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JUGGLING A PANDEMIC

Managing (or not) COVID-19 and its consequences

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DEAR READER,

Normally on this page we provide you with some thoughts about the content of this issue in the current context. However, as we send this issue to print – one week after the forged presidential election in Belarus – we rather decided to share with you below our call for solidarity with the Belarusian people.

***

It is with great sadness, anger and concern that we observe the violent crackdown of peaceful protests by Belarusian security services and police forces. In recent weeks, many peaceful demonstrators were brutally beaten and several people were killed.

The only solution right now is to organise free and fair elections as well as to punish those who are responsible for the violence. The citizens have a right to express their discontent with the massively forged election results.

When a regime, which pretends to be all powerful, does not ensure even minimum standards nor observe the most basic rights, people come out to the streets. This is not only their right, but also their responsibility.

A democratic Belarus is also our European responsibility.

In solidarity together with Belarusians - Жыве Беларусь!

The Editors

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The election that changed Belarus

MAXIM RUST

The August 9th presidential election has become a critical event for both the Belarusian society and the ruling elite. The election saw the breakdown of traditional divides between the government and a decades-old political opposition. New players have presented themselves as an alternative to the existing system and have shown themselves to be capable of amassing an unprecedented level of public support.

On August 9th, a consequential presidential election took place in Belarus. A few months prior, there was no indication that this year's campaign would be radically different from any previous one. Everyone had assumed that the regime would simply register a few opposition candidates with no chance. After a typically uneventful campaign, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka would then claim another "elegant victory". Perhaps a few protests were expected, alongside expressions of "deep concern" from the European Union and the United States. Belarusian political life would soon return to "normal" following the announcement of the results.

However, events took a completely different course. Although the official results have ensured Lukashenka another "victory", the political processes in Belarus appear to be undergoing an irreversible change.

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COVID-19 stronger than the opposition

The problems caused by the coronavirus epidemic in Belarus were a key catalyst for the country's recent surge in political and civic activity. While all of its neighbours began to enact quarantine measures and close their borders, Minsk pretended that nothing was happening. Enterprises, offices and institutions continued to function as normal. Assemblies of large amounts of people, such as at football matches, were not cancelled and still took place. The restrictive measures introduced in other countries were described in state media as signs of mass panic and psychosis, whilst Belarus was presented as a virus-free country.

However, when the first cases and deaths appeared, the society slowly began to fall into a state of self-isolation. Social dissatisfaction and frustration grew in the country and Belarusians began to seriously doubt the state's ability to provide security to its citizens. Ultimately, this feeling was the result of the state's arrogant, irresponsible and inadequate reaction to the spread of the virus. The Belarusian leader outdid himself when he publicly blamed the first confirmed victims of COVID-19 for their own deaths. This "they are themselves to blame" rhetoric resulted in widespread protest, during which people started to write their own obituaries, as if they had been instructed to by the president. Neither the Ministry of Health nor state media passed the social responsibility test. Infection statistics were manipulated and discussion of the virus was marginalised and downplayed by major state broadcasters.

Subsequently, grassroots actions aimed at strengthening social solidarity began to spread across the country. The epidemic affected Belarus's socio-political life, which was now especially filled with tension and uncertainty. This quickly resulted in a drop in confidence in the state and its institutions, especially the president. Public outrage surrounding the reaction (or rather the lack thereof) of the Belarusian authorities and societal dissatisfaction with Minsk's policies became a recurring theme during the presidential campaign, which coincided with the worst period of the pandemic. Society subsequently began to mobilise and self-organise on an unprecedented scale.

Candidates of hope

The virus's initial impact changed how politics was carried out during the presidential race. The traditional Belarusian opposition initially made yet another attempt at finding a unity candidate and decided to hold primary elections. Representatives of various opposition groups traveled around Belarusian cities and

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met local people. In March, as a result of the pandemic, many potential opposition candidates suspended their campaign and stopped meeting voters. Some of the favourites simply gave up the race and old rivalries returned. The quarrels among the Belarusian opposition were nothing new, but Belarus's increasingly frustrated and mobilised society made it clear that it needed a stronger alternative to the regime. The pandemic quickly put an end to the decades-old idea that the population must tolerate a government that provides relative stability and security.

