Montenegro and Russia are closely linked by linguistic similarities and a common Orthodox religion. In particular, the Orthodox Church in Montenegro repeatedly shows social and political proximity to Russia.

As in neighbouring Serbia, Russian news outlets also play a major role in pro-Russian attitudes in the country. In Montenegro, Russian-owned media outlets such as RT or *Sputnik* were only closed a few months after the start of the war in

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Ukraine, but before that they had a significant influence on the political climate in the country. Ultimately, the wealthy Russian diaspora itself also contributed to pro-Russian sentiment in Montenegro through its money and influence. In principle, their contribution to Montenegro's economic upturn means that they are anything but unwelcome residents.

Montenegro is also home to a large Serbian population, which is traditionally more Russia-friendly than the Montenegrins. This is mainly due to the Serbian trauma of the NATO bombings of the Serbian capital Belgrade, which were not covered by international law nor through the United Nations Security Council. Russian support for Serbia regarding Serbian claims to Kosovo, as well as Russia's veto at the United Nations against Kosovo's independence, have led to widespread Russophilia in Serbia. This is also true among Serbs in neighbouring countries, including Montenegro.

All these factors and circumstances indicate a certain closeness when it comes to large parts of Montenegro's population and Russia, or at least there is no decisive rejection. Most Ukrainians living in Montenegro are probably also aware of these circumstances. Either they themselves have a certain personal, political or business proximity to Russia or they have come to terms with the fact that they now live in a country where many Russians also live and seem to accept this fact to a large extent.

Political response to Russia's war in Ukraine

For its part, the Montenegrin government currently consists of a rather pro-European and pro-NATO government that has joined the West's sanctions against Russia. However, it is also worth noting that the Montenegrin government did so rather hesitantly and with some delay. As already mentioned, Montenegrin politics has reacted in a divided manner to the Russian war against Ukraine, which is symptomatic of Montenegro's current attitude towards Russia. The rather pro-European Montenegrin government is aligning itself with the West's political stance towards Russia, but is doing so more hesitantly and indecisively than other European states, as the social cohesion between Montenegrins, Russians, Serbs and Ukrainians in the country is supposed to remain as undamaged as possible. This foreign policy balancing act is also intended to satisfy as many voters in the country as possible, most of whom have a very polarized view of the conflict in Ukraine.

Many of the sanctions that Montenegro is now complying with against Russia are also being circumvented via Serbia. Many sanctioned goods from Russia can be imported into Montenegro via Serbia, and after direct flights between Montenegro

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and Russia were cancelled, the majority of Russians in Montenegro now enter the country with AirSerbia or Russian airlines via Serbia.

In the small coastal state of Montenegro, a large number of nationalities converge, all representing their own interests and creating certain economic dependencies. Montenegro's cultural, religious and historical links with Russia lead to a certain affinity with Russia among some Montenegrins, which is usually even greater among the Serbs in the country. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Russian and Ukrainian diasporas in Montenegro have been very diverse and therefore represent differing interests. Due to the heterogeneity of the approximately 620,000 people living in Montenegro, who are politically very polarized, Montenegrin politics is trying to pursue a careful approach which currently includes a pro-European policy, but which also allows for a closeness to Russia behind the scenes. As a result, Montenegro will probably remain one of the few places in Europe where the Ukrainian and Russian diasporas live together peacefully for the most part, celebrate the same holidays, attend the same schools or work together. It remains to be seen whether this fragile social convergence will withstand future geopolitical events. EE

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Why Turkey's ambitions are focused on the South Caucasus

KAROLINA WANDA OLSZOWSKA

It is clear that Turkey is very keen to be increasingly involved in the South Caucasus region. Its interests in this region are inextricably linked to cooperation with Azerbaijan and numerous transport projects, particularly those that allow for the transportation of energy resources. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the importance of supplying energy from the Caspian Sea to Europe has only become more crucial.

Much has been written about the Turkish involvement in the South Caucasus in 2020, when the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh re-ignited after a period of calming. As expected, Turkey supported Azerbaijan, its close ally. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called on the Armenian government to withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh and gave assurances that Ankara would support Baku militarily if necessary. There were even rumours that a Turkish F-16 fighter jet shot down an Armenian plane, which was denied by Ankara.

Since that time, Turkish politics have changed significantly. First, economic problems have forced Erdoğan to revise Turkey's foreign policy. Thus, its main goal is to now stabilize the country's financial situation by increasing trade and attracting foreign investments. Second, Turkey's ambition is to become an important energy hub and to profit economically and strategically from offering its territory for the

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transport of energy resources: gas, oil and those created from renewable sources. Yet, in order for this to happen, Turkey will need to expand its cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus.

One nation in two states

The Republic of Azerbaijan is without a doubt Turkey's closest ally in the South Caucasus. Both countries are members of the Organization of Turkic States and their political leaders repeatedly emphasize their close relationship, stressing that they are one nation in two states. Azerbaijan, in addition to having access to the key natural resource of oil, is well-located at the crossroads of important transport routes. These include China's New Silk Road and Russia's North-South Corridor, which links Russia to India via Iran. These routes are used for running large infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, and the New Silk Road project. These all help to connect Central Asia and China with Europe via the territory of Turkey.

These routes are also intended to serve – as in the case of the rail link connecting Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey – as a transport corridor and an alternative to the maritime route. The importance of these alternative connections is even more evident during blockades or conflicts when supply chains are disrupted, as has been the case in recent years and especially with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In Turkey's plans to transport energy resources to Europe, an important role is played by the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This territory is now fully a part of the Republic of Azerbaijan following September 2023, when the unrecognized and self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was abolished. This region is seen as one with an overall high potential for energy production, especially from renewable sources. In the north and especially in the Jabrayil and Zangilan regions, there are areas where solar energy projects can be developed, while in the Lachin and Kalbajar mountainous regions the "presence of favourable wind potential" has been identified. On top of all these, examinations have been underway to find geothermal energy sources, with the highest chance of finding them estimated to be in the Lesser Caucasus Mountains.

> The Nagorno-Karabakh region plays an important role in Turkey's plans to transport energy resources to Europe.

Recognizing this potential, the Azerbaijani government decided to create zero-emission green energy zones in the Nagorno-Karabakh and eastern Zangezur regions where, according to various estimates, the potential for solar, wind and hy-

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droelectric energy exceeds ten gigawatts. Nonetheless, harvesting the green energy potential of Nagorno-Karabakh will only be possible when its status is finally stabilized. Of course, given Armenia's uncertain position since 2020 without significant Russian support, it is very likely that Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, will maintain Nagorno-Karabakh within its borders.

According to the assumptions behind the aforementioned energy projects, the transportation of green energy generated in Nagorno-Karabakh will need to go through the Zangezur transport corridor (also known as the Nakhchivan corridor). It will connect the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (an exclave of Azerbaijan) with the rest of Azerbaijan through the Armenian province of Syunik. To make it happen, Azerbaijan uses the stipulations of the 2020 ceasefire agreement where, despite no mentioning of the corridor's name, the unblocking of the region's economic and transport links is stated and discussed. Armenia fears that a transport corridor – a motorway and a railway line – will allow Baku to make the area extraterritorial and exclude it from Yerevan's sovereignty.

This fear is not ungrounded. Turkey and Azerbaijan have already started building infrastructure projects together. On September 23rd 2023 Erdoğan met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Both leaders took part in laying the foundations for the construction of the new gas pipeline. Erdoğan declared that the opening of the corridor is a priority for Baku and Ankara, as it will provide a railway and transport line, and perhaps in the future even a pipeline to transport energy to Turkey and Europe. Construction of the route and renovation of the stations have already begun.

The railway line in Kars connects with the railway line from Georgia and has a branch leading to Iran. Notably, due to lack of progress in the construction of the transport line by Armenia, Azerbaijan decided to hold talks with Iran on the construction of rail and road links through the Iranian territory which is close to the Armenian border. These negotiations ended successfully and construction works have begun. Naturally, these two corridors are not mutually exclusive, and in the future, if a route through Armenian territory is also built, they could be used in parallel. These transport corridors represent an alternative path to the route through Russia. Thus, China, among others, has also shown its interest in them.

With and without Turkey

The Organization of Turkic States is an important format for cooperation also in the field of energy. So far, collaboration between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in the energy sector has been formally announced. However, Turkey

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan makes a statement in Ankara. Erdoğan has seen the region of the South Caucasus as an opportunity to strengthen his own influence at home and abroad.

is active in this regard as well, mainly by its involvement in the pipeline project that goes through the Caspian Sea and which is routed through Turkey to later reach Europe. Kyrgyzstan, a country with excellent hydropower potential, has also declared its willingness to enhance cooperation.

Despite the format of the Organization of Turkic States and subsequent high-level meetings and declarations, it is clear that cooperation between the states that form this organization is not always easy. For example, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are in dispute over the status of the Caspian Sea – the basin's division, along with the hydrocarbon deposits there. Kazakhstan has, in parallel, been cooperating with Russia and China on energy projects.

Since Russia's aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, we have clearly been seeing a significant acceleration of energy projects that go from the South Caucasus through Turkey to Europe. This is also a result of the change in the European Union's energy policy, which now sees diversification of gas supplies and independence from Russian gas as a priority. Thus, among strategic energy projects is the Southern Gas Corridor, which will transport gas from Azerbaijan (and, in the future, perhaps other countries in the Caspian region) through Georgia and Turkey to Europe.

This corridor has already attracted wide interest from many parties. It was the topic of discussion at a high-level meeting in Baku which was organized in February 2023. The event was attended by representatives from the European Union

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but also individual countries, including: Azerbaijan, Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States. The corridor which now transports natural gas is expected to be used in the future to also transport green energy.

Despite all of the above, we cannot say that Turkey is a component of all Azerbaijani energy and transport projects. For example, in December 2022, Azerbaijan signed an agreement with three countries (Georgia, Hungary and Romania) to build a strategic partnership in developing and transmitting green energy. Turkey is not a part of this partnership. The four signatory countries yet agreed to cooperate on constructing a green energy transmission channel from Azerbaijan to the European Union.

The project omits the territory of Turkey, as it runs along the bottom of the Black Sea. The investment cost is significant and is estimated at around 2.3 billion euros. The chances for success are seen as high. Olivér Várhelyi, the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, declared that the EU would cover part of these costs as the project coincides with the EU's plans to achieve carbon neutrality. In addition, it enables the diversification of energy sources and makes the EU economy less dependent on Russian supplies.

Turkey, with its ambitions to become an energy hub, obviously took note of its omission from this project, especially because ensuring energy security is one of Ankara's top priorities. With Turkish-Azerbaijani relations in mind, it is also worth remembering that Ankara's dependence on Azerbaijani energy supplies, as well as the economic importance of transit, has already been used politically by the government in Baku to put pressure on Turkey. This was the case between 2008 and 2010, when Turkey and Armenia tried to normalize bilateral relations.

As stated before, with Azerbaijan unquestionably being Turkey's most important partner in the South Caucasus and many energy projects being a top priority for Turkey, it is important to understand that both countries need a transport corridor through Georgia, Armenia or Iran in order for their ambitious visions to be realized. Thus, in addition to plans to launch the Zangezur transport corridor, many things on the ground could still be improved. First, there is the question of Baku's relations with Iran, which despite having an agreement with Turkey supported Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, threatening Azerbaijan that it could intervene militarily should it violate Armenia's borders. Iran's relations with Turkey are also complicated. Namely, despite several high-level Turkish-Iranian meetings which have been organized in recent months, both countries continue to be involved in Syria, but on the opposite sides of the conflict.

Thus, a transport corridor that would run through Georgia is a much safer project. Launching a strategically important transport project that would run from the

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Caspian Sea through Georgia to Turkey is seen as one of the key issues in Turkish policy designed to support Georgia. Georgia is also the country through which road transport infrastructure from Russia to Turkey is channelled. Thus, Turkey is among Georgia's key trading partners and one of the largest exporters of goods to the country. In addition, the Turkish company TAV Airports Holding operates international airports in both Tbilisi and Batumi. This activity is not only important in economic terms but also builds a positive image of Turkey in Georgia. In 2020 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the then-Turkish foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, declared that Turkey supported Georgia's admission into NATO. The situation could become more complicated should Georgia be admitted to the EU before Turkey. Naturally, before such an enlargement takes place, there is still a long way to go and clearly the EU still has a chance to work out other types of cooperation with Ankara, which would be beneficial to both sides.

Stabilization above all

It is evident that Turkey is very keen to be increasingly involved in the South Caucasus. Its interests in this region are inextricably linked to cooperation with Azerbaijan and numerous transport projects, particularly those that allow for the transportation of energy resources. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the importance of supplying energy from the Caspian Sea to Europe has only become more crucial.

This has led to a demand for increased pipeline capacity and even the construction of new pipelines. For economic and strategic reasons Ankara hopes that these projects can run through its territory, which would be facilitated by close cooperation with Azerbaijan, one that is based on a strategic partnership. Such cooperation, however, does not mean that Baku excludes the possibility of projects that would bypass Turkey or using cooperation with Ankara as an effective leverage tool in their bilateral relations on other issues.

The most important condition, however, for all of the discussed projects is a stable and predictable situation in the region. Experience indicates that conflicts make the supply of energy resources difficult, especially in this region. That is why it is so important to work the contentious issues out or ensure that they do not affect economic interests. EE

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How Putin entangled Germany in Schröder's net

An interview with Markus Wehner and Reinhard Bingener, authors of *The Moscow Connection. The Schröder Network and Germany's Path to Dependency*. Interviewer: Jarosław Kociszewski

JAROSŁAW KOCISZEWSKI: After reading your book *The Moscow Connection. The Schröder Network and Germany's Path to Dependency*, I had an impression that what you wrote about Russia, and especially about the Kremlin's connections with German politicians, was very well-known already in Poland, but also in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe. How new was this information for the German audience?

REINHARD BINGENER: I think this information was partly new and partly old. Many of the things that we wrote about in the book were known before the information was public. However, this information was released over time and therefore there was a lack of a broader picture. Our idea was to combine the facts and present this big picture. We also decided to include all the corruption schemes that developed in Germany around the former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. They were widely known, but not necessarily connected with Russia. We linked these facts together and put them in the wider context of *Ostpolitik*, which was the policy put forward and pursued by German Social Democrats during the Cold War period.

Do you think that German society now accepts and understands how corrupt some of these groups have become?

MARKUS WEHNER: In 2016 I published a book titled *Putin's New Cold War* (*Putins Kalter Krieg*). This book was not a huge success mainly because the German public did not want such a book at that time, even though it was published after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. Now, since the onset of the full-scale invasion, it is clear that Germans are more interested in such books. The questions that people ask themselves now are: Why were we so blind? How could we have allowed ourselves to become so dependent on a state which is a dictatorship? All these ques-

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tions only appeared after the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

RB: What I think is also interesting is that when we talk to foreign journalists, they use the word "corruption". In Germany you haven't heard this term until today.

For me the word corruption clearly indicates a certain process of decay, but at the same time when we talk about corruption in a democratic country, such as Germany, we should also ask about accountability.

MW: We do not see accountability for that in Germany yet. No German politician has stepped down because of his or her policy towards Russia. But I see that many of our readers say that they did not expect the things we write about in the book to happen in Germany. They admit to having lost faith in our political system. I think that many of those who read our book have changed their view on German politics and have started seeing corruption in this broader sense of the word.

Will this change within society translate into a change within the political elite? Would you say that this change, which includes cutting off links with Russia and supporting Ukraine, is genuine?

RB: Yes there is a change, of course, but the question is whether it is really genuine. We have a major shift in security policy as well as energy policy. But is there still this ambiguity towards Russia? I would say yes. Take the example of the Taurus missiles – the long-range weapons that can be fired over a very long distance and could reach Russia from Ukraine. Chancellor Olaf Scholz refuses to deliver them to Ukraine, fearing an escalation in the conflict. We are not fully certain but it is possible that the reason behind this indecisiveness is his plan to keep an open door to talks and relations with Russia, once the war is over and there is a new regime in Moscow.

MW: But we can also see a real change. This year we spent two per cent of our GDP on defence. It is the first time this has happened in ten years since the NATO summit in Wales, where this commitment was made by the German government. We are also delivering more weapons to Ukraine than Great Britain, Italy and Spain. But we can also notice that for some left-wing politicians, especially the Social Democrats, this change is more imposed than genuine. This is the burden of our long tradition of good relations with Russia, but also our long tradition of being a pacifist country. For example, the Green Party, whose members have always had a very clear view on the Russian regime and who supported Ukraine, has also been a part of the pacifist movement. Now it has to change its attitude as well. There is no doubt that for a change to take place – and for it to be a genuine change – our society will need to go through a long and painful process. This will not be easy because there are extreme political parties that are pro-Russian and very popular in the eastern German lands. Among them is the right-wing AfD, the left-wing Die Linke but also the new Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance.

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RB: In Germany we ask is this glass half full or half empty? I would argue that in this case it is half full. We can, for example, compare Germany to Austria where politicians have even deeper connections with Russians and have not made any real political changes since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion. By contrast, Germany has seen a real shift, we just don't know how genuine it is.

In your book you make public what some German politicians, especially the Social Democrats, were saying about Poland and other countries in the region like the Baltic states when there were increasing warnings about the threat coming from Russia. How did they treat these states?

RB: These were flyover countries.

Do you think that something has changed also in this regard? Have German politicians started to listen more to voices from this region?

RB: I would say yes. I think that change is both in the public perception but also within the political elite. However, when you think about this pro-Russian approach you can also explain it historically. I would recommend a very good book by the historian Martin Schulze Wessel, the leading German expert on Eastern Europe, who wrote about the alliance between Prussia and Russia in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. From his writings you can see that the two imperial powers had the same perspective and agreed on exploiting Poland and other states. And I think the long-term effect of this thinking should still be taken into account by those who want to understand German politics in the last few decades.

MW: I would add that Lars Klingbeil, the co-leader of the Social Democratic Party who has been a part of this Moscow connection group and who was very close to Gerhard Schröder, in the last two years has said on several different occasions that we should have listened to Poland and the Baltic states. And that we should be doing so in the future because it was a mistake not to listen to them. So from time to time, you hear such statements. But I have an impression that these words are not always liked by the older party members, who were socialized in the Social Democratic Party at the time of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr's *Ostpolitik*. We write about this in our book as well, stating that they do not differentiate enough between the first phase of this policy, which was of course right and important, and the second stage when the Social Democrats supported the communist regimes and were against the Solidarność movement in Poland. They established partnerships with the communist regimes, even with the East German communist regime, disregarding the opposition, including the small opposition in the GDR. They wanted to preserve the status quo and perceived the freedom movements as a threat to this attempt at diplomacy. That is why even today German Social Democrats do not want to destroy this myth of *Ostpolitik* as the best thing ever.

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RB: I think it has also something to do with the guilt that is profoundly present in German society and which has been exploited by Russia. Germany fought all these wars in the East but its longest and most difficult enemy was Russia. Thus, for the generation that survived the war the word "East" meant Russia, while other nations, like the Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians, were forgotten. However, since the beginning of the full-scale war, there's been a large shift in the perception of the German public that is now starting to acknowledge the existence of the perspective of the Ukrainians or the Belarusians and those who live in the Baltics.

You also write about the business part of this German-Russian connection, which is clear and understandable. However, you note the ideological component suggesting that by building bridges with Russia, German politicians were convinced that they were contributing to building a better world. How strong was this motivation to build bridges in your view? How much was it enforced by the knowledge that in parallel to engaging in dialogue, you could also get richer?

RB: It is impossible to look into someone else's mind. But I think that these people really believed that politically they were doing the right things. The financial part that you mention is less clear. For example, we just learnt about a German journalist who worked for public television but also had a contract with a publisher known for publishing pro-Putin books. However, at this point all of his activities, although morally dubious, were legal. Only later it was revealed that there was a second contract that he had signed with one of these tax havens. He then received 600,000 euros from an account which could be tied back to a Russian oligarch. There is suspicion that these transfers were managed by Heino Wiesel, who was a part of Schröder's network. So you see that there may be multiple levels to this whole financial story. This is possibly only one individual case but we suspect that there may be a certain scheme at work. We will see…

MW: Unfortunately, we didn't get any documents from the Cayman Islands to prove it. However, to answer your question, I think the ideological part is quite important because if we speak about *Ostpolitik* we are talking about a certain myth. Clearly, a myth is something you believe in and there is no room for doubt. For the German Social Democrats, *Ostpolitik* has been such a political myth. Without *Ostpolitik*, there would have been no reunification of Germany. So it was something that had to be good. That is why German Social Democrats did not recognize the role that President Ronald Reagan or Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher or Pope John Paul II played in the collapse of the Soviet Union. They believed that westerners could talk to Gorbachev or Yeltsin exactly because of *Ostpolitik*. There might have been some truth to this idea of course, but we also need to stress that *Ostpolitik* was not the main reason why the Cold War ended.

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It's hard not to get the impression that the German elite was completely defenceless against the Russian agents manipulating it. Is Germany becoming more resilient now? Or is there a risk of repeating the same mistakes?

MW: I don't think that Germany was the only target in this spy game. Let's not forget about Berlusconi in Italy, Sarkozy in France, and also what was going on in Austria. That is why we have to see this problem in a broader context of hybrid warfare. We have to win this war before it starts. But it is only now that we are seeing Russian propaganda, disinformation, its brutal warfare, and so on. We had it all the time, but we did not see it. And now it is very late.

RB: Yet, I think that in the end Putin miscalculated. In 2022 Putin believed that the West was much weaker than in fact it was. He was also probably convinced that Germany would back down because of energy relations. So there were miscalculations on both sides.

Are the Germans, or more broadly the West, now discovering their strength?

RB: Germany is in a difficult situation because we are an exporting nation. We depend on markets more than other countries. We have a problem with Russia, but we also have a problem with China. And we may face problems with the United States. These three markets together have been the backbone of the German economy and therefore it is a very serious issue for us. What will happen in the autumn when we have our elections? It is a difficult topic for Germany but it will also be a difficult topic for our neighbours. They do not have to decide our political future, but they will be affected by our decisions. And we will see how strong we are, because if our export companies don't flourish, the whole European economy, and therefore European politics, will be in trouble.

You are talking about challenges such as Russia, China and the uncertain fate of relations with the US, but where is Germany looking for solutions? Maybe they can be found in the European community or Germany can build its power by competing with its neighbours?

MW: I think that our strategic thinking in all these years was very weak, and I hope that now we are developing better strategies on how we should deal with these regimes who want to change the status quo and want to change our political system. During the Merkel years our success was based on three lies. The first was that security was the domain of the US. We simply outsourced it to the US and stopped treating it as our own responsibility. The second lie was that business with China is very important, while the third one was that we had to rely on cheap energy from Russia. Now we see that all these assumptions have cracked. Of course, we have to think about what our future will be like. I'm certain that the parties that are in the centre of German politics are aware that we can succeed only in a united Europe.

RB: I think we have four options. The first option is that Germany should

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stand on its own two feet in terms of security. However, I don't think any of our political parties really see the problem this way. The second option is to bend down to Russia but here even the right-wing extremist parties do not seem to opt for this. But we also have two European options. And I think probably Poland has the same choice. The first one is the creation of an alternative nuclear umbrella, maybe in cooperation with France. And the fourth option is reliance on transatlantic cooperation. I can see that the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats opt for options three and four. We don't say it publicly, but there are pros and cons to both of them and the future will show which one is chosen.

You mentioned China as a problematic business partner. If the Russians manage to corrupt German politicians wouldn't the Chinese try to do the same?

RB: Russia was clearly focusing on politics and energy, while China is focusing on technology. Therefore, you have different methods and different espionage activities. The Chinese have more difficulty here because they don't have these deep cultural relations with Germany as Russians do. They also cannot play with our German guilt, nor with the admiration that the Germans have for Russian culture. It is harder for China. But you can be attracted to the fact that they are so effective, that they do things without all these difficult discussions we have.

MW: I agree that China has the same goals towards Germany as Russia does but it is much more difficult for Beijing to achieve them. On the one hand, the Chinese are not treated as romantically in Germany as Russians are, but on the other hand, there is this myth of Chinese speed and effectiveness. There is a belief that they can achieve their goals because they are not limited by the discussions and debates that we have to conduct. Merkel has always said that China is a reliable partner.

Since you mentioned Merkel, can you tell me how she functions in this new situation?

RB: She has all but vanished from public life. She's writing her memoirs and they should be published sometime in the autumn. Everybody is very keen to read them. In our book we focused on the Social Democrats because it is a very special story, but it doesn't mean that there is no other story. There is a Merkel story too, because she was the chancellor for 16 years. In my view Merkel was fully aware of Putin's nature and that is the difference between her and the Social Democrats. She also always mentioned human rights and after the annexation of Crimea introduced sanctions in Germany and convinced other EU states to do the same. Most importantly, we did not see any signs of financial gain by Merkel personally, nor in her inner circle. So that is a different story.

MW: Merkel is different, for sure. For example, she went to the hospital to see Alexei Navalny after he had been poisoned and was recovering in Berlin,

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which offended Putin. But on the other hand, you might say that she bears a great amount of responsibility for where we are now because she understood how Putin's system works and how Putin thinks. Nevertheless, she thought that if you give him a certain role you can prevent this big confrontation.

RB: She couldn't stop Schröder personally but she could have stopped Nord Stream 2. She didn't do it also because of this pattern. This was characteristic of her politics; she loved having coalitions with the Social Democrats and allowing them to do their social stuff but also allowing them to do their Russia stuff. She believed that by letting them do that she was depriving them of topics which could lead to a mobilization against her party (CDU) in the next elections.

So she was playing with monsters, just like many politicians in the world. And it later turned out that these monsters were growing big and could bite.

MW: And this is what I would probably call her fault. Of course, it was important for her to stay in power and to show that she can stay in power, although there were some doubts that she could. Her own party did not expect that she would stay in power for so long. In this context she was making a decision to not spend more on defence because it was very unpopular. And popularity was very important to her.

It is easier for us to criticize her because we know how it all ended.

MW: That is true but remember that during one of the rare public discussions at Deutsche Theatre, Merkel said that if diplomacy fails, it does not mean that trying wasn't the right thing to do. So that's her view.

RB: I think that there were things that she did that are understandable and things that she did that are not understandable. I think her attempts to prevent a war in Ukraine by buying time or compromising with Putin are understandable. I think that at that time it was understandable and sensible, even when it proved wrong with time. But her decisions to cut defence spending, even after 2014, are not understandable and difficult to defend.

MW: The same can be said about the decision to build Nord Stream 2 in 2015 and sell gas storages and all this stuff. These things are really impossible to understand. EE

Markus Wehner is a political correspondent for the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, focusing on German domestic policy and German-Russian relations. He previously worked as the Moscow correspondent of this newspaper.

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Making the invisible seen

The Baltic struggle for independence

A conversation with Una Bergmane, author of *Politics of Uncertainty: The United States, the Baltic Question, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Interviewer: Maciek Makulski

MACIEJ MAKULSKI: How did you arrive at the point when you thought that there is still much to uncover when it comes to our understanding of the processes around the collapse of the Soviet Union and the regaining of independence by the Baltic states?

UNA BERGMANE: I would probably say by accident, since I wanted to write a master's thesis about French-Baltic relations in the 1920s and 30s when the Baltic states were independent before the Soviet occupation. But then I discovered that there was already a doctoral dissertation just defended in Paris on that very topic. So I started then to look at what seemed like the next logical thing – what France did when the Baltic countries wanted to become independent again at the end of the 1980s. What was interesting for me initially was the discrepancy between what I saw in the French archives. There was a lot of interest about the Baltic push for independence but a lot of confusion as well. The difference I saw was when I talked to people in Latvia, both the general public or people in academia, when I started to tell them that I want to write about French reactions to Baltic claims to independence. People's reactions were a bit surprising overall. They felt that there was no interest in that cause, that they were on their own and nobody really cared. So that was the starting point when I realized that there was actually interest in the West concerning the question of Baltic independence, as well as a feeling in the Baltic countries that the Baltic question was not so important outside. The intriguing thing was to try and find a strategy, on the French side, American side, or Russian side, of how to deal with the Baltic question.

And what did you find initially?

I saw confusion, uncertainty, a lot of last-minute decisions, improvisation and hesitation. I then realized that this

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is the question I want to write about, the uncertainty. That is also why my book is called *Politics of Uncertainty*.

Let's discuss the central theme of the book then – uncertainty. You explained that small countries sometimes struggle to be visible to other states. I understand that this struggle was also a kind of social emotion, a real social feeling, that people in the Baltic states felt that nobody saw their struggle or was interested in it…

I think there is a strong narrative of a sense of betrayal for just reasons in the Baltic countries and in general, in Central and Eastern Europe. It is this feeling that our interests, our countries have always been seen as less important than relations between Russia and Western Europe and the United States. And there is some truth to this. Yet at the same time, the Baltic question was not something that could be easily hidden from the international agenda. In 1940 the Soviet annexation of the Baltic countries was not recognized as legal by Western Europe or the US. And so, by consequence, in the eyes of the West, legally, the Baltic states were not a part of the Soviet Union. Just like today, we do not recognize the annexation of Crimea or we do not recognize the annexation of eastern Ukrainian regions. They are not, of course, part of the Russian Federation, even though the Russian Federation has proclaimed them as theirs. And because of those dynamics, the Baltic question was still on the international agenda, even though it was an uneasy question about which people didn't know exactly what to do.

I think there is a common understanding of what were the internal and external factors that ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. A lot of people wrote about it, but you argue that we underestimate the link between these two groups of factors. So could you elaborate a little bit on this? In what way does your approach to analysing the collapse of the Soviet Union show us more than we knew before?

If we want to write a good domestic history of the Soviet collapse or events in the Baltic countries in 1989, 1990 and 1991, we have to contextualize them in a larger regional and international context. This is a question of methodology first and foremost. In this story of Baltic attempts to gain independence, regain independence, and re-establish independence, I think the division between external and internal was blurred. What did it mean to restore the independence of the Baltic countries? It meant domestic mobilization. The building of a domestic consensus that independence is the answer to all problems. It was also a domestic debate in each of these countries. How are we going to restore our independence? Are we going to proclaim new states or are we going to say that these are the same states that existed in the 1920s and 30s? There was this process of internal struggle and internal consensus building between pro-independence forces and the conservative part of the communist party, to

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convince the Russian-speaking minority in the Baltic countries, especially in Estonia and Latvia, to work with other nationalities who lived at the time in the Baltic countries. This is the domestic aspect, but at the same time, you cannot restore independence on your own. You need to work with the imperial power who holds the power over you. And it was obvious to everybody that we couldn't break out of the Soviet Union by force. So there had to be negotiations and we had to deal with Moscow. This leads to relations between the Baltic countries and Moscow, but also the relations between the three Baltic states. These are three different countries, three different societies, which all had the same goal.

Was there cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the very beginning or did it come with time?

Even though they were willing to work together there was still a lot of coordination and consensus building that needed to be done. At the same time, when the Baltic countries were restoring their independence, they were also trying to build relations with other states. So as Lennart Meri, the future president and foreign minister of Estonia, said by restoring these contacts with the world, we are restoring Estonia. It was a question of restoring sovereignty and establishing contacts with the West that didn't go through Moscow, which meant pushing the question of Baltic independence on the international stage.

Among these emerging elites there was also this strong feeling that Moscow would not let the Baltic states go so easily. The idea was that international pressure could be a game-changer in this whole story. There was hope that if the West would recognize the restoration of the independence of the Baltic countries, Moscow would just have to accept this fact. So that's why this whole story of the restoration of independence can't be told just as a domestic story, but it can't be told also as some sort of diplomatic history. It is both at its core.

If this division between internal and external is blurred but you still want to tell a story of the Baltic States' restoration of independence to a newcomer to the region, how would you approach that? How would you distil the essence of the process in a way so that we could better understand the three Baltic republics' road to independence?

I think there are three elements to answer this question. The first is, and it sounds a bit poetic, but at the same time it is the truth, the will of the people in the Baltic countries. Without the strong desire for independence, nothing would have happened. There would be no Baltic question. There would be no Baltic independence movements. There would be no reason to have the independence of the Baltic countries. The second factor is the confusion and hesitation in Moscow. The fact that Mikhail Gorbachev was not sure what to do with the Baltic countries and that for him, this Baltic question was also a question that kind

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of revealed strong tensions at the heart of the *perestroika* project. He wanted to democratize Soviet society. But he also wanted to maintain the Soviet empire. But empire and democratization don't go together. As soon as there was democratization, the democratic process allowed people to express their will, and the will was independence.

The third element was the international community, including the crucial non-recognition policy. Baltic countries were never recognized as part of the Soviet Union officially. Thus, their claims for independence were very difficult to dismiss. The attention that the international community paid to the Baltic situation made it harder for Soviet conservatives to convince Gorbachev that force should be used against the Baltic countries. When force was used in January 1991, there was international outrage along with outrage among Soviet liberal and Russian democrats, which made Gorbachev very reluctant to continue with the use of force. Of course, there is an argument that would say that the Soviet Union collapsed anyway. But I do think that the Baltic agency contributed to the destabilization of the Soviet Union. It also showed what was possible for other Soviet republics. There was a time both in the West and in Moscow, for Boris Yeltsin and for Gorbachev, that saw people believe in the possibility of the Baltic countries becoming independent while the rest of the Soviet Union would manage to continue to coexist in some sort of reformed federation.

Gorbachev did not want the Soviet Union to come to an end and in theory, he had a simple and good plan – let's give people a little bit more freedom. But all of a sudden, everything occurred very quickly. There were already structures in place which enabled the agency you described and utilized the window of opportunity which opened. In Poland, it was Solidarność (Solidarity). In the Baltic states there were civil movements called popular fronts. What was their role in this story?

So these movements, the popular fronts, became pro-independence movements in the Baltic countries. They emerged from pre-existing networks in the Baltic societies such as groups which were interested in folk music, heritage preservation and, most importantly, environmental protection.

Those networks were there for more or less the entire period of the communist era?

No, they emerged later and the connections started to be made in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Stalinist period had cut horizontal ties in society in an attempt to destroy these networks. But with the death of Stalin and the Soviet regime becoming softer, also with a new generation, societal life in the Baltic countries began fostering intellectual, folk and environmental connections, especially after Chernobyl. These mobilizations are the origins of these popular fronts. The popular fronts were then established by reform-minded communists, also people who were a part of the so-called intelligentsia. Yet to be in the

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Photo courtesy of Una Bergmane

intelligentsia at that time you needed to be a part of the Communist Party, be a member of the writers' union, etc. So these were not hardcore dissidents but rather people who supported Gorbachev's reforms. Some of them maybe already thought we could go further. But officially the popular fronts were established to support Gorbachev and his reforms. Thus, there was this combination with the bottom-up processes of people becoming involved in a common goal, which was not political.

The level of coordination for pursuing independence between Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania was quite unusual. Did it have anything to do with the Baltic exceptionalism that you also introduced in your book?

I use the idea of Baltic exceptionalism in a bit different way. For me it is this idea in the Soviet Union and also in the West that the Baltic countries were not entirely Soviet. Even in the Soviet Union they were perceived as the most western, most European and a little bit different. Later this idea that the Baltic countries could become independent while the Soviet Union continued to exist was hoped for in Washington and Moscow. But this question of coordination between the Baltic countries is a question with many layers.

It seems to me that there should be more research in the history of emotions in this process. My book is not on the history of emotions, but I think there could be a very good book written about the history of emotions at that time – in the late 1980s, early 90s, in light of what was understood as a common struggle and this feeling of understanding, of knowing that Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians understand each other because they had the same history and same goal. This very idea of solidarity was rooted in emotions. But there are also more rational and systemic explanations. History and geography always pushed the three Baltic states to cooperate. So there was geography, history, emotions and also the external pressure, because the Baltic countries were perceived as one question. For Moscow, it wasn't a question of whether one of the Baltic countries would become independent. There was always an understanding that what happens in Lithuania relates also to the future of Estonia and Latvia. Washington had the same approach. If one Baltic country becomes independent, all three of them will and vice versa.

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This sentiment was shared by the political decision makers in the Baltic states, that independence will happen for them together or it will not happen.

What role did the Baltic diaspora play in these processes, especially in the United States? Did they have influence over US foreign policy?

Let's remember that the official policy of the US was that they did not recognize the annexation of the Baltic states. So there was already a legal tradition that was continued over the decades. The diaspora played a key role in that it kept the Baltic question on the political agenda in Washington. Both President George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, who was the national security advisor, wrote in their memoirs about the pressure they felt from the Baltic diaspora and from the US Congress to take a stronger stand on the Baltic issue. Throughout the Cold War period, the Baltic diaspora had slowly managed to build good relations with certain members of both the House of Representatives and the US Senate. Those were mostly people who were elected from states like Michigan, Illinois, New York, or Connecticut, which had a high number of people with Baltic ancestry.