Several new candidates, who often differed in their image and identity, quickly appeared in the political arena. Contrary to well-known opposition "veterans" who have been complaining in the same vein about the regime for years, the new candidates were energetic and to the point. Several of them even had real experience in state administration. Overall, they do not want to be associated with the authorities or the opposition. They presented themselves as an alternative to the existing system and quickly enjoyed widespread public support. Even before the official start of the electoral campaign, three of these figures gained the support of thousands of citizens at an unimaginably fast pace. This is why they were described as "candidates of hope" in public debate.

Belarus's increasingly frustrated and mobilised society made it clear that it needed a stronger alternative to the regime.

The first of the candidates was Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a social activist and blogger who ran one of Belarus's most popular YouTube channels. He often travelled around the country and talked with citizens about their everyday problems. Thus, he quickly won the support and trust of the "common people". The potential threat posed by Tsikhanouski resulted in the Belarus Election Commission refusing to accept his registration documents. As a result, his wife Sviatlana became the official candidate of the campaign. She soon became a symbol of change in Belarus.

The second "candidate of hope" was Viktar Babaryka. Until recently he was an influential banker, the president of Belgazprombank (Gazprom's subsidiary) and a well-known patron of Belarusian art. In just a few weeks, he became the most recognisable and "sought-after" presidential candidate in the media. Babaryka collected over 430,000 signatures supporting his campaign, a record number in modern Belarusian history. The third candidate was Valery Tsapkala, a former Belarusian ambassador to the United States and director of the High Technology Park, the country's own "Silicon Valley".

It is clear that both Babaryka and Tsapkala come from the establishment and circles close to Lukashenka. This was the first time that traditional members of the ruling elite have openly competed with their patron. This subsequently suggests

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that the country's relatively monolithic elite is now suffering from infighting. There have long been rumours that senior officials have grown tired of the government's policies and feel less comfortable within the state.

Social mobilisation versus repression

Deteriorating economic conditions, the pandemic, dissatisfaction with government policy and the emergence of an attractive alternative all influenced the increasing political mobilisation of Belarus's citizens. The civic solidarity that emerged from the pandemic is by no means insignificant. Such broad and dynamic social mobilisation has not been seen in Belarus since the mid-1990s. It all started with a campaign to support those in need during the pandemic. In a short time, this collective action turned into genuine political protest.

This change was first made clear by the willingness of citizens to openly support these opposition candidates in Minsk and other Belarusian cities. People were lining up in order to give their signatures in support of the opposition candidates. They were guided by a simple logic: they were ready to stand for a few hours to sign the list of any candidate, except the incumbent president. Tsikhanouski's "Stop The Cockroach!" campaign also quickly spread throughout the country. Its Belarusian translation – "Stop Tarakan!" – rhymes with the well-known anti-fascist slogan "No pasaran" used during the Spanish Civil War. The "cockroach" is meant to allude to Lukashenka and his public image, with moustaches often connected with the animal in regional culture. Hundreds of people chanting this slogan with posters and slippers in their hands did not formally offend anyone, but everyone knew who was the target.

The "Sasha3%" and "MeWe97" campaigns became the next popular means of protest. They referred to the results of election polls on independent news portals. In none of them did support for the president exceed three per cent. Although actual support for Lukashenka is much higher (though, of course, not as high as a few months earlier), the Belarusian leader was clearly offended by these statistics. Similar opinion polls and data collected by internet portals have been officially banned by Minsk. Consequently, all campaigns and actions in support of alternative candidates moved onto the internet and social media, where the authorities would find them more difficult to control.

The actions of unrestricted protest could not last too long. The ruling elite reacted to the wave of social optimism in a way that is natural, yet recently avoided – with a wave of repression. At the end of May, Siarhei Tsikhanouski was arrested in Grodno. After his arrest, public support for opposition soon shifted to Babaryka.

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Following the announcement of the election results, mass protests broke out across the country, with the historical Belarusian flag becoming one of the symbols.

The Belarusian president was clearly nervous and irritated by the growing popularity of his opponents. He began to speak out against them in public. He often emphasised that "high-ranking figures in Moscow" were ultimately responsible for the alternative candidates.