Was it a large diaspora in the US at that time?

There were not that many, around one million people claimed to have Baltic origins in the early 1990s. But it was a very well-organized and active diaspora. It was a very well-off diaspora. Most of these people were the descendants of Second World War refugees or they had spent time in displaced person camps in Germany themselves. And for them, the restoration of Baltic independence was a huge part of their diaspora identity. Diasporas are often built around this myth of return. And for them, this myth of return was basically the return of Baltic statehood and independence. So they worked with the Congress, they managed to build this pressure, which did play a role in making Bush more active on the Baltic question.

How is the Soviet past currently discussed in the Baltic states? What changes have taken place in the process of remembrance of the collective past?

The first observation is that Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine has changed the way we relate to our history, or maybe increased some of the specificities in how we see it. For a long time, the only way we thought about the Soviet period and about history was thinking about it in terms of totalitarian, authoritarian rule and occupation. Occupation was the main framework through which we had viewed that period. The full-scale invasion has certainly accelerated the academic debate about the Soviet Union as a colonial power and Russian imperialism. In Latvia, applying post-colonial theory in analysing these dynamics was more popular among literary scholars and less among historians. Now there is this process of starting to see this aspect of the Soviet experience

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in the Baltic countries. I think that the full-scale invasion has also brought this history back for a lot of people, and for some it can be quite painful, triggering trauma and memories from their own family stories from 1940, 1945 or 1949. I see more interest among the younger generation in the commemoration of deportations which happened in the Baltic countries in 1941 and 1949 because we see deportations happening in Ukraine and the occupied territories. So the Russian crimes in Ukraine currently have made the memories of Soviet crimes in the Baltic countries more painful and more alive again. There is now a strong push for removing whatever vestiges of Soviet power is left from the public space.

Could you give an example of this?

Up until recently, an important street in Riga was called Moscow Street. It has now been renamed after one of the regions of Latvia. So I think that the manifestation of Russian imperialism in Ukraine has made references to Russia in the public space somewhat unbearable, as a reminder of Russian imperialism today. The question of Moscow Street exemplifies this. Is it just a street? Is it just a historical fact that historically we were part of the Russian Empire, or is it still some sort of manifestation? The most popular case was of course the removal of the Soviet-era monument which was built in 1985 in Riga to officially commemorate the victory over Nazi Germany by the Soviet Union. Over time, this monument had become a monument which was associated with Russian imperialism because it was used for the May 9th celebrations. It was never clearly understood by Latvians whether these celebrations were of the Soviet victory over Nazism, or if they were celebrations of Stalinism, celebrations of the Russian imperial might. They could also be seen as a celebration of the onset of the occupation of the Baltic states; or maybe a celebration of the current Putin regime.

What about the perspective of Latvia's Russian-speaking minority?

Even among the Russian-speaking part of the population who participated in these celebrations, there would be different answers to those questions. What are we celebrating? The liberation from Nazi Germany has always been used by Moscow to legitimize the occupation, and then later repressions. So that is why after the full-scale invasion there was really a very strong consensus in society. People who previously did not care so much about the monument, began to have very strong opinions about it. EE

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How Lukashenka's regime silences the Belarusian free press

DARYA GRISHCHUK

Since 2020 the Belarusian media field has lost up to ten important independent publications. Some of them did not survive the financial crisis while others were taken over by propaganda or decided to avoid covering politics. The decline in the number of independent media outlets and the difficulty in reaching audiences within the country, where consuming truthful news can result in criminal charges, affects the overall political mood in the country.

In 2023 Belarus ranked 167th out of 180 countries in press freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders. Since the political protests in 2020, the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka intensified its persecution of the free press. Currently, there are 35 journalists imprisoned on criminal charges, serving sentences in prisons where they face torture and isolation from the outside world and their families. From 2020 to 2023, nearly 600 journalists and media professionals were arrested, according to Press Club Belarus.

Severe repression against the press forced all independent publications to leave the country. If any correspondents still work in the country, they do so secretly. Officially, there is not a single uncensored editorial team operating in Belarus at the moment.

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"Despite all the regimes, executioners, and sadists, I must live"

Volha was arrested on her way home from one of the 2020 protest marches. The police pushed her into a van and began to severely beat her while driving to the station. Once they arrived, she started feeling dizzy and nauseous, so they called an ambulance and doctors took her to a hospital. In her room, she was handcuffed to the bed and was kept under guard. However, even in such a condition, the police did not allow her to receive adequate medical care. The next day, she was charged and taken away from the hospital. The journalist was accused of actions that grossly violate public order, hooliganism committed by a group of people and insulting a public official.

"I was sure that sooner or later they would imprison me, they would come for me. Maybe it's pompous, but I was ready to sacrifice my life. It was unbearable to see this barbarity."

Volha grew up in a family of political journalists. She attended her first political protest in 1996 when she was only 14. She started her career in 1997 and has collaborated with numerous independent Belarusian and international publications since then.

With such a background and her fearlessness, it was indeed unlikely for her to avoid prison under these circumstances. After Volha was detained, she was moved from one pre-trial detention centre to another. Meanwhile, her relatives were completely unaware of her whereabouts and condition until her trial took place ten days later.

> After Volha was detained, she was moved from one pre-trial detention centre to another.

"I didn't testify during the trial. I waited to take the last word and told people in a courtroom about the tortures I endured. I also said that I would be honoured if they convicted me and ended my speech with the words "Long live Belarus"."

Volha served her sentence in a women's penal colony in Homel, a regional centre 300 kilometres away from the capital. Her time in prison brings back the most terrible memories for her. She spent about five months in solitary confinement cells, one of which was filled with water up to her ankles. Because of the cold and damp conditions, Volha began bleeding, but even after that, she was not relocated to a regular cell.

"I thought I might die. It was one of the most terrifying and dramatic moments of my life. I saw images of my childhood flash before my eyes. I was in such pain that I cried. It was distressing to think that I wouldn't live to see change in Belarus. But later, I felt lighter. Thoughts of my family and the fact that they were waiting

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for me helped. I remembered my father's relatives, who had also been repressed during the Great Terror. My great-grandfather spent 20 years in the camps, but he survived. I felt as though he was watching over me from the heavens. I realized that I had no right to let them down. Despite all the regimes, executioners, and sadists, I must live."

Volha was released in late 2022 after two and a half years. She could not believe they would let her go until the last moment. Even at home, she constantly expected the police to come to her door. And they did. The day after her release, riot police knocked. They tried to persuade her to collaborate with them. After that, Volha decided to leave the country.

"We cannot be silenced, neither my father nor I as journalists. First, this is our job. Second, I see it as my moral duty to speak out," she says.

Volha is now residing in Switzerland. She is back to her profession, writing extensively about political prisoners and collaborating with Belarusian media publications in exile. She believes that the darkness in Belarus will come to an end and those responsible will be held accountable. In the meantime, she carries out her journalistic duty despite all the obstacles put up by the Lukashenka regime and for the sake of political prisoners who are still serving sentences for speaking the truth.

Working in exile

Harsh repression against journalists forced all independent publications to leave the country, making their work extremely difficult in terms of accessing their audience, conducting investigations and providing reliable information. This is not the only obstacle the Belarusian free press faces today. By expelling the free press from the country, the regime placed independent media in a difficult financial situation.

The Lukashenka government began restricting access to free media in 2020, first by blocking their websites, and later by labelling them as extremists, which criminalizes the consumption of their content. *KYKY.org*, a lifestyle outlet that became politically engaged during the protests, was one of the first publications targeted by censorship. In August 2020 riot police searched the publication's office and the director's home, prompting the entire team to leave the country.

"We realized that to continue working without self-censorship, we needed to leave," says Alexandra Romanova, *KYKY's* director. However, the *KYKY* team continued actively covering political events in Belarus from abroad. In December 2020 their website was finally blocked.

"By the start of the protests in 2020, we had a large number of readers. The website was profitable thanks to advertising and we were making good money. It

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was a solid media business," Romanova continues. "In December 2020 we were blocked, and the website could only be accessed using a VPN. This meant that a significant portion of our audience in Belarus could no longer access our content."

Belarus began restricting access to free media in 2020, first by blocking websites and later by labelling them as extremists.

Two years later, *KYKY* was labelled as an extremist organization. This new status made the publication not just an unattractive platform for Belarusian advertisers but a dangerous partner for collaboration.

"The model we used in Belarus is almost impossible to recreate now. We are an extremist organization, working with us is a criminal offence for advertisers in Belarus. There are businesses that have left Belarus, but some of them are still hesitant because they have employees or relatives in Belarus. We do not hold any interest for European businesses: we don't write in their language, so why would they work with a Belarusian audience that we still write for? At the same time, we don't want to become a media outlet that writes about Poland or Lithuania. We are not ready to forget about Belarus," Alexandra says.

Lack of money made the outlet reconsider its format. At the beginning of 2024, *KYKY* decided to stop updating the website and now focuses on publishing news on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter. They also share longer stories on their Patreon page, which are accessible to those who donate.

Economic woes

Subscriptions are one of the few sources of income for Belarusian media today. However, it is neither the most reliable nor systematic source of funding, and it also poses risks for patrons. Donations may lead to criminal liability, as they are considered as financing so-called extremist groups. Despite this, Belarusians, including those living abroad, continue to support independent media. This solidarity helps these outlets stay afloat. For one media organization, it even became a lifeline. In December 2023 Belarusians donated approximately 17,000 euros to *Reformation*, another so-called extremist outlet operating outside the country, after its chief editor asked for help on the website.

"At the end of the year, we were unexpectedly denied a substantial grant from a foundation. Our publication could have stopped working within a few months. So, we reached out to our audience to ask for support and raise awareness about the challenges Belarusian media face, as most outlets operating abroad face similar issues," says Fyodar Pauluchenka, the chief editor of *Reformation*.

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Within two days, around 280 Belarusians sent money to *Reformation*'s editorial team, with the biggest donation being 10,000 euros. However, for a media outlet with a team of about ten employees, this amount is only sufficient for a couple of months. After that, what comes next? Neither donations nor advertising can fully cover the expenses of media businesses, so they must seek additional sources of funding. Grants are one such option. Yet it is still unpredictable and challenging because the competition for funding from foundations has increased since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Belarusian press is not the only one seeking support.

"Russian independent media need support because they have relocated and are working with grant funding. International foundations may be tempted to run joint competitions for Belarusian and Russian media, but they should treat us separately. A Russian publication can have huge audiences, while for a Belarusian media outlet, a million-strong audience is already a big achievement," says Barys Harecki from the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

Competition is growing because Russian liberal media also partly cover Belarusian news. Since Belarusians speak Russian, some foundations might mistakenly believe that the Russian press is enough to meet the demand for honest news among Belarusians.

"It's important for Europe to support Belarusian media and to not equate them with Russian media. We are not Russia," Harecki adds.

At the same time, it is incorrect to say that the Belarusian free press is at risk of extinction. However, small and medium-sized media businesses could still fail. Additionally, the focus of the press has shifted to socio-political themes, while other topics such as culture, sport and lifestyle have become secondary. Many outlets also struggle with salaries – they cannot pay on time and the compensation amounts are not attractive.

Many media outlets also struggle with salaries, they cannot pay on time and the compensation is not very attractive.

"Belarusian journalists are very vulnerable. They do not have financial safety nets, and they cannot return to their homeland. This is a significant problem. But we will try to save our project no matter what and keep our employees on board," says Fyodar Pauluchenka from *Reformation*.

Since 2020 the Belarusian media field has already lost up to ten independent publications. Some of them did not survive the financial crisis while others were taken over by propaganda or decided to avoid covering politics. The decline in the number of independent media outlets and the difficulty in reaching audiences within the country, where consuming truthful news can result in criminal charges, affects the overall political mood in the country. Some experts believe that Bela-

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rusians have become more tolerant of Lukashenka's regime – not due to trust but rather due to humility. The reliability of such assessments is unclear, as it is currently impossible to conduct independent sociological research in the country. However, the Belarusian Association of Journalists believes that Belarusians still want honest news.

"According to our estimates, the total audience of independent media is around four million people (The population of Belarus is 9.2 million – editor's note). That means that the independent media sector still reaches at least one-third of Belarusians. The authorities block media outlets, shut down VPNs, and yet media outlets still produce content that reaches Belarus. If not in the form of websites, then through YouTube, TikTok and Instagram channels," says Barys Harecki. "No matter how hard Lukashenka attacks the public with his propaganda, we remain opposed." EE

Darya Grishchuk is a Belarusian journalist based in Kraków, Poland.

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The Polish pioneers and the unexpected hardships of migrating to Canada

MAŁGORZATA SIDZ

First there were the peasants who went from being subjects of the partitions to pioneers in the Wild West. Then there was the wave of educated people fleeing the communist regime. Among the Poles migrating to Canada were also veterans of the Second World War, in whom Canadian soldiers found a replacement for German prisoners of war.

The journey across the Atlantic was long and difficult. The ship sailed to Canada for a month. Walter F. Chuchla recalls that the ship rocked in all directions and seemed about to break in half. The sea was so rough that the travellers were not allowed to leave their cabins for four days. Disease outbreaks and crowding were also a problem. Many people were dying. Minors were allowed to travel in pairs, on a single ticket, as long as they used one bunk and shared a meal.

George Biedrawa stopped going to school at the age of nine at his parents' request. Up to the age of 21 he helped them on the farm. He fell in love and wanted to marry but his parents did not approve. Biedrawa decided to take matters into his own hands. He and his fiancée boarded a ship to Canada to start a new life together. Unfortunately, the woman died on the ship.

It was also sometimes fun on the ship, with games arranged together in the evenings. In Poland, Frank Andreychuk led a folk music band with his brother and father. In the evenings, they would take out their instruments and play music for their fellow passengers to forget the sorrows and suffering they had been experiencing.

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Canada opens up

In the late 19th century, Canada opened up to immigrants from Europe outside the United Kingdom. The first Poles arrived in the country in 1858. Many found employment in the construction of the Trans-Canada Railway, the largest construction project in Canadian history. The railway connects Montreal in the east with Vancouver in the west and stretches over 20,000 kilometres.

On the construction site, everyone knew their place. Canadians and immigrants of British origin earned the most and did the safest work. The Chinese earned the least and had the dangerous job of clearing paths and blowing up rocks with dynamite. Many died by the hundreds. Poles and Italians were somewhere in the middle of this hierarchy. When the railway was completed in 1885, Canada's Wild West was open and ready for conquest. The country needed able-bodied people who were ready to populate and seed the wild prairies of Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta. The railways were also prepared to carry grain east – which meant they needed farmers to provide a steady supply of wheat.

> The first Poles to arrive to Canada in the 19th century found employment in the construction of the Trans-Canada Railway.

Those willing to take on this challenge were promised 160 acres of land per family. Polish peasants from the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian partitions boarded ships to conquer the Wild West. Most Poles did not leave to pursue romantic, pioneering fantasies. They were fleeing poverty, hunger and unemployment. They were dreaming of their own land. Those sent to recruit them were promised golden mountains – land so fertile that no work was required, a mild climate and high wages. The Poles' naivety was exploited. Most of them knew very little about Canada, only that they would be provided with bread and milk there. Thus, a great wave of emigrants moved from Poland in 1896. Peasants were selling off all their possessions to buy the boat ticket. Frank Andreychuk, along with his parents and brother, slept on benches in the harbour for five days, waiting for enough people to gather so that the ship could set sail without loss.

Wild West even wilder

Despite assurances from the Canadian government envoys, there was no paradise waiting for the pioneers when they arrived. In order to receive the 160 acres of land from the government, the settlers first had to cultivate and harvest at least ten acres per year for the first three years. The settlers were forced to clear the

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forest themselves, remove logs and stones, and dig up the land to make it fertile enough for cultivation. Men who came to the prairies with their families had it a little easier. But every pair of hands was needed, and children began working for the family around the age of four.

Single men, who made up the vast majority, were first forced to work for a few years to save up for the tools they needed, and to hire the necessary farm machinery to prepare the land. Many worked in the logging industry, on farms and ranches, in construction and in coal mines around Crowsnest Pass (in south-western Alberta). However, most of these jobs were seasonal. In the off-season, unemployment and even homelessness were rampant. Even if Poles wanted to return home, they did not have the money for a ticket.

The immigrants often said: "death to the first generation, dearth to the second, and bread to the third." They did not dream of a career or fulfilment. They aspired to give a better life to their descendants. To save as much as possible, many of the men lived together, on bunk beds, in cramped buildings in the slums. They had no access to water. It was difficult to maintain even basic hygiene, so disease was common. There was a high mortality rate among the settlers. When the Poles finally managed to save enough money, they claimed their 160 acres. Most often they chose land in the forests, resembling their native landscape. They were given plots far from the settlements and very often had to travel miles to the nearest village to buy or sell anything. To save themselves from the mosquitoes that tormented them, they walked with a smoky piece of wood on their backs.

Despite assurances from the Canadian government envoys, there was no paradise waiting for the pioneers when they arrived.

Initially, they pitched a tent on their piece of land. Over the next few days they would build a shelter out of peat, and when it was finished they would start building a log house. Most of the settlers did not realize how empty and difficult the prairies would be. Many did not know much about farming and eventually died of exhaustion and starvation. To avoid such situations, the Canadian government recruited people from villages who were used to primitive living conditions and poverty.

Each pair to the glory of the new homeland

The life of the pioneers was full of hardships. The new settlers were constantly haunted by forest fires and floods. Every day, endless chores awaited them to manage the farm, care for the animals and fight the forest. Every member of the family

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had to join in the work. Men worked on the land but often earned money outside the home as well. Women took care of the animals and housekeeping. Children were left to look after the chickens. The younger ones collected stones, while the older ones brought firewood and grazed sheep. To earn money, the Poles dried fruit and mushrooms gathered in the forest, cured meat, made sausages and sold wool.

When single men felt that their financial situation was already good enough to get married, they contacted girls from Poland or someone from their home village to help them find a suitable match. If an interested party was found, they would send her money for the ticket. The Canadian government helped make sure the women would reach their new homes. From the port of Halifax, the women were led straight to the train and padlocked into compartments. At stations, they were not allowed to leave the carriage lest they were kidnapped by lusty single men.

The women who came to conquer the Wild West were not numerous. If they did arrive on their own, it was usually to work as servants. They also employed themselves in shops, hoping to meet a future husband there. Living alone on the prairies was very difficult, especially for women. Even married women had to face difficulties. For example, when the husband went away for six months for seasonal work. Most gave birth at home, as it was usually a long way to a doctor. They relied on the help of their neighbours.

During the Great Depression in the 1930s, immigrants suddenly appeared to be a potential burden on the government. In some cases when they applied for financial or material assistance, which Canadians received, they were deported. Thousands were also thrown out of the country under the pretext of being "radicals".

The wave of Polish migration which arrived in Canada after the Second World War was very different. Previously, immigrants were recruited only for simple jobs. After the war, the government allowed educated people to come, which until then had only been possible for people of British origin. In 1946, family sponsorship (first-degree kinship) and orphaned nephews were allowed. An organized Polish community began to form, functioning mainly around the Catholic Church.

Polish soldiers instead of German prisoners of war

After the Second World War, there was a shortage of labour in Canada to grow sugar beet. During the war, many men went to work in factories, mines or joined the army. As long as the conflict lasted, sugar beet was handled by free labour in the form of German prisoners of war.

The Second World War was a period of prosperity in Canada. It was feared that there would be a crisis after its end and that there would be no jobs for Ca-

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nadians themselves. Nevertheless, the Canadian government decided to help the Polish veterans who had fought side by side with them. As a result, Canada issued 4,527 visas for soldiers who fought in Anders' Army. More than 7,000 men applied, mainly from Italy. Those who were not fully healthy, had wives and, above all, those who had no experience of farm work were rejected. This was the most important requirement, as they had to first have worked for two years as farm help in order to be granted immigrant status.

The veterans, expecting a royal reception in Halifax harbour, were met with protests from Canadians who feared they would encourage unrest. The Poles were suspected of communist sympathies or covert Nazism. There was a rumour that they were going to regroup in Canada and ignite another international conflict. Half of the veterans were transported to Ontario, while the rest were sent to the prairies. For two years they worked in nightmarish conditions. They slept in barns or chicken coops. They worked in uniforms because they were not given money or clothes. Sometimes the farmers left them alone on the farm. They lived in complete isolation.

According to the contract, the veterans should have worked a maximum of 65 hours a week and 45 hours in the off-season, but in reality they worked every day, from dawn to dusk. The government promised them a minimum wage of 45 Canadian dollars per month. This was below the official minimum wage (in Ontario it was 70 dollars), but even so, many failed to meet even these minimum conditions. A farmer could tell a veteran that he would not pay him without any consequence. Meanwhile the Poles had nowhere to return. They often came from places that were no longer a part of the country, and in communist Poland those who fought in Anders' Army were stripped of citizenship.

Siberia on the prairies

In order to fulfil his two-year duty, veteran Anatoly Nieuwierzycki was taken to Lethbridge prison, where German prisoners of war had previously been imprisoned: "That's when I realized that by signing a contract to work on the land, I was supposed to replace a German prisoner of war." By accepting almost 5,000 Polish veterans, the Canadian government planned to plug the hole created by the release of the Germans. Freedom for the Germans meant captivity for the Poles.

Canadian veterans received a generous aid package from the government after the Second World War. Not only were they eligible for free education at universities and vocational schools, they were also entitled to free health insurance and

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benefits. “Veteran preference” – priority for veterans – was introduced. Through financial allowances, employers were encouraged to hire them first.

Polish veterans, who until recently had fought shoulder to shoulder with Canadians, received next to nothing. Many had previously been sent to labour camps in Siberia. They compared living conditions in the new country to the Gulag. Those who were refused payment by the farmers very often could not count on legal assistance. They were seen primarily as cheap or free labour and were not informed of their rights in advance.

Today, those who declare Polish ancestry in Canada reach nearly 1.1 million, many of whom are descendants of those first migrants who faced such hardship. Unlike 100 years ago, those who wish to migrate to Canada can now do so by simply filling out a few documents online and travelling by plane (which is much safer than spending a month on a ship). At the same time, Canada continues to be a country of migrants. In recent years, Canada has welcomed around half a million immigrants a year; not counting those who come here to study. That is more than 2,700 people a day. EE

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The 80th anniversary of a tragedy that continues until today

PIOTR ANDRUSIECZKO

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, which reminds us of the double tragedy these people face. First in 1944, on Stalin's orders, they were displaced from their homeland. Second, when after years of struggle, they returned home and rebuilt their lives in independent Ukraine. Despite this, Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation in 2014. Since 2022, when the full-scale invasion started, the peninsula has been turned into a base for the Russian army.

I visited Crimea for the first time in May 2000. It was the 56th anniversary of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars. In Simferopol a gathering was organized to commemorate the victims of the deportation. Many people held blue Crimean Tatar flags. Some held posters detailing the story of their displacement, and some made demands to the authorities. At that time, and even more so in the years to come, it seemed that the tragic fate of the Crimean Tatars belonged to history. This was the case until 2014. Once the Russian Federation had annexed the peninsula, the Tatars were once again deprived of their right to honour the memory of the deportation as they wished. Worse, they found themselves faced once again with repression.

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Never forget

The last time I visited Crimea was in May 2019. It was the 75th anniversary of the deportation. Again I saw a small, informal gathering of Crimean Tatars in Simferopol. However, this event, despite being organized for the same cause, had a completely different character from the one I had seen 19 years earlier. The rally was closely watched by Russian police. At that time, any commemorations of the deportation were considered illegal by the Russian authorities. As it is in the case of authoritarian and totalitarian systems, memory which goes against official propaganda is often treated as dangerous. Therefore, the only commemorations that the Russian authorities in Crimea would allow would be the official ones, full of half-truths.

At that time I spoke with Nariman Dzhelyal, a Crimean Tatar activist who was present at the rally and remained on the peninsula despite the annexation: "It does not matter if it's been 75 years or if it will be 90 years, this date is crucial for Crimean Tatars because the crime committed by the Stalinist regime was so terrible, so inhumane, that it will live on in future generations and define our psychology, our lives. Even more so there are still people in Crimea and around the world who are justifying this crime. Some people say that everything was just, that everything was done humanely. And that's why it can't be forgotten," Dzhelyal told me on May 18th 2019.

The unofficial mourning ceremony ended with a plaque commemorating the displacement at the train station. There, Russian police officers read out a warning to rally participants: "In case of any attempts to violate public order … the participants and spectators of mass gatherings who do not comply with the rules may be held administratively and criminally responsible in accordance with the current legislation of the Russian Federation … the leadership of the interior ministry of the city of Simferopol warns you about the inadmissibility of breaking the law when holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, pickets …. We ask you to disperse!"

> The only commemorations that the Russian authorities in Crimea allow are the official ones, full of half-truths.

"And what have we done that is unlawful?" asked those who were at the rally. "We are in our homeland. We have the right to honour the memory of our people on the day of the deportation!"

"Let them not think we are afraid!" one woman stated firmly.

In 1939, the Crimean Tatars were the second largest nationality group, after Russians (19.4 per cent), living on the Crimean Peninsula. The third largest group consisted of Ukrainians. In 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Crimea

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May 18th 2000 in Simferopol, Crimea during the official commemoration of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars.

Photo: Piotr Andrusieczko

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In May 2000 was the 56th anniversary of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars.

Photo: Piotr Andrusieczko

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ССТАНО
ЦИОНАЛ
АРСТВО
ТАТА СКОГ

May 18th 2019 marked the 75th anniversary of the Crimean Tatar deportation. The events took place after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, and was limited by the authorities.

Photo: Piotr Andrusieczko

Nariman Dzhelyal, centre in glasses, a Crimean Tatar activist present at the 2019 rally. "It does not matter if it's been 75 years or if it will be 90 years, this date is crucial for Crimean Tatars … the crime committed by the Stalinist regime was so terrible that it will live on in future generations and define our psychology," Dzhelyal said on May 18th 2019.

Photo: Piotr Andrusieczko

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A scene from 2014 in Crimea as Russia implemented its annexation plan. Around 50,000 Tatars have fled the peninsula since the annexation in 2014.

Photo: Piotr Andrusieczko

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came under German occupation, which officially ended on May 12th 1944. A month later, Lavrentiy Beria, an accomplice in Stalin's purges, issued a decree to cleanse the peninsula of all "anti-Soviet elements". This was only a prelude to the ethnic cleansing.

On May 11th 1944 Stalin signed "Order Number 5859", which organized the deportation of all Crimean Tatars from the peninsula. The official reason for the deportation was their alleged "mass desertions" from the Red Army at the beginning of the war and their "total collaboration" with the German occupiers. In reality, the number of deserters among the Crimean Tatars was comparable to other nationalities fighting in the Soviet Army. Many Tatars fought until the end of the war in the ranks of the Red Army. Among them were also soldiers who were awarded the title of "Hero of the Soviet Union".

Deportation

Some historians believe that there were actually "pragmatic" reasons behind the deportation. After all, Stalin was preparing for a war with Turkey over the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits. The deportation in Crimea, as well as that in the South Caucasus, was intended to clear the areas that would be the hinterland of a new war of potentially disloyal populations. The deportation campaign began on May 18th 1944 and lasted for two days. It was carried out by the NKVD, the Soviet predecessor to the KGB. Tatar families were given about 15 minutes to collect their belongings, which could weigh up to 500 kilogrammes alongside food per family. In practice, most people took what they could hold in their own hands.

The Soviet deportation of Crimean Tatars began on May 18th 1944 and lasted for two days.

"I was 12 years old at the time … We were all deported in the same way, but each of us experienced it in our own way … They knocked on our door on the night of May 17th to 18th. Soldiers came in and told us to gather, we had 15 minutes or we would get deported. It was about three or four o'clock in the morning. My father was sick, he was shaking, he had Parkinson's. Our house was in a Tatar village, not many people knew Russian there, we too understood only a little. My mother took a sheet from the mattress to collect the most important things. My brother and I began to dress my father because he could not dress himself. By the time we dressed him, the 15 minutes had passed. The soldier told us that time was up and we were asked to come out. This is how they chased us out. My father couldn't walk, and the soldier was cursing at him not to

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pretend. They were from the NKVD – they behaved like the Gestapo," an 87-year-old Medzhit Mambetov, who died a few years later, told me in 2019.

Later, cars arrived to take his family and other residents to a place where a freight train was waiting. They were herded into train wagons. Mambetov recalled that it was hot, with 60 people riding in one train car. There was no toilet in it and only four small windows. The doors were closed and it was difficult to breathe. The adults thought they were being transported to be shot. The men managed to use a knife to cut a hole in the floor for a toilet. The door was allowed to open only after they left Ukraine. The train travelled for 18 days. Mambetov recalled that they were fed only three times during the trip. They were given some porridge with water and a small amount of potatoes, as well as three loaves of bread for the whole wagon.

Between May 18th and 20th 1944, 180,014 people were resettled under the issued decree. They were sent to places of special settlement. In addition to that, some 6,000 Tatars were sent to the Gulag, while 5,000 were made to do forced labour in mines. More than 6,000 arrived in Red Army reserve training camps. Another 3,141 Crimean Tatars were deported at the end of June 1944 along with local Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians.

Most of the deportees (78 per cent) were sent to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, with 2.2 per cent to Kazakhstan. The remainder were resettled in other regions of the USSR east of the Urals. In 1946, another nearly 9,000 Crimean Tatars released from military service were sent to places of "special settlement". It is estimated that between 191 and 320 died during the journey from Crimea to the resettlement sites. Yet the real horror awaited the Tatars at the actual deportation sites. Many women were sent to work in cotton fields. In the summertime, the temperature could reach almost 50 degrees Celsius. There was a shortage of water, so they took the water which was being irrigated to the fields. The Tatars were used to clean water from wells. In Uzbekistan, it had to be boiled and often there was nothing to boil it with. Infection and malaria reigned. It is estimated that 20 to 25 per cent of the Tatars who were resettled from Crimea died in the first years. According to the Crimean Tatar movement, this figure may have been even higher.

It is estimated that between 191 and 320 died during the journey from Crimea to the resettlement sites.

The Tatars had the status of being displaced for life. They faced up to 20 years of imprisonment for arbitrarily leaving their places of settlement. In 1945 Crimea's autonomy was abolished. The republic became an oblast (administration region) in the Soviet Union. The entire cultural base of the Crimean Tatars was destroyed. Overall, 1,500 libraries and 860 schools were liquidated, while higher and secondary Tatar-language edu-

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cation was completely eliminated. By 1948, about 90 per cent of the Crimean Tatar place names had been changed.

The struggle to return

Some changes came after Stalin's death. In February 1954, the Crimean region was incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In July of that year the decree punishing the Tatars with 20 years in camps for arbitrarily leaving their places of residence was rescinded. Subsequently, decrees on administrative control over the displaced were also withdrawn. Tatars misunderstood this as permission to return home. Local authorities and the militia quickly explained to them that they still had no right to return or reclaim their property. In the summer of 1956, a delegation of Crimean Tatars travelled to Moscow. They requested to meet with the leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union but were ignored. They therefore articulated their demands in a letter addressed to Mikhail Suslov, who was then in charge of ideology at the Central Committee. In November 1956, the Committee passed the renewal of the national autonomies concerning those deported in 1944. This concerned the Kalmyks, Karachays, Balkars, Chechens and Ingush, but not the Crimean Tatars.

In early 1961, an underground Crimean Tatar Youth Union was established in Tashkent. Among the members was Mustafa Dzhemilev.

In 1957, 14,000 Crimean Tatars signed a letter to the Central Committee demanding the renewal of their rights. This yielded nothing and the only response they received was further repressions. In early 1961, an underground Crimean Tatar Youth Union was established in Tashkent working for the return of the Tatars to their homeland. A few months later, its first two activists were sentenced to seven and five years in prison for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda".

Among the union's members was Mustafa Dzhemilev, then 18 years old and later the leader of the Crimean Tatar national movement. As he recounted in May 2011, most conversations in Crimean Tatar homes in exile revolved around Crimea. It was thanks to them that the identity of the young generation of Tatars growing up outside their homeland was formulated.

"Interestingly, Soviet propaganda did not work on us. We received all the information from our parents," Dzhemilev recalled back in 2011. He was not arrested in 1961 but the convictions of two members of his organization strongly influenced

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him. "I realized then that I would fight to the end to defeat the Soviet authorities. And from that time I began to prepare for prison."

In April 1962, more youth activists were arrested and sentenced, which only strengthened the resistance. Tatars signed petitions, sent letters to Soviet authorities and organized rallies in Uzbekistan. In 1965 Dzhemilev was imprisoned, serving a total of 15 years in the Soviet Union.

Russian repressions led to the emergence of a "more radical" wing in the Crimean Tatar movement, which believed that no changes will happen without the democratization of power. Crimean Tatars thus began to cooperate with Soviet dissidents. According to Dzhemilev, this is how the Crimean Tatar movement became part of a large democratic movement in the USSR.

"We distinguished ourselves from the dissidents by having more support. They could collect a maximum of no more than 200 signatures under their appeals, while we collected tens of thousands. Admittedly, our appeals were not as strident. Unlike the dissidents, if one of us got arrested, all our relatives, friends, all our people tried to support such a person. Whereas Russians, they often forgot about their comrades," Dzhmeilev told me in 2011.

Perhaps it was the determination and sheer size of the Crimean Tatar movement that forced Moscow to change its policy. In 1967, the Soviet authorities issued a decree titled "On citizens of Tatar nationality" that concerned those who lived in Crimea. It erased accusations of treason and restrictions on residence. Mass attempts to return to Crimea followed this decree. The Soviet authorities were frightened by this development and tried to somehow manage the process by restricted it administratively. Yet, the Tatars still tried to settle on the peninsula on their own by buying houses there.

Returning home

The real change came only after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. In July 1987, around 1500 Tatars came out to demonstrate on Moscow's Red Square, calling for a return to Crimea. Despite the reconstruction already underway, this was something unprecedented. The protesters handed a letter addressed to Gorbachev to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which was signed by 30,000 people. Dzhemilev believes that year was to some extent a breakthrough. A commission was formed under the chairmanship of Andrei Gromyko to investigate the complaints and demands of the Tatars. The commission was not so much to bring about a change in the situation but primarily to show some goodwill on behalf of the authorities.

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However, influenced by the further actions of the Tatars, on November 14th 1989, the Supreme Council issued a declaration declaring the forced resettlement unlawful and guaranteeing full restoration of the rights of the deportees. In theory, it obliged the authorities of the republics where Tatars resided to provide assistance to those willing to repatriate. In reality, the Tatars could count on nothing. Nevertheless, the position of the Soviet authorities and the weakening control of the bureaucracy led to the beginning of the mass return of Tatars to Crimea.

At the same time, the Crimean Tatar national movement was also in the process of formalization. On June 26th 1991, an assembly of Crimean Tatar representatives was held in Kyiv, where the formation of the Medjlis was announced. This was declared to be the "highest authorized representative body of the Crimean Tatar people". Significantly, the strategy of the Crimean Tatar movement states that the Tatars will demand autonomy within Ukraine and speak out against Crimea's annexation by Russia. According to Dzhemilev, during the independence referendum in December 1991, the majority of Tatars supported Ukraine's independence.

Once Ukraine's independence was declared, the Ukrainian state officially gave assurances that it favoured the return of Tatars to their homeland. In practice, the returnees faced numerous problems, which were also related to the overall situation in Crimea, where pro-Russian forces had been active since the early 1990s. In fact, after 1991 Crimea became an area of dispute between Russia and Ukraine. In the 1990s, the returning Tatars faced many problems. It was not until 1999 that the issue of granting them Ukrainian citizenship was finally resolved. Other painful topics such as housing and land acquisition arose. A compromise was reached that would see returning Tatars not claim property that had been taken away from them.

Crimean Tatars often demonstrated against restrictions on their rights, but nevertheless remained loyal citizens of the Ukrainian state. The rationale behind this support was that if Crimea was not Ukrainian, it would become Russian. In 2011 when I spoke with Dzhemilev, he was the chairman of the Medjlis in Simferopol. We discussed the relations between the Tatars and the Ukrainian state. He told me how difficult it was for Tatars to be patriots of Ukraine when the state ignores so many of their problems. Yet at the same time he stressed that Crimea is a part of Ukraine and Ukraine is their state.