Later, the government started a campaign of intimidation against Babaryka's supporters and associates of his staff. The management of Belgazprombank and other related companies were charged with money laundering and tax evasion by the prosecutor's office and tax inspection authorities. In mid-June, Babaryka and his son were arrested and charged with a range of corruption charges. Tsapkala, fearing arrest, fled the country and went to Russia.

Emergence of civil society

The campaign of intimidation and arrests did not dampen the enthusiasm of Belarusian society. It even had the opposite effect as parts of society began to mobilise even more. In this situation, it is necessary to talk about what constitutes "real" civil society. In recent years, demonstrations in the country have been attended mostly by supporters of opposition forces in larger cities. Now, however, ordinary residents are protesting and their slogans are not strictly political. Government re-

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pression continued as protests and support actions for alternative candidates were pacified. Activists, journalists and politicians were also imprisoned. The "political prisoner" is now becoming an increasingly well-known figure in the country. This poses serious problems for the authorities who have attempted to silence such figures as much as possible in recent years. Now, political prisoners will be one of the most important issues in Minsk's relations with the West.

Other measures were also introduced in order to prevent the participation of these genuinely popular opposition candidates. The election commission often did not recognise some of the political challengers' collected signatures. This resulted in authorities embarking on a search for potential tax irregularities and property declarations connected to these candidates just before official registration. The two most significant "candidates of hope" were ultimately not registered by the state. The official reasons given for the refusal of Babaryka were "irregularities in tax declaration and the financing of the campaign by a foreign state". Tsapkala submitted nearly 160,000 signatures, while the election commission recognised less than 80,000. This automatically excluded him from the presidential race. Only Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was registered from among the "candidates of hope".

Old/new style of election

Following the announcement of the registration results, mass protests broke out across the country. These were brutally suppressed by OMON (special police forces) and the state militia. The authorities' belief that this lack of registration would undermine the mobilisation of Belarusian society were completely disproven and miscalculated. As a result of Tsapkala and Babaryka being unable to register in the election, the population supporting the "candidates of hope" simply united around Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Tsikhanouskaya's campaign was supported by Tsapkala's wife, Veranika, and Babaryka's campaign coordinator Maria Kalesnikava. This led to talks in the country that Belarus's revolution would have a female face. A joint photo of these three courageous women quickly circulated in media around the world.

Tsikhanouskaya suddenly and unexpectedly became the leader of the majority of the Belarusian protest movement. Her campaign's distinguishing feature was that she had no specific agenda or prior political experience. She has often claimed that her main goal is to simply "change the president" and that she does not want to be leader herself. Tsikhanouskaya's main promise was to organise free and democratic presidential elections if she wins. This simple and clear message has produced tangible results – large crowds come to Tsikhanouskaya's official

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pre-election meetings. About 10,000 people gathered at a rally in Gomel, whilst over 18,000 appeared in Brest. A record 63,000 participants gathered in Minsk for a rally. According to the calculations of independent observers, over 150,000 people have attended Tsikhanouskaya's official meetings as a whole. For Belarus, this is a significant achievement. After these mass rallies, the authorities began to limit opportunities for Tsikhanouskaya's staff to meet voters, especially in smaller towns.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya suddenly and unexpectedly became the leader of the majority of the Belarusian protest movement.

Early voting began on August 4th. This method of voting is considered by international observers and analysts to be one of the classic tools used to manipulate election results. Early voting lasted until election day and the possibility of a reliable observation of this process is extremely limited. This year's campaign saw the authorities urge citizens to participate. Officially, this appeal was a means of counteracting the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, it was ultimately related to the fear that few people would show up to support the authorities.

The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was particularly eager to encourage early voting in foreign polling stations as support for the president was the lowest among Belarusians living abroad. According to official data, almost 42 per cent of voters took part in early voting. This is a record in recent Belarusian history. Independent observers do not agree with this figure and point to numerous violations of electoral law during this process, such as the inflation of turnout figures and the expulsion of observers from polling stations.

Active public support for Tsikhanouskaya clearly worried the Belarusian leader. During Lukashenka's speech to the nation on August 4th, the Belarusian leader looked visibly nervous and tired. The president made it clear that the state is on full alert to prevent destabilisation and that it will not hesitate to use force if necessary. A strong public mood in favour of protest and a desperate, determined state quickly became an explosive mixture.

The voting day on August 9th was critical for Belarusian society and the ruling elite. Long lines of voters quickly appeared in front of polling stations. In front of the Belarusian embassies, crowds of several thousand people gathered, but only a fraction of these potential voters actually managed to vote. In Belarus, the government shut off the internet and blocked various social networks and messenging apps. The army was brought into Minsk and in the evening the capital and other cities were effectively controlled by the military.

The election commission announced an exit poll for the elections which claimed that Lukashenka had gained over 80 per cent of the vote. His main rival Tsikha-

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nouskaya officially gained about ten per cent. Electoral procedures were only observed by a Commonwealth of Independent States mission which did not notice any irregularities. Interestingly, some polling stations broke with the government's line and began to publish the election's "true results", in which Tsikhanouskaya won in the first round. This enraged many disgruntled citizens, who soon appeared on the streets of many Belarusian cities. Peaceful protests lasted all night and law enforcement, the militia and OMON, responded with brute force.

The change has already happened

This year's presidential campaign broke several records. Although they could also be described as "anti-records". First of all, it is clear that social mobilisation occurred at a level not seen in 20 years. This was evidenced by the protests and the long queues in front of polling stations. Turnout was also record-breaking, which, according to official statistics, was over 84 per cent. Peaceful protests spread across all of Belarus and over 5,000 people were detained in the early days. Many of these people face up to 15 years in prison. The militia and OMON often used military equipment, rubber ammunition and stun grenades against the demonstrators.

Hundreds of peaceful demonstrators mutilated during the pacification were taken to hospitals. Workers of some state-owned factories went on strike. There was also information about protesters killed and injured. After two days of brutal clashes between citizens and the militia, Tsikhanouskaya was forced to leave the country and went to Lithuania. In a statement which appeared recorded under pressure, she calls on her supporters to "not to stand against police".

Given the conditions, the president's official result of over 80 per cent also seemed to be record-breaking. Nobody doubts that this was not the true result and that the elections were neither fair nor democratic. It is puzzling, however, as to why such a high number was even reported by the authorities. If Lukashenka's result would have been between 60 and 70 per cent, it is possible that the riots would not have happened. The day after the election, the president announced that foreign powers were responsible for both the demonstrations and the disruptions to the internet. According to him, these forces supposedly aimed to destabilise the situation in the country.

Hardly anyone believed that Lukashenka would not "win" these elections. Yet, it is also important to consider how people will react to these results in the long run, as well as the next steps of the Belarusian authorities. This year's presidential campaign was unique. There are several factors that will influence the dynamics of Belarusian politics in the coming months.

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First, the Belarusian ruling elite is clearly in a difficult situation. Desires to diversify foreign policy, which have been pursued for several years, has changed the image of Belarus on the international stage. The normalisation of relations with the West and attempts to become slightly more independent from Russian political influence have changed the nature of the country's social and political relations. There is a risk that the behaviour of the authorities during the elections may negatively affect relations with both the West and Russia. This could subsequently lead to international isolation. Lukashenka's official result of 80 per cent proves that the president has become increasingly detached from reality. The question is whether he is able to fully control the system he has created.

Second, Belarusian society has changed at a demographic level. There is now a generation of young people entering political life who have different expectations and ideas about the world compared to their parents. Most importantly, they do not remember the 1990s, which is why Lukashenka's narrative is completely alien to them. Both the political elite and the opposition will have to try to appeal to this new generation.

Third, and most importantly, the coronavirus pandemic and the presidential campaign have revealed the Belarusian citizenry's impressive capability to mobilise in support of societal co-operation, solidarity and resistance. This mobilisation and politicisation of society will not simply disappear after the elections. Ultimately, the election saw the breakdown of traditional divides between the government and a decades-old political opposition. Many new politicians emerged who did not want to be associated with either the authorities or the established opposition. This may further exacerbate issues regarding the political structures surrounding the authorities and traditional opposition. New players have presented themselves as an alternative to the existing system and have shown themselves to be capable of amassing an unprecedented level of public support.