Destruction of Crimean Tatar independence

In late February 2014, a Russian military operation to seize the peninsula began in Crimea. On February 26th a rally under the slogan "Crimea is Ukraine" was held in front of the parliament building of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which

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was attended by several thousand Tatars. On the night between February 26th and 27th, Russian soldiers without identifying marks occupied the Crimean parliament and government building. The Tatars found themselves targeted by Russian forces from the very beginning. On March 3rd, 39-year-old Reshat Ametov told his family that he was going to enlist as a volunteer in the Ukrainian army. On that day, in the centre of Simferopol a man on Lenin Square in front of the Crimean government building was recorded by cameras. It was Ametov, who was leading a one-man picket against the annexation of Crimea. The footage shows him being approached by several uniformed men from the so-called "Crimean Self-Defence". They tied his hands and forced him into a car. Two weeks later, his body was found with numerous signs of torture.

This was still the period when the Kremlin tried to "bribe" the Tatars. Vladimir Putin even had a half-hour phone conversation with Dzhemilev.

"There was an impression that Putin was looking for a Tatar version of Ramzan Kadyrov (the strongman Chechen leader loyal to the Kremlin – editor's note). This did not work out. They tried to use the Kazan Tatars as intermediaries. The Tatarstan president came to us seven or eight times and told us how good things were in Russia. Our people listened attentively and answered him politely: "You have your way, and we have our way," Dzhmilev told me when we talked in Kyiv in late 2014. In fact, the Russian authorities banned the Medjlis leaders, such as Dzhmilev and Refat Chubar, from entering the peninsula.

Around 50,000 Tatars have fled the peninsula since the annexation in 2014. The Russian repression machine was on overdrive, with blackmail, intimidation and business inspections becoming regular occurrences. By 2016 more than a dozen Crimean Tatars had been kidnapped and some of them are still missing. By then, Russia had fully eliminated the Medjlis from Crimea by issuing a ban on the group's activities. The next stage of repressions was to stir up cases of extremism or terrorism.

By 2016 more than a dozen Crimean Tatars had been kidnapped and some of them are still missing.

What has been left in Crimea is Milli Firka, an organization of Crimean Tatars which after the annexation has remained in opposition to the Medjlis. While there is nothing wrong with opposition in theory, Milli Firka was primarily treated as a pro-Russian institution.

"As one Frenchman said, when there are no traitors, no prostitutes, no drug addicts in a nation, what kind of a nation is it? In our country there are also such people, but for Russia their number is critically small," Dzhemilevi told me in late 2014.

Milli Firka officially supported the Russian annexation. Its head Vasvi Abduraimov explained to me in 2019 that in the "merger" with Russia he saw an opportunity for

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the development of the Crimean nation as part of *Russkiy mir* (Russian world). He explained that this Russian world is a "natural socio-cultural matrix" in which the Tatars have lived since the late 18th century, when "Russia first came here". In his view, Tatars are "saturated with the Russian language, Russian culture, and there is nothing wrong with that", because this does not mean that they forget about their own culture and language. On top of that, Russia promised to do a lot for the Tatars.

"Unfortunately, instead of the steps that the Russian authorities should have taken, we received just some shuffling. Today I can say with full responsibility that for five years the new authorities in Crimea have not fulfilled their promises," Abuduraimov told me with clear disappointment in his voice.

Not to make this view just a general opinion, the head of Milli Firki mentioned very concrete problems. They included the lack of adequate representation of the Tatars in Crimea's authorities, as well as issues concerning education and the failure to solve the land ownership issue. Abuduraimov was especially disappointed with the policies of the Russian authorities when it came to addressing the issues of rehabilitation and autonomy for Tatars in Crimea. Moreover, under the pretext of fighting terrorists, he believes that there are attempts to intimidate people so that they do not dare to protest against what is happening in Crimea.

This harsh criticism of the Russian authorities from a person who supported the Russian operation to annex Crimea in 2014 was surprising to me. But my intuition also tells me that three years later, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he would probably not dare say what he told me back then.

A tragedy that continues

Nariman Dzhelyal, the Medjlis deputy chairman and a charismatic intellectual, was one of the few Crimean Tatars who stayed in Crimea after the peninsula's annexation. And he stayed for quite some time. Such people are particularly "dangerous" to the Russian system. All the more so when they speak of the universal dimension of ethnic cleansing, which was also the case during the 1944 deportation.

"The deportation of the Crimean Tatars but also the deportations of many other peoples in the Soviet Union are tragic events with huge meaning not only to us. They are important for all of humanity. We should finally learn to live in peace, so that blood is not shed today in Ukraine, Syria or Palestine. So that people are not killed in mosques or in churches, as is happening today. So that the Uighurs are not persecuted like they are in China. So that people finally learn to hear each other. And that is why we, not only for ourselves, but for all of humanity, we try not to forget this day. We mark it, talk about it, even shout about it, so that every-

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one understands the depth of this tragedy, this crime, and that we can finally learn something," Dzhelyal said on May 18th 2019.

Two years later, Dzhelyal was arrested along with four other Crimean Tatars. They were accused of blowing up a gas pipeline in Crimea. In 2022, Dzhelyal was sentenced to 17 years in a maximum security penal colony. In addition to his sentence, he received a Stalinist-style ban on his movement for one and a half years.

In early 2024, Ukrainian human rights organizations reported that since the beginning of the annexation, there have been 307 cases of court persecutions for political reasons in Crimea. According to the statistics, 206 of them have involved Crimean Tatars, with 99 of them now sentenced to long prison terms. Evidently, the situation has only worsened since the start of the full-scale invasion and Crimean Tatars are victims of this aggression as well. NE

Some of the quoted statements were previously published by New Eastern Europe, Ukrainsky Zhurnal and Outriders.

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What remains

ARIEL ROSÉ

A native language has a clear and unique grip on an individual. While it is possible to learn others, it is perhaps impossible to escape the unique issue of identity when we discuss our first language. After all, we do not choose the language taught to us by our family.

"What remains?" asks German journalist Günter Gaus of Hannah Arendt during a 1964 television interview. The transcript of this conversation is well known in English, and Arendt's famous answer is most often rendered as "What remains? Language remains." However, what Arendt really says is *"Was bleibt? Es bleibt die Muttersprache." Muttersprache* means mother tongue, or in the patriarchal Polish, "father tongue". Italians say *Madrelingua*. In Ukrainian, it is *рідна мова*, or literally, native speech. It is a language we do not choose.

Why does Arendt and this interview come to mind? While in Paris I found a book of Arendt's poems in French translation called *Heureux celui qui n'a pas de patrie* [Happy is the one who has no country], an almost exact borrowing of the phrase by Nietzsche, so it seemed to that immigrant thinker. However, Nietzsche meant the opposite: *"Wohl dem, der eine Heimat hat"* [Happy is the one who has a home]. This seemingly minor mistake saves Arendt or is a source of liberating irony for someone who found her refuge first in the German thought of Martin Heidegger and then Karl Jaspers. After emigrating to France, Arendt then found herself in New York and spoke English with a strong German accent for the rest of her life. Despite everything, the German language forever remained her "home".

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Closer to the heart

It was similar for the Jewish poets Paul Celan and Rose Ausländer. Both were from Chernivtsi, a town that changed owners many times. When they were born, Chernivtsi belonged to Austria-Hungary, a great multinational state that had many *Muttersprachen*. Later it passed into Romanian and then Soviet hands. Ausländer, like Arendt, found herself in New York. She also wrote in English. There is a certain affinity between Ausländer and the Ukrainian poet Iryna Vikyrchak, who currently is writing her doctorate on Ausländer.

On my laptop screen I see Iryna's dusky face, brown eyes and gathered-up dark hair. She tells me about her linguistic background. She is sitting in an armchair in a room with an enormous dark red curtain that is probably supposed to stop the insistent Calcutta sun from coming through the window. However, the curtain is unable to stop the choking air and pollution, likely the source of Iryna's cough. Coughing, she tells me how her paternal grandparents came from a small town on the Romanian-Ukrainian border. Although they spoke Romanian themselves, they did not pass the language on. They taught Iryna's father to speak Russian, as they regarded it a more prestigious language, which in turn her father did not pass on. Thus this was a relay *à rebours*. Iryna grew up in a home where Ukrainian was spoken. Her father had a dual identity: he was Alexander in Russian, and Oleksandr in Ukrainian.

> Iryna grew up speaking Ukrainian, but her father had a dual identity: Alexander in Russian, and Oleksandr in Ukrainian.

The Ukrainian town of Zalishchyky, where Iryna was born, has strong ties with Poland. The prominent Polish interwar writers Stanisław Stempowski and Maria Dąbrowska spent summers together there. It was a spa town. "There was a *luxtorpeda* [express] train going straight from Gdynia to Zalishchyky," Iryna recounts, wearing nothing more than a sleeveless dark top, sipping water every now and then, while I wrap myself more tightly in a blanket, also sitting in an armchair, but in an unheated Roman villa at my writing residency.

Although Iryna was wrapped in the Ukrainian language like I with my blanket, and even attended Ukrainian school, the cold air of the Russian language was present. At summer camp Ukrainian-speaking children were bullied by Russian-speaking children. When Iryna was 16 she left for the United States. Upon her return she noticed that Russian had taken over the television, like a fog that crept silently into the air. Her mother, who always protected her Ukrainian identity and responded to Russian inventions rhetorically – "Why do we need this? From Moscow?" – sent her daughter to extra Russian classes, saying, "You'll find it useful."

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Iryna alternates mainly between Ukrainian, Polish and English. What did that Russian ever do for her? But Iryna asks herself a different question. Instead of asking what she can do for poetry she asks "What can poetry do for me?" It is as if she wants to turn one of the bridges over the Tiber upside down. For her poetry becomes a bunker, an asylum, a shelter. It provides her with a possibility for painful expression, however, not in Ukrainian, but in English. Iryna wants to speak about the tragic events of the war directly to the world, hence the poem I chose for an evening of Ukrainian poetry in Warsaw. She wrote in English, "Luckily, I have no one in Mariupol / fortunately / otherwise my heart would blow up / it is not big enough / to ever contain Mariupol." But later, after she read the poem in Ukrainian at a festival in Athens where it brought her to tears, she realized that English was just a buffer. She concludes our conversation by stating that "The mother tongue is closer to the heart."

Intimacy of language

I log off and go for a run. I run along the Tiber which in Rome is grasped by one word in Italian, *Lungotevere*. I count the bridges. Five. Six. Behind the seventh hanging on the wall are plaques with poems by various poets who paid homage to the city called eternal (for the time being). Rose Ausländer's German poem *"Rom"* ("Rome") from the volume *Italien mein immerland* is barely visible underneath some graffiti in a different language. The artist spared Nora Moll's Italian translation. How did this Jewish poet from Chernivtsi, author of the volume *Denn wo ist Heimat?* feel on the Tiber river? I recall Iryna's words from our recent conversation: "You know, for the first time in my life, here in Calcutta, I feel at home." But perhaps it is the sense of security and her 16-month-old son Alexandre that give her this force of gravity.

For Iryna, poetry becomes a bunker, an asylum, a shelter. It provides her with a possibility for painful expression.

I return to my hilltop. I walk through the *Giardino degli Aranci* where I hear the murmur of words in various languages spoken by tourists. *"A las cinco." "Nie tamtędy." "Vorrei sedermi lì." "Ost til lunsj."* "I wanted to go to Saint Peter's, you know, but it was so crowded, there was a line all the way around the square."

What is the intimacy of language? The trees have crowns filled with flowers and only occasionally do bitter oranges show up like jewels. I enter the residence for Scandinavian writers, where I work as a Norwegian poet. The Finnish composer Eero Hämeenniemi greets me in the kitchen and recalls how the Swedish lan-

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guage used to push out Finnish. Few people know that the former Finnish prime minister speaks a rare dialect from the Tampere area, but Eero knows because he speaks the same dialect. This is like Jean Améry, about whom Sofia Andrukhovych later tells me while sitting with her short hair and mop of bangs on the bed in her daughter's room in Kyiv, complete with a poster of "Fantastic Mr. Fox" on the blue walls. When Améry was imprisoned in Belgium and a Nazi officer entered his cell speaking his dialect, a tiny, almost microscopic dialect, for a moment this Jewish Austrian writer felt at home, as if he had met a relative with whom he shared a common, intimate language. But this was an enemy, one of those who tortured the writer, who "hated brute force", as Adam Zagajewski wrote. Now Russian soldiers who speak the same Russian as many of the residents of eastern Ukraine are coming to "liberate" them by killing them.

For Sofia, Ukrainian is an intimate language. Ukrainian is "a territory where I feel fully myself," she adds. According to Deleuze and Guattari, territory is a semiotic structure, "a regime of signs". Therefore, language is one of the most effective tools to constitute a territory. Consequently, language plays a pivotal role in the formation of politics and the objectification of others. Canetti saw language as an instrument for imposing power and subjugating others by dictating orders to them. Very often it is an order to escape – to escape death, as the one who has power has the ability to take another's life. For Canetti this does not constitute the essence of language (after all, he himself used this instrument for completely different purposes), but he paid attention to the power of command and authority that lies in language. The only way out is de-individualization or de-territorialization, as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari wanted. This is a kind of linguistic nomadism. The Ternopil poet Yury Zavadsky sees the situation similarly. He recognizes the dependence of power based on language and the trauma associated with it, but at the same time he imagines the creation of a federation in Ukraine where multiple languages would exist side by side, not just Russian and Ukrainian.

Element of identity

Sofia's linguistic background also is not uniform, although she identifies most strongly with Ukrainian. Her maternal grandmother came to Ukraine from Russia with her husband, and she never learned Ukrainian. Today she is 93 years old and still cannot pass a Ukrainian language test, unable to say correctly, *palyanytsa* (*паляниця*), which means bread with a burnt crust (*пали́ти*, *palyty*, meaning "to burn" or "to scorch"). Sofia was five years old when she visited her grandparents in Chernihov (*Чернігів*) and was speaking Russian when she returned home.

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"Why are you speaking Russian?" her paternal grandfather asked her. "After all, you are Ukrainian." That was the moment when she understood that language was an element of identity. This situation repeated itself between her husband and her seven-year-old daughter, who attends Ukrainian school. Even though the lessons are conducted in Ukrainian, at recess and outside of school the children speak to each other in Russian. "Why are you speaking Russian?" Sofia's husband asked. "Are you ashamed of Ukrainian?" Despite acquiring this linguistic awareness, her daughter was unable to express what she saw in the photos from Bucha. "Describe to me what you saw," Sofia asked her daughter in order to free her from the trauma of witnessing it. "It's too horrible to name, it's the worst thing I've ever seen." For some experiences, there is no language…

"Colonization was in many regards a co-production of colonizers and colonized," Achille Mbembe writes.

"Colonization was in many regards a co-production of colonizers and colonized," Achille Mbembe writes in his new book *Out of the Dark Night*. What does he mean by this? "Both sides together, but from different positions, they forged a past. But having a past in common does not necessarily mean sharing it," he says. In the case of Ukraine, the colonizer was the Soviet Union (and earlier the Russian Empire). Zavadsky was 15 when he realized that the Russian literature surrounding him was that of the occupier, and he rejected it.

"In school they tortured us with Pushkin," he tells me over the phone, sitting in his hometown of Ternopil. I am in Berlin, and every day I cross the eastern and western sides whose past was divided by a wall. Before Ukraine gained independence in the 1990s, "I lived in a state that was not very independent," Yury admits, adding that "Ukrainians felt like indigenous Americans on a reservation." The comparison is probably rooted in Yury's reading. The books on his shelf are mostly in Ukrainian, but also a few in Polish, including one by Thor Heyerdahl, the Norwegian ethnographer and traveller who sailed to Polynesia on the famous Kon-Tiki raft.

I sometimes took the ferry past the Kon-Tiki Museum between my former home on the Nesodden peninsula and Oslo, and I was puzzled by this need to reconstruct someone else's existence. Was it an attempt to capture a classification, or an approximation of a classification? Was it done for our need or theirs? Can we truly touch someone else's feelings or experience? Between history written in Russian and history written in Ukrainian, Yury chose the second option. He had a weakness for Mayakovsky until his teacher introduced him to Ukrainian Futurism.

Yury was always closer to Polish than Russian. In 1998 he could choose a second language to study. "And what did you choose?" asked his grandmother, to whom he admitted, "Polish". "What for!?" she cried. Russian was the official language and

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the language of television. One needed to know Russian. It was good manners. Yury tells me about a Russian-Ukrainian dictionary that was going around at that time. It was supposed to prove that the two languages were so similar that it was not worth using Ukrainian. Or better yet, one should use Russified Ukrainian, and say *"spasibi"* instead of *"dyakuyu"*.

"It was difficult to keep the language clean," Yury says. I imagine the language as a stone path through a garden, like the one at my residency which the gardener sweeps clean daily from dry, fallen leaves and twigs with thorns, one of which I once stepped on when returning home.

Essence through language

The Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy sees the mosaic nature of the legacy of Ukraine as being a borderland from the very beginning. This borderland included Ottoman, Polish and Ruthenian territories. "Modern Ukraine includes lands that were well beyond the reach of ancient Rus'," as Timothy Snyder opens with during his 11th lecture on the formation of Ukrainian identity, "but well within the ambit of ancient Greek, Byzantine, Ottoman, and perhaps most importantly Crimean Tatar power".

Yuliya learned three languages at the same time: Ukrainian, Russian and Polish. She moves seamlessly between them.

At the same time, the borders were not stationary; they moved like vipers. For example, Yuliya Musakovska's family lived in Poland until the Second World War, only to later "switch places" with my family, who then lived in and around Lviv. Until the war, Yuliya's family spoke Polish. After being resettled into the Ternopil region, they began speaking Ukrainian, "and of course Russian", she points out. On the other hand, her maternal grandfather came from a large Armenian community that lived in Baku and arrived in Lviv with the Red Army, where he met the woman who became Yuliya's grandmother, and stayed. They spoke Russian at home, but Yuliya adds that he had a decent command of Ukrainian.

So Yuliya learned three languages at the same time: Ukrainian, Russian and Polish. She moved seamlessly between them, as if they were rooms. However, she regrets that her grandfather did not teach her Armenian, claiming that it would be of no use to her. Russian literature was present in the house but Yuliya tells me that she never connected with it. She preferred Pavlo Tikhina and Lesya Ukrainka to Dostoevsky and Akhmatova. She never established a real relationship with the Russian language, like a person to bond with for life, and there was never any spark

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between them. The few poems in Russian she wrote when she was still at school were pale and artificial. She feels that in Ukrainian they are real.