The election figures are by no means the most important result of recent events in Belarus. The real question is what will happen now regarding the incredible level of social and political mobilisation that has developed in Belarus in recent months? NEE

Editor's note: This article went to print a week after the election and as the protests were still taking place. Visit New Eastern Europe online for the latest developments and commentaries on the dynamic situation in Belarus.

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Coronavirus pandemic seriously challenges Russian economy

OLEG BUKLEMISHEV

A combination of socio-economic factors observed in Russia not only indicates that the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the country's economy will be profound, but that the recovery might take longer than it appears today. Much will depend on the authorities' readiness to support household incomes and business activity through accumulated reserves and borrowings.

Russia has approached the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic with the economy not in great condition. Back in 2010–2012 the Russian economy was growing faster than the world economy. Yet since then, its global share has fallen by about one-fifth. In 2014, following the events in Ukraine, the Russian economy suffered a double blow as a result of lower oil prices and the impact of sanctions imposed on it by the United States, the European Union and a number of other countries.

These measures have significantly limited the inflow of foreign capital into the country and complicated the prospects of Russian companies for international co-operation. In recent years, weak dynamics marked almost all key economic parameters – from investments in fixed capital to real disposable income. Due to the neglect of structural reforms, the government has failed to reduce its economic dependence on oil and gas, and volatile conditions of the hydrocarbon market have continued to influence the country's socio-economic situation.

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Profound and diverse

This stagnation has inevitably caused the authorities great concern. President Vladimir Putin has declared the objective on achieving economic growth rates not lower than the global average. The so-called "national projects" – development programmes in various spheres (from environment protection and health care to transport infrastructure) – have become the main instrument for accelerating economic growth. Although most experts have expressed scepticism about the potential impact of these national projects due to their insufficient scope and vague focus, it was planned that over 25 trillion roubles (288 billion euros) would be spent over five years at the expense of budgets at all levels and co-financing from private investors. According to the government's official forecast, Russian GDP should be increasing at a rate of over three per cent per year as early as 2021.

Having ignited a new global economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic seriously undermined these plans. Quite soon it became clear that the previous goals of advanced growth are no longer relevant, the national projects in their original configuration will be impossible and the negative effects on the Russian economy will be profound and diverse. In mid-March, the first measures to limit the spread of the virus included the closure of external borders, a ban on mass gatherings and the suspension of full-time classes in educational institutions. However, despite the restrictions imposed, the rapid spread of coronavirus was not prevented. For this reason, a policy of "non-working days with preservation of wages" was introduced at the end of March, determining the suspension of a number of production facilities, closure of shops (except for grocery stores and pharmacies), as well as a full suspension of urban service sector (with only an online provision). These restrictions were extended until May 8th, with many remaining in place even after the end of that period.

The country has undertaken urgent measures in mobilising resources of the health system to combat the pandemic while at the same time performing broad-based testing. Earlier, however, the infrastructure for combating infectious diseases and the number of specialised doctors was significantly reduced as part of the "optimisation of the health system" programme which further complicated the existing challenges. Nevertheless, by the end of May, 177,000 beds, or approximately 15 per cent of the country's total capacity, were made operational and reoriented for coronavirus treatment. More than 400,000 physicians and medical staff worked with coronavirus patients with the promise of increased payments.

At the same time, the mortality rate among medical personnel in Russia was the highest in the world, several times higher than in other countries. By mid-June more than six per cent of those who died from coronavirus were medical workers.

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It may indicate both the underreporting of the mortality statistics and the poor provision of protective equipment for medical personnel.

As the situation differed greatly from region to region, the federal government decided to grant regional authorities discretionary powers in determining necessary quarantine measures. As a result, the country has adopted many simultaneous quarantine regimes and imposed diverse restrictions in different areas of business activity and on the movement of people and goods within the Russian territory. Some federal subjects, including Moscow, have introduced electronic monitoring mechanisms for various categories of citizens as a means of enforcing the "self-isolation" regime and imposed fines for potential violations.

Consequences of the pandemic

Russian economic policies were quite different from other governments. Most countries ensured support for its citizens and businesses in order to mitigate the consequences of the economic slowdown. In Russia, despite the presence of substantial oil and gas savings (as of early April – 165 billion US dollars, or 11.3 per cent of GDP), securing these reserves have become almost the top policy priority.