It was different for Iryna Shuvalova, who joins me from China, sitting in her high school office where she counsels students who are experiencing difficult emotional and psychological situations. On the wall behind her hang postcards from all over the world, including several from Ukraine. One is from Odesa, and one is of the Dnieper river. And there is a photo of three open hands with heart-shaped radishes cut in half. The hands belong to Iryna, her mother and her daughter. The hands form a triangle. Iryna's mother is from Sumy in eastern Ukraine, while her mother, on the other hand, was in a labour camp in Germany. Then she was in Poland with the Soviet army and learned Russian. Actually, she spoke a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, which is called *surzhyk* in Ukraine. And so Iryna spoke Ukrainian with her grandfather, and *surzhyk* with her grandmother.

"How's your *surzhyk*?" Iryna recently challenged her daughter Mariana, who learned Russian in school because that is what the other children expected of her. For Iryna, that memory from 2004 is a trauma. But trauma can be covered by a dream in which…

so we too
forget to hate as we sleep
and simply grow like grass
covering the earth
with our clinging brittle
superfluous
*love,**

… as she writes in the poem "Vesper". I would like to ask Artur Dron, a young poet who is on the front lines, about the language of love. But he has not responded for several days to my Facebook message. Love, in his poem "after a long battle, vomits under a tree":

Sometimes love
closes dear friends' eyes.
Wraps friends in sleeping bags
and carries them out.
Love never fails,
like prophecies that end,
like the gift of language
that will perish,
like knowing that will fail.

* Translation by Uilleam Blacker

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When the artillery goes silent,
friends will close love's eyes.
They will wrap love in a sleeping bag
and carry it out.
We will meet love
face-to-face. *

I worry that he is not responding. I send a message to his mother, who added me on Facebook, but I do not hear back from her either. I am anxious. I get a message on Tinder instead. So I go on a date with an Italian theatre director. We speak a little English, a little Italian. Like a couple from J. M. Coetzee's new book – a Polish composer and a Spanish fan talk in global English. Coetzee published the book first in Spanish to break the global monopoly of English. Sara sits across from me and records a message with her phone to a friend: *"ho lasciato il mio grosso orecchino a casa tua"* [I left my ugly earring at your house] and shows me the earring mark on her left earlobe. Maybe the right words are earring holes?

Man is the main content of language as long as his spiritual essence and, language itself, meet, and man expresses this essence through language. Thus argued Walter Benjamin, an advocate for the possibility of spiritual translation between languages. His younger, yet no longer so young, colleague Giorgio Agamben sees in language the power of the sacred, provided we assume that the word is an oath between us and God. Today, this oath often loses its force, which Agamben notes. However, it is possible for the intellect to do the work to bring the edges of metaphysics and physics together, *Styx interfusa*. I am looking at the brisk current of the Tiber when a message from Olga Dron comes in: "Yes, Artur is in position."

Postscriptum: Listening on Zoom to Iya Kiva reading a poem about war

Yesterday we listened on Zoom as Iya Kiva
read a poem in Kyiv where the golden
caps of the Orthodox churches did not run to the shelters,
we listened from our homes,
nearly everyone, listened,
and we were all eyes, as if there was
nothing else, just eyes, as if we wanted
to protect her with our eyes with which we absorbed
every word while Babyn Yar burned in the background,

* Translation by the author

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but memory does not burn, we trust, memory is rustproof,
memory will survive, hibernate like a mole,
all of us, a thousand people on Zoom,
two thousand eyes, wanted to hold
an umbrella of air over Iya,
shield her with our gaze,
when she finished reading, I raised my head,
on the table was a book from the library,
Emil Cioran's La Tentation d'Exister,
the hills held Bergen in their lap,
the first crocuses were in bloom, everyone
was looking forward to spring.

Translation from Polish by Frank L. Vigoda

ariel rosé is a poet, essayist and illustrator who is originally from Poland, a resident of Norway and based in Berlin.

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In Croatia, ecology and art mend the wounds of the past

TATJANA ĐORĐEVIĆ

At the age of 36, Vladimir Miketa retains few memories of the war and his past. However, what bothers him most is people's attitude towards the environment in his area and how authorities manage waste in the region. As a passionate mountaineer and nature lover, he often explores the surrounding area during his hikes. It was during one of these excursions that he discovered a road leading to the village of Lončari.

Before the war in Croatia between 1991 and 1995, the small village of Lončari, situated in the central part of the country and belonging to Zadar County, was home to approximately 120 people, primarily of Serbian nationality. After they fled in 1995 following the military operation "Storm", during which the Croatian army liberated a significant portion of territory previously under the control of Serbian rebels, the homes inhabited by Serbians remained abandoned for years. Many of these homes were used as stables by local residents, who kept goats and sheep in them.

In 2010, Nikola Lončar returned to the village from Serbia with his wife. They endured difficult living conditions without electricity. A decade later, another Serbian family with two children also returned, coinciding with the arrival of electricity in the village and the paving of the four-kilometre road from the main highway.

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Marko Simić, of Serbian origin, purchased a house and estate in Lončari in 2011, unaware of the existence of a trail near his property leading to the picturesque Bijela river canyon, which was strewn with glass shards. In addition to glass, the trail was littered with other types of rubbish, much of it originating from the abandoned houses, consisting mainly of large amounts of waste and construction materials that are products of nearby tourism development close to the coast.

Birth of the "It's Not Too Late" project

Vladimir Miketa was only nine years old when he, along with his family, fled Bosnia due to the war. After a brief period as Croatian refugees in Germany, his father decided to buy a house in Zadar, the capital city of Zadar County. This region encompasses much of northern Dalmatia and borders Bosnia and Herzegovina to the east, where a high percentage of the population was once Serbian. Today, at the age of 36, Vladimir retains few memories of the war and his past. However, what bothers him most is people's attitude towards the environment in his area and how authorities manage waste in the region. As a passionate mountaineer and nature lover, he often explores the surrounding area during his hikes. It was during one of these excursions that he discovered a road leading to the village of Lončari.

> What bothers Vladimir most are attitudes towards the environment and how the authorities manage waste in the region.

"Walking on that broken glass, I came up with the idea for an artistic short film," Miketa says. Josip Miočić, another passionate mountaineer, has been frequenting the Bijela river canyon for about ten years with friends to practice climbing. He has always wondered where all the glass on the road came from. "We have dogs, and it's interesting to note that none of them have ever been cut because someone has smoothed out the glass with a bulldozer," Miočić says.

Titled "It's Not Too Late", this short film, released in 2019, features a pregnant woman giving birth to a child on a waste dump. It serves as a powerful indictment of neglect and disregard for the environment.

"I shot this film right on that glass-covered path," Miketa explains, adding that he imagines a future in which humanity fails to heed the warnings of scientists, and the last person is born among the waste. "I wanted to convey all the anger, helplessness and agony I felt every time I walked in that area."

The waste in the area is swept away every time it rains, ending up in drinking water, fields, and the nearby sea. The documentary's message is clear, as its author says: "People must not allow it to be too late."

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Ecological actions around an important social theme

Due to the lack of support from the local municipality in addressing the degradation of nature, Marko Simić took action by founding the Lončari Association for the Promotion of Environmental Protection, Nature Conservation, Sustainable Development and Tourism in 2016. This organization spearheaded its inaugural ecological endeavour in 2020, dubbed "It's Not Too Late," aiming to clean up the trail leading to the Bijela river canyon. In 2022, Lončari secured initial funding from the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, alongside two other NGOs. Collaborating with locals, members of the Paklenica climbing sports club and additional volunteers, they launched an international public call for artists. This call underscored the crucial role of seagrass beds in the broader ecosystem and tackled environmental pollutants head on.

The Bijela river in the Dalmatia region of Croatia is a unique phenomenon, originating from a cave at approximately 300 metres above sea level. Its canyon is a rare example of dissolved limestone, which lends it a distinctive white colour, from which it derives its name. Above the river's stream, there are towering rocks, some reaching heights of 300 metres, offering numerous climbing routes including highlining and other similar sports. Due to its specific nature and geographical position near the Novigrad and Karin seas, which are rich in sea flora, this location is highly attractive to nature enthusiasts, athletes and tourists.

The Lončari Association also advocated for a petition regarding water supply for their village in 2020. This action was prompted by the village's exclusion from a major water supply project designated for a nearby Croatian-populated village. Following this, a fascist symbol and anti-Serb graffiti appeared on the road leading to Lončari.

Looking back to the past, the events surrounding Operation Storm in 1995 are viewed differently in Belgrade, Serbia's capital, where it is considered a tragedy due to the massive displacement of Serbian civilians from Croatia, with over 220,000 people forced to leave. Only a small percentage of Serbians have returned to their homes since. Conversely, the official Croatian narrative portrays Operation Storm as the nation's greatest triumph, commemorated annually on August 5th as Liberation Day. The village is still lacking a programme for water supply development.

"On accepting the undesirable"

No one is sure where all that glass that remained there after the war in 1991–95 comes from. There have been two more ecological actions, one in 2022 and the last

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one in 2023. Over 500 volunteers from across the country, as well as from abroad, came to contribute to this project. These ecological projects brought together not only Croats, Serbs and Bosnian refugees living in the area, but also a diverse population from around the nation, including artists, students, environmentalists, hikers, associations and organizations, all rallying around an important ecological and social theme.

Davorka Perić, the art director and curator of the international public call titled "On Accepting the Undesirable", launched last year, explains that the main idea was to focus attention on the problems faced by local people, highlighting their values and potential, and to involve all those living in the area, as well as those who had participated in the ecological action.

"We invited the artists and collectives to use the glass waste collected from the location, the experience of people who worked together on waste collection, the fishing tradition and culture related to fishing heritage, and the natural and cultural heritage of this area as the elements for the creation of the artistic work," Perić, who is of Serbian origin and resides in Zagreb, explains. "We received more than 46 applications from around the world, and the jury consisting of artists chose the proposal of American artist Dodd Holsapple from Santa Monica."

The collected glass waste is used by Holsapple to create a drywall with a mosaic of eels in the shape of a ring that will form a space for sitting, hanging out or talking, with a diameter of nine metres. He was a guest for one month at the Lončari village, which in the meantime became a place with international educational and artist in residence programmes, together with a platform for aggregating cultural initiatives around art and environment. This last group is called Pueblo Escondido and is run by Marko Simić.

The collected glass waste is used to create a mosaic in the shape of a ring that will form a space for sitting.

"Creatively developing the concept of the project, I considered how to best use the collected glass waste in a public art installation. The difficult question was how recycled glass scraps can be effectively used in art while maintaining the spirit of environmental protection and public art. I focused on a design that would avoid creating a process that is wasteful or requires additional significant resources," Holsapple says.

The inspiration for the creation of the circular form, as explained by the artist, draws on ancient historical figures such as snakes, dragons and lizards. The proposal emphasizes cyclical energy and symbolic spiritual regeneration, which is seamlessly incorporated into the authentic local context through the circular shape adorned with an illustration of the eel species, characteristic of this area.

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One of the completed art installations which was made from the glass. The inspiration for the creation of the circular form, as explained by the artist, draws on ancient historical figures such as snakes, dragons and lizards. It emphasizes cyclical energy and symbolic spiritual regeneration, which is seamlessly incorporated into the authentic local context.

The experts from the ReStruct Group of the Delft University of Technology in Holland helped examine the usability of the glass that was collected after several years of exposure to external influences. The ReStruct Group is a multi-disciplinary teaching and research group exploring the next generation of safe, sustainable and elegant structures. In addition, the Faculty of Civil Engineering in Rijeka, Croatia was consulted on stabilization techniques for the drywall and the adhesion of natural hydraulic lime and glass waste for the implementation of the mosaic. At the same time, the installation was built with cut-offs of the stone that were the result of waste from local commercial stone and production processes.

As art production supervisor, Jagoda Cupać, PhD, research associate at the Institute of Building Construction, Faculty of Civil Engineering, TU Dresden, advised on the application of glass waste in the art installation Sea Glass Again and took care that additional materials introduced in the nature protected area are chosen with respect for the local environment and building heritage. For the base of the glass mosaic, representing also the main structure of the ring-shaped bench, the team chose stone off-cuts from the local quarry and stone processing plant. The ring was built using a drywall technique, led by the association Dragodid which specialises in education and interpretation of drywall heritage, and supported by local craftsmen and volunteers.

"Much of the glass waste collected in Lončari remains. Researchers from TU Delft who specialise in cast glass applications using all kinds of glass waste, tested the casting properties on the samples of glass waste from Lončari, as received, i.e. including contaminations from the site, and cleaned. The tests showed that dec-

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ades of outdoor exposure did not compromise the casting properties of the glass. It can easily be recycled into new glass bottles, or up-cycled into building blocks with high compressive strength", Jagoda says.

The production of the installation took place across several workshops. The glass separation process involved students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, while the drywall construction workshop received expert guidance from members of the Dragodid NGO, the primary organization in Croatia dedicated to drywall preservation.

"We educate the local population through ecological actions"

Ivan Matić, an ecologist and activist from Obrovac, the nearest town where the majority of the population is Croatian, emphasizes that all ecological initiatives contribute to integration. These initiatives bring people together around a common idea, where identity and issues of national belonging become insignificant.

"We provide this space for nature lovers who, through ecological actions, educate the local population," Matić says and adds that this project had a positive impact on the environment and the community.

"We removed a significant amount of pollution from the Bijela river. Through this project we have raised awareness of environmental issues, promoted sustainable practices and spread knowledge of the importance of seagrass beds." On the other hand, Juraj Aras, the director of the Verrdi Theatre in Zadar and one of the initiators of this project, argues for caution in introducing the values of civilization to a deeply traumatized and long-neglected area.

These initiatives bring people together around a common idea, where identity and national belonging become insignificant.

"The reconciliation between Croats and Serbs living here can happen through a process of mediation, and when we stop identifying who belongs to which nation," Aras suggests.

The "It's Not Too Late" project was among the fifty finalists of the New European Bauhaus Prizes 2024. It was placed in the category of reconnecting with nature, and it was the only project selected from Croatia.

This competition, organized and supported by the European Commission, exemplifies beautiful, sustainable and inclusive real-life projects and encourages the younger generation to develop new concepts and ideas. From the first edition held in 2021 until the most recent one, over 4,500 applications have been received from European countries and 52 winners have been awarded up to this year.

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The "It's Not Too Late" project may not have won an award, but its founders and believers have already achieved a victory by transforming the once-abandoned village into a thriving community. "Through public eco-actions and art installations, our aim is to raise awareness among the local community and tourists about the importance of the environment, aiming to solve complex post-conflictual social problems," Simić says. He adds that their goal is to pursue similar projects in the future and establish partnerships with foundations and international organizations sharing the same values and goals. EE

Tatjana Dordevic is an award-winning Serbian journalist and writer based in Milan. She writes for *Al Jazeera Balkans*, BBC News in Serbian, the Croatian weekly newspaper *Novosti* and the Italian daily newspaper *La Stampa*. She served as the chairperson of the Milan Foreign Press Association from 2020 to 2022. In June 2021, she published the book *Il Pioniere* (in Italian), edited by Besa Muci Editore. She has been a chairperson of the Foreign Press Association in Milan since March 2024.

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Bosnia and Herzegovina has been misunderstood for too long

JP O'MALLEY

Bosnia and Herzegovina's ambition to join the European Union faces a complex reality despite optimistic declarations from Brussels. The author and political scientist Jasmin Mujanović believes that the deeply entrenched ethnic and political divisions within Bosnia and Herzegovina are too often overlooked by the West. His latest book *The Bosniaks: Nationhood after Genocide*, gives greater insight into this complex history.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is keen to join the European Union. In Brussels the feeling is mutual. "Your place is in our European family," said EU Council President Charles Michel on Twitter/X late last March. The post was much ado about nothing, though, warns Jasmin Mujanović. "Banal sloganeering about EU membership is completely divorced from the political realities of Bosnia and Herzegovina," the political scientist writes in *The Bosniaks*: *Nationhood After Genocide*.

The book begins in March 1992 when Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – with an overwhelming majority within Bosnia voting in favour. The result was condemned, however, by Bosnian Serbs. Their then leader, Radovan Karadžić (currently serving a life sentence in prison for genocide and crimes against humanity) tried, but failed, to carve out a "Greater Serbia" from the former communist federal state.

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Photo courtesy of Jasmin Mujanović

Jasmin Mujanović author of the recent book The Bosniaks: Nationhood after Genocide in which he writes on how in the 1990s the struggle for recognition and equality within Bosnia and Herzegovina would prompt the most significant round of extermination and expulsion against the Bosniak community in its history.

Complicated beginnings

Mujanović was then five years old and living in the Bosnian capital. He was born into a non-practicing Bosnian Muslim family. His parents, a doctor and an engineer, were part of Sarajevo's secular educated middle class, who came of age during Tito's Yugoslavia.

"We fled Sarajevo in April 1992," he recalls to me. "First, my family and I were in refugee centres in Croatia, then we went on to Slovenia, then Germany, but by the time the war was winding down in 1995, my parents did not want to return to Bosnia," adds Mujanović. He is currently a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Newlines Institute, a nonpartisan strategy and policy think tank in Washington DC.

"They believed in the socialist slogans – like brotherhood and unity – that the old Yugoslavia stood for, and they struggled with its dissolution, so we emigrated to Vancouver, Canada, and I later moved to Los Angeles."

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It was in the United States that Bosnia's political future was decided. During the Clinton administration, the Dayton Peace Accords were brokered in late November 1995 by the American diplomat Richard Holbrooke at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio. The Accords were signed by the respective leaders of Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia on December 14th 1995 – marking the beginning of the end of the Bosnian War (1992–95), which resulted in 100,000 deaths and the displacement of more than two million people. Mujanović, who is also the author of the 2018 book *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*, claims the Clinton administration could have been tougher on the Bosnian War's main sponsor and aggressor. This was namely Serbia, led by its then President Slobodan Milošević.

"Concern for the Milošević regime was greater than any sense of justice for the liberation of Bosnia," says Mujanović. "Even after the fall of Srebrenica – the single greatest atrocity committed in Europe since the Holocaust – the US actively protected the strategic interests of Serbia."

During the frantic last-minute negotiations at Dayton, Milošević, along with the then president of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, and the West, effectively engineered the de facto internal partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Like all peace agreements, compromise and realpolitik were necessary to save lives and keep the peace. Still, the results were imperfect. So, too, was the complicated Bosnian constitution that emerged in the wake of Dayton.

Downward trajectory

Supporters of the Bosnia and Herzegovina government, which included Bosniaks and Bosnian-oriented Serbs and Croats, were able to preserve the country as a sovereign state. In exchange, they agreed to significant internal administrative divisions of the Bosnian state and the introduction of expansive ethnic provisos and quotas within its governance. The Croat nationalist camp, after giving up their breakaway "Herceg-Bosnia" territory, already on the verge of collapse after 1994, received a high degree of self-rule in the newly minted Federation entity. The Serb nationalist camp gave up their Greater Serbia secessionist project. In return, they were granted the majority Serb Orthodox-populated Republika Srpska (RS) entity, which was formally incorporated into the constitutional regime of the post-war Bosnian state.

Today, in the Global Perceptions Corruption Index, Bosnia and Herzegovina is ranked in 108th place. Mujanović believes issues of corruption must be addressed internally if the country is to prosper economically and socially. But that is not

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happening. The unemployment rate in Bosnia and Herzegovina stands at roughly 13 per cent. The country also has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, estimated to be nearly 40 per cent. "Bosnia and Herzegovina may not yet be a failed state per se, but it is clearly on a downward trajectory," he says.

Meaningful reform of Bosnia-Herzegovina's contemporary politics, however, requires a thorough liberalization of its constitution, the political scientist insists: "Bosnia and Herzegovina needs a constitutional regime in line with the European Convention on Human Rights." Last August, the EHCR agreed. The Strasbourg court ruled in favour of a complaint by Slaven Kovačević, an adviser to Željko Komšić, the Croat member of the tripartite presidency, who complained to the body about being constitutionally barred from taking part in the vote concerning the Serb part of the presidency.

According to the current Bosnian constitution, a Bosniak and a Croat must be elected presidents in the Bosniak-Croat federation and a Serb must be voted in as president of Republika Srpska. This legal provision prevents members of any other ethnic or religious groups from running for office in those positions. Also, Bosniaks and Croats residing in Republika Srpska or Serbs residing in the Bosniak-Croat federation cannot run for office or vote in their respective place of residence. The ruling that emerged from the "Kovačević v. Bosnia and Herzegovina" case in the ECHR "essentially said that it is not permissible for ethnicity to be at the centre of a political and constitutional regime," Mujanović says.

Yet ethnicity is impossible to avoid when addressing the tumultuous, bloody history of the Western Balkans – a point Mujanović reiterates in his latest book. The title alone says it all really: *The Bosniaks: Nationhood after Genocide*. In the opening pages, the author poses a pertinent question: who are the Bosniaks?

"I define the Bosniak community as those who support Bosnia and Herzegovina as a distinct sovereign polity and maintain the existence of an accompanying distinct Bosnian cultural and linguistic identity," the author explains. "[Bosniaks] though predominantly (culturally) Muslim, maintain claims to a pre-Islamic and pre-Christian past, which is also cited as conceptual proof of their ancestral belonging in the historic Bosnian lands."

Broader historical context

Mujanović claims that the West does not appreciate this complex history and has typically viewed the Bosniak community exclusively through the prism of religiosity, which creates its own problems. "If you were reading western newspapers when the Bosnian War and the Bosnian genocide happened in the 1990s, it was

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always presented as this conflict between Serbs, Croats and Muslims," Mujanović tells me. "This [Muslim label] has skewed some of the debates and conversations about contemporary Bosnian politics, which led me to write a book that explores the complex layers of Bosniak identity."

This is all linked to the multi-ethnic history of the region. Mujanović points out that 19th-century Ottoman Bosnia was still a quasi-feudal regime. By 1831 the political and social position of the Bosniaks and other indigenous Muslim-majority communities in the Balkans was precarious. The Ottoman Empire was weakening, as was its hold on the region, and rising in its midst were new, virulently sectarian Christian nationalist movements which sought to expel both the Ottomans and local Muslims alike.

A sea change in the Western Balkans occurred when the Ottoman Empire collapsed. Officially, that happened in 1922 but its demise began much earlier. Out of its wreckage came the creation of new nation states and a new form of aggressive sectarian identity. From the collapse of the Ottoman administration in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 to the end of the Second World War, "the Bosniak community experienced a period of sustained, then rapid, collective political marginalization, accompanied by successive rounds of targeted violence by Serb nationalists," Mujanović explains.

Like most history in the Western Balkans, nothing is straightforward and without contradictions and paradoxes.

The author also points to the broader historical context. The three decades between 1918 and 1945 were marked by the establishment of the first Yugoslav state, which saw Bosnia and Herzegovina go through four successive partitions, and finally the brutality of fascist occupation. This saw the Bosniak community "reduced to the status of a marginal political factor in their own homeland". Yet, like most history in the Western Balkans, nothing is straightforward and without contradictions and paradoxes.

The Yugoslav communist period (1945–1989), for instance, saw socio-economic improvement for Bosnia and Bosniaks. "But those ethnic tensions within Yugoslavia never really went away," says Mujanović. "Even though the Bosniaks were becoming the majority community within Bosnia and Herzegovina, they were massively underrepresented as a whole."

This brings Mujanović to discuss the third and final theme of his book. This is namely how by the 1990s that same struggle for recognition and equality within Bosnia and Herzegovina would prompt the most significant round of extermination and expulsion against the Bosniak community in its history: "The Bosnian Genocide cannot be divorced from the political conditions within the second Yugoslav state that ultimately facilitated its orchestration and enactment. It must be recognized as

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a state and government-directed campaign of mass murder, expulsion and torture of Bosniak civilians by the then Belgrade regime."

Stuck in a political straitjacket

Srebrenica is the only episode of the Bosnian War to be legally defined as genocide. It happened in July 1995 when forces of the army of Republika Srpska invaded a small town, Srebrenica, in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. There, Bosnian Serb forces first abused, tortured, and then executed more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men, throwing their bodies into mass graves.

"It was not a one-off, freak event but part of a larger genocidal project to create "Greater Serbia" via ethnic cleansing and extermination," Mujanović claims. "It's preposterous to believe that, between 1992 and 1995, during the Bosnian War, genocide only occurred in one enclave, in one small town, in Bosnia," he says. "That is like saying a genocide only happened in Auschwitz, but not in Buchenwald [during the Holocaust]. We can quibble about the [legal] phrasing. But the totality of Milošević's project in Bosnia and Herzegovina was genocidal and not merely confined to the events in Srebrenica in July 1995."

> Srebrenica is the only episode of the Bosnian War to be legally defined as genocide.

"It's obvious to everyone that Serbia and Croatia both invaded Bosnia and engaged in wars of occupation and conquest, but this was never really publicly acknowledged," Mujanović adds. "By the time you get to the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, which was set up in [the Hague] in 1993, the international community had really mixed feelings about how it wanted to think, talk about and characterize this conflict."

Mujanović may be exaggerating this point somewhat. The international tribunal encountered numerous challenges. Still, the court eventually indicted 161 individuals for serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. It successfully tried two Bosnian Serb leaders, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, and the former president of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, for war crimes too.

Still, those convictions notwithstanding, Mujanović believes that the West has essentially given Serbia and Croatia the power to punish Bosnia over the last three decades. Although it was not always so. In the early 2000s in Croatia there was a period of so-called "de-Tuđmanization". During this period, particularly during the tenure of then President Stjepan Mesić, Croatia's relations with Bosnia improved

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significantly, especially with regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina's wider ambitions for more self-autonomy. But then things changed. This first occurred after Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013 and then in 2016, when Andrej Plenković took over the leadership of the Croatian Democratic Union party (HDZ).

"From this moment onwards Zagreb's position towards Bosnia became visibly less tolerant and more aggressive, as politics in the country shifted to the right," Mujanović claims. "Today, Croatia has virtually no foreign policy interests outside of its continuous and systematic interference in Bosnia and Herzegovina domestic affairs."

In Serbia, meanwhile, the restoration of nationalist rule in the country since 2012 and the rise of the populist authoritarian strongman Aleksandar Vučić have facilitated and encouraged "Republika Srpska (RS) to re-emerge as the proverbial spearhead in a grander Serb nationalist agenda in the Western Balkans," says Mujanović.

"If we could have a period of, say, five years, where Serbia and Croatia were not involved and interfering in Bosnia's domestic politics, Bosnia and Herzegovina could make huge improvements, very quickly," Mujanović concludes. "But that is unworkable in a political regime that is divided along ethnic lines. The Dayton constitution is a political straitjacket and a continuation of the politics of sectarian aggression which animated the Bosnian War and Bosnian Genocide." EE

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The 1863 uprising and the shared legacy of the Commonwealth

WIKTOR BABINSKI

The January Uprising of 1863 was the last common struggle for the ideals of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Today, when no existential disputes exist between the independent nations of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus, the memory of 1863 should be a stepping stone to teaching the history of the Commonwealth as a common legacy.

Earlier this year, the presidents of Poland and Lithuania, accompanied by the leader of the Belarusian democratic opposition in exile, celebrated together in Vilnius the 161st anniversary of the January Uprising. This event was fought by the nobility and intelligentsia of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the years 1863–64 against Russian imperial rule. Animated by the historical tradition of the Commonwealth and by innovative notions of mass politics, 1863 was at the same time the last political act committed in the name of the old Commonwealth. It was also a milestone marking the birth of the modern Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian nations. A century and a half later, 1863 holds new significance for the future of Central and Eastern Europe.

In order to understand who fought the January 1863 uprising and for what, let us start at the end of the 18th century, when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned out of existence. Its memory survived among its politically-conscious elite, who now aspired to independence and liberty.

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Birth of politics

Just around the time that the partitions of the Commonwealth took place, between 1772 and 1795, a novel and groundbreaking political process begun unfolding in Europe which changed the way people perceived politics, as well as the semantic toolbox they used to describe it. Throughout the Middle Ages and for the better part of the early modern era, politics on a scale any larger than local was habitually a sphere reserved for only a handful of people proximate to royal authority – the king, the aristocracy, the Church and occasionally tradesmen and financiers. The entire medieval and early modern *ancien régime* derived its legitimacy from divine providence and royal patrimony. All political decisions were justified using vocabulary derived from this realm. If the concept of "nation" was used at all – like in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth where the "nation" chose its own kings – it meant at most the politically enfranchised aristocracy.

By the late 18th century, however, the scope of politics started expanding perceptibly. The French Revolution in 1789 was at first an attempt by the educated, materially comfortable and politically-conscious parts of the vast "third estate" to gain entry into politics. This sphere was previously controlled by the *ancien régime*, with its exclusive vocabulary of blood rights, patrimony and divine providence. The rejection of this vocabulary and embrace of at least notional equality was one of the key strands of Enlightenment thought. By questioning divine and hereditary rights; resolving to treat the temporal Earth as the place where the pursuit of human happiness was to be realised; and aspiring to found human relations on rationality; the dominant intellectual current of the 18th century laid the foundations for a new type of politics. The same way of thinking found its way into the discourse of the struggling Commonwealth.

The Polish Constitution of May 3rd 1791, inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, was an attempt to create a modernized society.

The Constitution of May 3rd 1791, inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment and passed by the reforming Great Sejm held in Warsaw between 1788 and 1791, was an attempt to create a modernized society. It did so by easing the burden of the peasants, giving more rights to burghers and funnelling poor noblemen into the growing bureaucracy away from oligarchic magnate cliques, thereby expanding the scope of politics across society. In this way, a civic nation in a modern centralized state was being constructed. It is for this nation, not the purely aristocratic one, that the Polish-American revolutionary hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko fought the 1794 insurrection against the Russian and Prussian absolutist occupation that overthrew the Constitution in 1792. While leading Commonwealth revolutionar-

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ies that year, he declared: "I will not fight for the nobility alone; I want freedom for the entire nation and for this only I will risk my life."

After Kosciuszko's defeat, the third partition wiped the Commonwealth off the map in 1795, thereby extinguishing the flame of liberty that Central and Eastern Europe generated parallel to France and America. Stanisław Poniatowski, the last king, despaired after the partitions that Poland was lost forever. In textbook *ancien régime* terms he equated the nation with the monarchical state. In a rebuke to such thinking, by singing in 1796 "Poland has not yet perished so long as we live," Commonwealth patriots fighting under the banners of revolutionary France for their homeland's restoration became the third in history after the French and Americans to identify the nation explicitly with the democratic masses. Overall, they derived legitimacy from people and not from royal patrimony or divine right.

Political community

The achievements of the Commonwealth statesmen, Enlightenment figures and revolutionaries of the late 18th century are often reduced to an exclusively Polish legacy. This is often understood in modern ethnonational terms, and therefore excludes Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians. Oftentimes, those nations exclude themselves from this legacy by rejecting pre-19th century history, which they also understand as Polish and therefore alien. It is not hard to identify the origins of this misconception. Commonwealth citizens and subsequent patriots fighting for its restoration thought of themselves as "Polish" and spoke the Polish language when engaged in politics. But the 18th and early-19th century "Polish" nation of the Commonwealth that Kosciuszko and subsequent generations fought for, thought of itself in ways very different from how we understand politics today. It was not yet an ethnic nation of today but a political community derived from centuries of common statehood and culture. It was defined by civic patriotism in an era when today's concept of ethnicity did not yet exist and when language did not define political identity. It was perfectly logical to be a Lithuanian or Ukrainian patriot of the larger "Polish" Commonwealth nation, and many thought of themselves in those terms.

In other words, the modern Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian nations did not yet exist. But neither did the Polish one. To think of Polishness in the way late 19th century nationalists did was as much a break with the Commonwealth's legacy as conceptualizing Lithuanian or Belarusian communities as separate from the larger whole. In 1795, this idea was still many decades away. Even after the partitions, the Commonwealth remained very much alive in people's minds. The political idea of

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the civic nation kept encouraging successive generations to fight for its restoration, first during the Napoleonic Wars and then in the Polish-Russian War of 1830–31.

The Congress of Vienna in 1815 established a truncated Kingdom of Poland, whose liberal constitution the tsar habitually violated and whose unification with the Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian lands of the Commonwealth under Russian occupation he repeatedly denied. In 1830, roused by gossip that Russia was going to send them to suppress the July revolution in France, Polish troops consisting of Napoleonic veterans rose in revolt against the tsar. The Polish-Russian War brought about an uprising across the Russian-occupied parts of the former Commonwealth, with many waging a partisan struggle and flocking to join the armies in Warsaw.

Lithuanian peasant partisans fighting Russian troops at that time sang a version of the 1796 hymn: "Poland is not yet lost while the Samogitians live" (*Dabar lenkai naprapule kol Žemaitiai gyvi*). The uprising leaders promised, in the appeals written in three languages, that the peasantry would no longer be *muzhiks* but "genuine free Poles". This was not a promise of ethnic conversion as nationalists would understand it today but of political rights. In the language of the Commonwealth, to be a Pole was to participate in the life of the nation.

Last fight for a common political nation

The landscape in which political identity functioned in our region started changing in the second half of the 19th century. The end of the 1830–31 uprising significantly weakened the stateless political community of the Commonwealth, resulting in mass emigration and brutal Russian repressions including executions, confiscations of property, as well as the destruction and robbery of material heritage. More broadly and importantly, industrialization and globalization created the grounds for mass politics based on ethnicity and language. In an era in which people needed common frameworks to organize complex economic structures and compete for the resources and attention of the administrative state, language and the concept of "ethnicity" started to be the most effective tools for constructing identity. Slowly but surely, this fostered exclusive ethnic nationalisms and narrowed the space for broader and more inclusive ones like "Commonwealth Polish". The 1863 uprising happened at a historical crossroads, after which lies the era of ethnic nationalism that we know and understand from our vantage point today.

Thus, while the insurgents of 1863 fought for a multi-ethnic "Poland", many already thought in terms close to modern national identity. The best example would be Kastus Kalinouski, the present-day hero of democratic Belarus, who mobilized the Belarusian peasant masses for the cause of the uprising. He utilized their own

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language and a spirit of the Belarusian culture connected to but inherently autonomous from its Polish or Lithuanian counterparts. From this comes the tripartite coat of arms of the uprising, representing a modernized union that the insurgents sought to restore: the White Eagle (Poland), Vytis/Pahonia (Lithuania-Belarus) and the Archangel Michael (Ukraine).

Although Ukraine figured as a co-equal part of the common fatherland that the January insurgents fought for, the uprising was not very popular there due to class tensions between Polish-speaking noblemen and Ruthenian peasants. These issues were much more pronounced in these areas than anywhere else, alongside the imperial legacy of the Commonwealth in Ukraine. In Ukraine the separation between the Polish and Ukrainian nationalist movements happened earlier. This occurred in 1848 and was based on the Uniate clergy and a rising Ukrainian intelligentsia, as well as a much stronger imperial Russian presence. As a result, by the time of the January Uprising the Commonwealth's ideals already felt outdated.

In the decades following the suppression of the uprising in 1863, the early modern political nation of the Commonwealth fragmented into separate and exclusive Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian national movements. Of course, these were defined by language and ethnicity. Another way to put this would be that the Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian national movements crystallized as independent forces and defined themselves against both Poland and Russia, while the old idea of "Poland as Commonwealth" lost its meaning and folded into a similarly ethnic and exclusive Polish national movement.

The last attempt to revive the common idea, imagined by Leon Wasilewski as a Polish-led multinational federation and directed by Józef Piłsudski, failed in 1920.

The last attempt to revive the common idea of a Polish-led multinational federation failed in 1920.

The newly independent Lithuanian nation-state rejected Piłsudski's overtures and declared it wanted nothing to do with Poland, while the joint Ukrainian-Polish offensive on Kyiv aiming to establish an independent Ukraine was repulsed by the Bolsheviks. After the Polish-Russian war ground to a standstill following a narrow Polish victory in the battle of Warsaw, supporters of federalism in Poland were weakened and discredited. A nationalist-led Polish peace delegation abandoned Poland's Ukrainian allies and sign a peace treaty with Soviet Russia, dividing Eastern Europe between a Polish nation-state and a multinational Soviet empire. Despite the efforts of some of Piłsudski's followers in the 1930s, notably Henryk Józewski and Tadeusz Hołówko, to steer Polish policy towards conciliation with the Ukrainian national project, interwar Poland was remembered by its national minorities more as oppressor than common civic home.

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Common legacy

Across the first half of the 20th century, most prominently between 1917 and 1921 and later during the Second World War, these exclusive nationalist movements fought many often genocidal battles over lands and cities in a bloody division and cleansing of the multi-ethnic inheritance of the Commonwealth. This era ended in the late 1940s when, as a result of the movement of borders and various periods of ethnic cleansing, separate political entities came into being for all four descendants of the old Commonwealth: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus.