In the first half of the year, federal budget expenditures increased by 27.9 per cent compared to the same period last year; the total amount of support provided to the economy was no more than three per cent of GDP. These measures are mainly represented by payments to families with children, increase in unemployment benefits, tax holidays for businesses in the affected sectors and the financing of companies that retain employment and pay wages. As a result of a decline in economic activity, price growth slowed down and the Bank of Russia was able to reduce its interest rate.

> A sharp drop in oil prices on the world market augmented the negative effects of the virus and the quarantine restrictions.

For Russian businesses, the five-week holiday inevitably meant a cutback in production. In March, a sharp drop in oil prices on the world market augmented the negative effects of the virus and quarantine restrictions. In May, Gazprom's average export price fell below a profitability level. Russian companies' compliance with the OPEC+ agreement to reduce oil production caused another blow to the domestic economy which led to a one-third drop in total exports in the first five months of the year. According to *The Economist*, the rouble represents one of the most undervalued world currencies and, as a result, import volumes have also fallen markedly. External dynamics have had a considerable impact on the federal budget. In contrast to the correspond-

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ing period last year, oil and gas revenues (oil production tax and export duties on hydrocarbons and products of their processing) decreased by 35.4 per cent.

By May, one million more people were unemployed, which accounts for 6.1 per cent of the workforce. In total, almost half of those employed, 35 million people, remain at risk of unemployment. Income levels have also undergone dramatic changes. While one in five reported a significant drop in earnings in the wake of the pandemic, one in ten declared a complete loss of income. Almost 45 per cent of Russians live on less than 15,000 roubles (875 euros) a month, while more than 60 per cent have no savings at all. Should those who do have savings experience a loss of income, they will be supported by savings for no longer than six months. Moreover, more than half of Russian households are paying back at least one loan.

Not only has there been a general decline in household incomes, there has also been a significant reduction in consumer activity. The decline in retail turnover in the first half of the year is 6.4 per cent. The pandemic crisis has had a negative impact on the country's economic activity: compared to the same period last year, there was a 12 per cent drop in GDP in April, and nearly 11 per cent drop in May (the first six months of the year saw a 4.2 per cent drop).

What's next?

The first shock of production decline as well as the fall in oil prices has now passed. Even though Russia could possibly avoid a second wave of the virus, and an antiviral vaccine could be developed for widespread use soon, experts are not certain that a swift economic recovery would follow the period of crisis.

Even after the end of the first outbreak, and faced with a sharp increase in uncertainty, businesses will, for some time, opt for more cautious patterns of behaviour. They will cut back on "unnecessary" costs, including investments and issuing redundancies. In order to save on office space, they will request that employees permanently work remotely, opening the way to a vicious circle of reducing production activity. Industries such as airline transport, commercial real estate, tourism, catering and entertainment are those most likely to be affected.

Shortened working hours and possible dismissals will reduce household incomes and increase economic insecurity for those burdened with credit obligations or without full access to social protections. Households will be lowering expenditures and creating rainy day savings. In other words, a return to pre-crisis consumption patterns can be very slow, if they recover at all.

Finally, the situation of the global economy remains far from optimistic. In a number of countries, including the US, Brazil and India, coronavirus infections

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continue to grow. In the meantime, US-China disagreements are intensifying and threatening to turn into a full-fledged trade war which will undoubtedly have a considerable deterrent effect on global economic development. As a leading supplier of raw material exports, Russia has traditionally been very sensitive to global economic dynamics; it is not interested in stagnation that could lead to a drop in demand and prices for energy resources.

Much will depend on the Russian government's readiness to support household incomes and commercial activity in the country through accumulated reserves and borrowings. Unfortunately, for the time being, the authorities are determined to economise. In the coming period, cuts to budget expenditures are planned for a number of unprotected areas.

Considering the outcomes of the current year, the Bank of Russia expects a five per cent decline in GDP. Although the recovery of the economy will begin in 2021, it will not be able to compensate for the economic collapse. Next year will see the introduction of a tax on large bank deposits, as well as the transition from a flat scale of income tax towards a more progressive system. The decrease in inflation and interest rates does not seem likely to stimulate investment in an economy with high-level risks. It is estimated that real unemployment may become more visible and double the current levels to more than 10 million people. Heavier international sanctions against Russia, at the moment, seem far more likely than their easing.