Throughout this time, one idea that united those who sought a return to the kinship of 1863 was the struggle against Russian imperialism. Figures such as the 20th-century strategist Jerzy Giedroyc saw reconciliation as a basis for national security and individual freedom. Finally, in the critical period between 1989 and 1991, these aspirations triumphed. The foundations for reconciliation were laid when Poland accepted its post-1945 territorial losses and the four states made steps to establish mutual relations on the basis of sovereignty, territorial inviolability and mutual tolerance for national minorities.

> The overwhelming threat remains Russian imperialism, which gives the January uprising of 1863 a symbolic and political meaning.

Today, with Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus having settled their existential disputes, the ethno-nationalist conflict between them dating back to the middle of the 19th century has lost its basis, even if its echoes remain potent in people's minds. Despite this, the overwhelming threat to all of them and their way of life remains Russian imperialism. In such conditions, the January uprising of 1863 holds a special symbolic and political meaning.

The year 1863 was the time of our last common struggle, and the year that we parted ways. Today, when no existential disputes exist between the independent nations of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus, the memory of 1863 should be a stepping stone to teaching the history of the Commonwealth as a common legacy. Its monumental achievements, especially the long tradition of civil society and the self-generated drive for liberty in the late 18th century that was snuffed out for 200 years by Russian and Prussian aggression, ought to belong to Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians as much as Poles. It gives us all a claim to participation in the European history of liberty no worse than that of any other European nation.

At the same time, the Commonwealth nation cannot be equated with modern Polishness. The rise of ethnic Polish nationalism was as much of a break with the Commonwealth's traditions as that of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. This requires some adjustments on all sides. The Poles should stop basing their modern national

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identity on the entirety of Commonwealth history and start teaching it as a shared legacy. Ukraine, Lithuania and, in the future, Belarus should overcome the traumas derived from the struggles of their modern national movements with their Polish counterpart, and stop demonizing the common past.

Why should we bother about this issue at all? Because there is a future to be won. Memory of the past always, without fail, reflects a view of the present and aspirations for the future. In the conditions of nationalist struggle, it made sense to focus on narrow perceptions and demonize neighbours. It does not make sense anymore, when those neighbours no longer have hostile designs, are members of the same Euro-Atlantic community, and share the same aspirations of liberty and economic growth. Of course, they also share the same imperialist enemy.

National symbolism and historical memory are the cornerstones of modern politics. Reimagining the history of the Commonwealth, like we are already reimagining the January Uprising, can help us achieve common aspirations. When the Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian flags stand together in celebration of a common past, then we can go on to build a common European future. EE

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A man outside the system

OLEKSII LIONCHUK

Oleksandr Muzychko was a brigadier general of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, a personal bodyguard of its President Dzhokhar Dudayev and, above all, a Ukrainian. He went to more than one conflict zone across the post-Soviet states. Claiming that he had already "looked death in the eyes", he was not afraid to go against the state system that had been built in Ukraine in the 20 years following independence. Murdered ten years ago, he remains in the memory of many.

This past winter Ukraine and the world commemorated the events that took place a decade ago. This was namely when Ukrainians rose up in peaceful protest in support of the country's European integration. In November 2013, the EU and Ukraine were meant to sign an association agreement at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. However, at the very last minute, Ukraine's then president, Viktor Yanukovych, announced that he would not sign the document. Yanukovych's decision was met with outrage and frustration in Ukrainian society, which saw European integration as a vision for a better future. If not for them, then at least for their children and grandchildren. The rejection of this direction, under the Kremlin's influence, brought many active Ukrainians (primarily students) to the main squares of all the cities throughout the country.

The city of Rivne, located in western Ukraine, was no exception. Like in other parts of the country, the representatives of the opposition political parties first tried to take the initiative. However, remembering the experience of the 2004 Orange Revolution, the protesters did not want to put their trust in them again. This time, new faces came to the fore and became leaders of their local Maidan. In

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Rivne, among those who organized the protest on the city's Independence Square was Oleksander Muzychko – a man in his 50s who is better known as Sashko Bilyi. Respected by his friends, he was feared and hated by his enemies. Until today nobody remains indifferent to him, even though it has already been ten years since his murder.

Actions speak louder than words

Muzychko was born in 1962 in Perm Krai, which is in the territory of today's Russia. His parents, Ivan and Olena, were oppressed by the Soviet authorities. The family had a history of military service and fighting for Ukraine's independence. His grandfather had served in the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic, while three of his father's brothers were in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army fighting the Soviet occupiers. As a result, already as a young boy, Muzychko experienced unfair treatment from the official representatives of Soviet institutions and power structures. This is also probably why he only obtained secondary technical education, after which he was obliged to do military service in the Soviet army. He was in the military in the early 1980s in the Soviet republic of Georgia, where he was assigned to the air defence forces. After his service in Georgia he returned to Ukraine. Muzychko's relatives and friends recall that in the midst of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* he joined the national-patriotic movement in his Rivne region. Together with Mykola Karpyuk, he headed the Union of Independent Ukrainian Youth created in 1989. Two years later, after the failed coup d'état carried out against Gorbachev that was organized in August by communist hardliners, paramilitary units known as Ukrainian People's Self-Defence (UNSO) were created in many cities in western Ukraine. Muzychko joined such a unit in Rivne that gathered around 500 people.

Together with Mykola Karpyuk, Muzychko headed the Union of Independent Ukrainian Youth created in 1989.

After the failure of the coup, members of these paramilitary units began to tear down communist monuments, starting a phenomenon which later became known as "leninopad". In Rivne this took place on August 22nd 1991. In the place of communist monuments there was a statute dedicated to Symon Petliura, the head of the soldiers of the Ukrainian People's Republic during the interwar period.

In the early period of Ukraine's independence mass rallies and demonstrations were organized frequently and also in Rivne. Among the speakers there were young local activists such as Viktor Shkuratyuk, Mykola Karpyuk and Oles Babiy. However,

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Muzychko stayed away from public performances. For him, actions spoke louder than words. But first he had to make ends meet. Like many of his compatriots then and now, he went to Poland to earn some money. From those work trips he bought himself a jacket which had "VIKING" written on it. He wore it for a long time. Thus, when at some point it became public knowledge that one of the military units in Chechnya was also called VIKING, people who knew Muzychko immediately understood who was commanding it.

The nationalist movement

Seeing the Ukrainian national movement as a serious threat, the Kremlin established a propaganda machine to defame it, and especially its radical right wing. This section was then comprised of several groups, which included: The All-Ukrainian Political Movement "State Independence of Ukraine", the Ukrainian National Assembly (UNA) and, a bit later, the Society for the Revival of the Ukrainian Nation created in Zhytomyr. All these groups based their activities on the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism formulated by Dmytro Dontsov in the first half of the 20th century.

However, after Ukraine gained independence in 1991 leaders of the nationalist movement continued to emphasize that the danger from the Russian Federation had not disappeared with the proclamation of independence. They argued that it was necessary for Ukraine to prepare for future conflicts with its north-eastern neighbour. Therefore, the UNSO units did not disappear after independence and instead they merged with UNA, creating one structure which became known as UNA-UNSO. At that time, Muzychko, together with the like-minded Serhiy Pandrak, Oles Babiy, Mykola Karpiuk and Viktor Shkuratyuk, founded a newspaper in Rivne titled *Our Job*. It was a publication that covered both contemporary politics and history.

The unstable period of Ukraine's independence was, for clear reasons, called the "chaotic 90s". It was characterized by high crime rates, mafia-style local conflicts, as well as real wars, like the one that erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, or in Moldova between the authorities in Chisinau and the rebellious region of Transnistria. Following them was the conflict concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were parts of independent Georgia. In all of these military operations Ukrainian volunteers participated and sided with those who were attacked (not always directly) by Russia. Recognizing the Kremlin's intentions with regards to these conflicts, Muzychko and other UNSO activists from Rivne organized special missions to all of these hotspots.

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War in Chechnya

The conflict between Russia and its subjects in the North Caucasus began almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For Moscow the biggest troublemaker was Chechnya, whose leader was General Dzhokhar Dudayev – a former combat pilot whose regiment was located in the Poltava region during the Soviet Union (today's Ukraine). Dudayev was also the first Chechen to become a general in the USSR.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he sought to gain independence for his homeland – Ichkeria. However, after experiencing the loss of 14 republics, and an entire socialist bloc, the Kremlin was not willing to release more territories from its grip. The conflict, which could not be resolved in 1991, was postponed for three years. At first the Kremlin used its favourite tactics and utilized internal opposition to Dudayev. When this plan did not bring its desired results, and Dudayev remained Chechnya's legitimate president, the whole machinery of Russian propaganda was used against the unconquered highlanders.

To break through the information vacuum which emerged as a result, UNA-UNSO's Kyiv headquarters decided to send its correspondents to Grozny and transmit information from there to Ukraine and the rest of the world. The first delegations included two People`s Deputies of Ukraine, Yuriy Tyma and Anatoliy Lupynis, as well as Natalyia Changuli as a correspondent and a cameraman. They were soon joined by Muzychko, who arrived in Chechnya as a journalist with the *Our Job* newspaper.

At the end of November 1994, Russian forces, with air support, launched a new assault on Grozny. Russia's advantage over Chechnya was tenfold. To put it in more concrete numbers, against 4,000 advancing Russians, Dudayev had a mere 400 fighters at his disposal. Russian troops managed to capture strategic positions in the capital and break through to the presidential palace. Grozny's defence was led by another legendary commander named Shamil Basayev but he too had to retreat. In these critical conditions Muzychko demonstrated his skills. First, he developed an operational plan to liberate Grozny from the Russian troops. He later personally led the operation to push the enemy out from the presidential residence. Finally, a detachment of UNSO volunteers, nicknamed Viking, led by Muzychko, fought against regular Russian troops under Basayev's command. At the end of the Grozny liberation operation Muzychko's role was recognized by Dudayev himself.

Moscow issued an ultimatum to "stop the bloodshed" that it had provoked. Yet on the night of December 31st 1994 a new assault on Grozny was launched. By January 3rd 1995 this had failed, with the Russian military personnel who were still alive by then deciding to voluntarily surrender. In response, Russian propa-

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ganda repeatedly accused both the Chechen field commanders and the defenders of torturing prisoners. The same accusations were issued against Muzychko and his unit's men. However, evidence suggested the opposite. Namely, it is said that Chechen commanders and their subordinates tried to return captured Russians to their families. In the same way Muzychko not only did not torture anyone but also saved the lives of young Russians who, as he believed, were shamelessly used as cannon fodder.

During his stay in Chechnya he gained great respect among the Chechens. First and foremost, he became the head of Dudayev's Security Service. Second, he received the military rank of Brigadier General of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and the highest state award – the Order of the Hero of the Nation (*Qoman Turpal*). However, when it comes to this distinction, he was never personally handed it, as each time he was supposed to receive his award the Russian FSB intercepted couriers travelling to his address. Also, it was thanks to Muzychko's influence that Dudayev's family was first transported to Lviv and later to Western Europe.

To honour Muzychko, many Chechens gave his name to their sons and President Aslan Maskhadov named a street in Grozny in Sashko Bilyi's name. It was later renamed on the order of Chechnya's current ruler, Ramzan Kadyrov, after he had become the Kremlin's protégé in the republic. To catch Muzychko, the Russian FSB sent many requests to the Ukrainian secret services, asking for the location of Sashko Bilyi. Despite this, each time they received a negative answer.

Homecoming and Maidan

There is not much information about Muzychko's life after his return from Chechnya. Among some often-heard accusations are those of his participation in criminal groups, with criminal cases started against him and even a conviction. Just like other UNSO members Muzychko simply tried to protect young Ukrainian businessmen from criminal authorities. His esteem earned in Chechnya helped a lot during such meetings. On several occasions Muzychko was a candidate for the Rivne Regional Council, while in 2012 he ran for the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in Rivne. This was the moment when I also met him for the first time in person.

He came across as a kind and cheerful man, with an unusual sense of humour and a warm smile. He was also very modest. However, his image as a leader and organizer became most visible at the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity. At that moment he not only organized the tent camp in Rivne's centre but also actively helped to form the Maidan Self-Defence units in both Kyiv and Rivne. These formations were manned by both the cities' youth and the old UNSO members, as well

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as veterans of the Afghan war. For all of them, Muzychko, known as Sashko Bilyi, was an unquestioned authority. His orders were carried out to the letter.

After a number of nationalist organizations, including the All-Ukrainian Union "Tryzub", Patriot of Ukraine, the Youth Nationalist Congress and UNA-UNSO announced in Kyiv the creation of Right Sector (*Pravy Sektor*), Muzychko was appointed as its coordinator in western Ukraine. In this capacity he led the capture of the regional state administration in Rivne, starting a process which later swept through other regional centres. Muzychko's authority explains why there were no assaults or looting in western regions of Ukraine. From the Maidan stage in Rivne, Muzychko called people to observe public order, warning of negative consequences for those who would not obey it. The same happened with the sale of alcohol at night. It was after Muzychko's request that all large and small shops stopped selling it.

Importantly, during their confrontations with Yanukovych's forces almost all representatives of Right Sector hid their faces behind balaclavas, medical masks, etc. Only Muzychko did not hide his face. For doing so the Rivne press called him a "suicide bomber". The peak moment of confrontation between the Berkut special forces and Maidan protesters took place between February 18th and February 20th 2014. Both sides suffered losses. Among the protesters over a hundred were killed. Their memory is now cherished as the "Heavenly Hundred". Many more were harmed with injuries of varying degrees of severity.

In Rivne, after the capture of the regional administration, Right Sector, led by Muzychko and Yaroslav Hranitny, stormed the local Berkut base and seized a weapons warehouse. From that moment on, Muzychko held a machine gun in his hands until his death. However, when local Berkut units returned from Kyiv they came straight to Rivne's Maidan. At that moment, angered city residents came to the square demanding Berkut kneel before them and repent for those who were murdered in Kyiv. In fact, Rivne lost three men at the Maidan. The inspiration for asking Berkut to kneel in repentance came from the Maidan in Tarnopil, where local activists demanded the same of the local Berkut forces. Seeing this taking place in Rivne, Muzychko did not approve of such emotional acts taking place. Instead, he suggested to those gathered that Berkut can wash off its shame by going to fight against Russian troops in Donbas and Crimea.

Murder

Muzychko had a strong sense of justice, and always backed his words with actions. His personal mission was to defend the rights of vulnerable groups. Even if this was at the cost of breaking the law. Such was his reaction to the decision of

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the Rivne District Prosecutor's Office which, to the fear of the local population, allowed for the release of one of the murder suspects. To express his disagreement, Muzychko grabbed the tie of one of the prosecutors who, by the way, a few years later was caught taking bribes. The video from this event went viral and generated a lot of emotions both in Rivne, as well as in other parts of Ukraine. Not to mention that this event was skilfully exploited by Russian propaganda, which used it to intimidate the population in Crimea. It discussed the workings of Right Sector in general and Muzychko in particular.

The second case was Muzychko and Right Sector's attempt to stop the illegal extraction of amber in the north of the Rivne region. The People's Deputy of Ukraine Hennadiy Moskal submitted a request in which he accused Muzychko of creating an organized criminal group. To avoid any negative consequences for his actions, he was encouraged to go abroad to wait before he could come back in better times. He was even invited to join the French Foreign Legion, an offer he turned down. More than anything else, Muzychko understood the threats coming from Russia and wanted to protect his native land. His efforts were brutally stopped on the night of March 24th 2014, when he was killed in the village of Barmaki near Rivne. Muzychko's death was publicly announced by local radio the following morning. To many, myself included, it came as a shock. Muzychko was buried in Rivne in the "Alley of Heroes". In 2014, several thousand Rivnians came to say goodbye to him, and the funeral procession chanted "Sashko – Hero!"

All in all, Muzychko was a brigadier general of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, a personal bodyguard of Dudayev, and above all a Ukrainian patriot. He went to more than one conflict zone across the post-Soviet states. Claiming that he had already "looked death in the eyes", he was not afraid to go against the state system that had been built in Ukraine in the 20 years following independence. For his actions, he was openly or secretly supported by Ukrainian society, at least a certain part of it. As this year marks ten years since Muzychko's death, when reflecting on his life we realize that many of his experiences could now serve as valuable lessons for the Ukrainian Army in its current war with Russia. EE

Translated by Katerina Novikova

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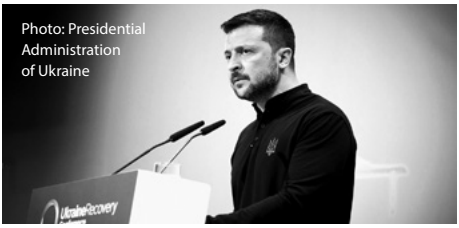

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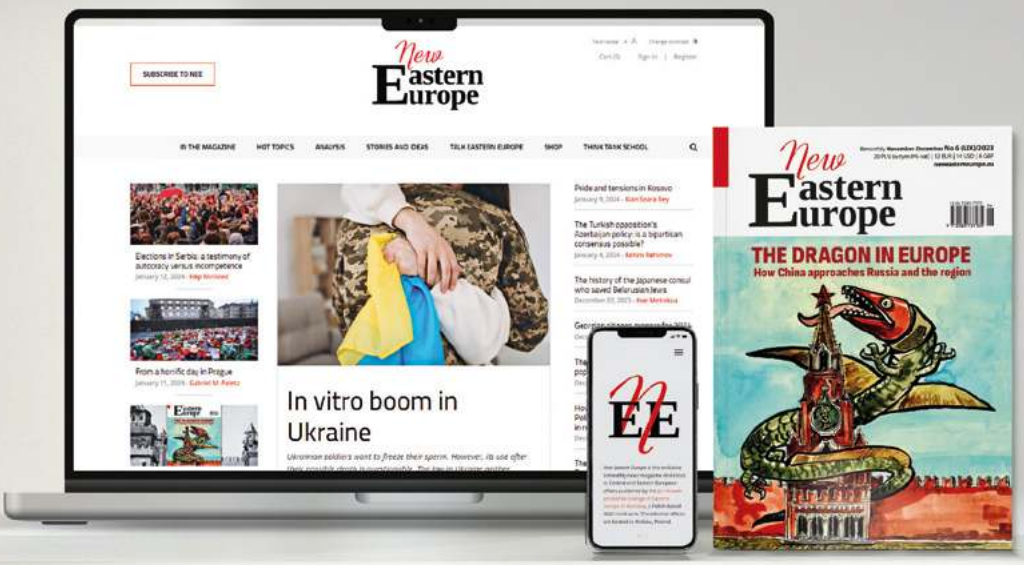

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