Therefore, a combination of socio-economic factors not only indicates that the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the country's economy will be profound, but that the recovery might take longer than it appears today. In order to overcome the long-term and painful challenges ahead, it is crucial to revise the state's goals and priorities, implement deep structural reforms in many areas of life and normalise relations with the international community. NEE

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Russian digital authoritarianism at the time of COVID-19

MARIA DOMAŃSKA

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly accelerated the use of digital surveillance technologies in Russia which had been planned earlier but tested only on a limited scale. Their increased use by the state will not end with the pandemic, but will determine the "new normal" where civil liberties are restricted more than ever before.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a classic example of an extraordinary situation which adds to the discussion regarding the ideal balance between public security and civil liberties. As expected, in Vladimir Putin's Russia, security has been treated as a pretext to expand the state's authority at the cost of individuals' rights. The pandemic has been a catalyst which accelerates and expands implementation of advanced digital technologies that are aimed to tighten the authoritarian hold over society. The authorities use them to monitor the citizens, manipulate behaviour, coerce people into political loyalty and to repress the opposition.

Before the pandemic

In Russia, the internet, digital technologies and digital rights have been subject to growing securitisation, at least since 2012. This trend – which is the process of the state turning political matters into urgent "security" issues that need to be

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dealt with – is well-evidenced by the growing number of repressive laws aimed at restricting freedom of speech, privacy of correspondence and information pluralism. Mounting control over the Russian segment of the internet (the Runet) is discussed in, among other studies, the Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net* reports which rank Russia as a "not free" country, pointing to the continued deepening of its "digital authoritarianism".

The systemic attack on online free speech started as a response to the mass protests which took place in Russia before Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. Those demonstrations were coordinated and publicised through social media on an unprecedented scale. This growing role of the grassroots digital communication, in a way, resembled the Arab Spring which the Kremlin interpreted as a series of coups d'état organised with US-developed technologies. As Putin has put it, "the internet is a CIA project".

Two factors determine the Kremlin's attitude towards the internet as information and social communication space. First, it is the logic of the authoritarian regime which treats the safety of the authorities and social stability as uncompromising priorities. This explains why the Russian authorities fear the internet, recognising it as a popular source of information which offers an alternative to TV propaganda and is a channel of a grassroots mobilisation for social protest. These fears find ground in public opinion polls which now show an increase in protest mood and demand for change among Russians, as well as the lowest level of public support for Putin recorded in the last 20 years.

The second factor is the method of operation of Russian security services (from where the key decision-makers come from) and their perception of the outside world. Namely, in their view the internet is first and foremost an element of hard security: a battlefield in the information war between Russia and the West and an area of rivalry with foreign intelligence services. The latter are believed to be working towards destabilising and disintegrating Russia. The dissemination of information critical of the Kremlin by Russian internet users is also recognised as a part of this war. Thus the digital world is seen as a strategic defence line, one that does not follow state borders, but can be found inside them – within the Russian society.

> The Russian authorities fear the internet, seeing it as a popular source of information and an alternative to TV propaganda.

By 2020 quite a large number of legal regulations limiting free speech were already adopted in Russia. Their scope includes: restrictions on media freedom; increased censorship; restricted privacy of correspondence; the blocking of websites without court ruling; growing and uncontrolled access by security services to

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personal data of the internet users; and repressions of the critics of the authorities. The "icing on the cake" came, however, with the 2019 law on "sovereign internet", which formally aims to create an infrastructure for the safe functioning of the Runet, should it get cut off from foreign servers.

Yet, everything suggests that the Kremlin's real intention is to create a smart, centralised system of internet management in order to block internet access domestically (in selected regions or for selected groups of users), for example in the case of mass public protests. It would permit the authorities to block not only selected IP addresses, but also particular web content and to selectively slow down the flow of specific data or online traffic on specific routes. The Russian authorities already have a record of cutting access to the internet. It took place during the 2018–2019 protests in Ingushetia and in 2019, during summer demonstrations in Moscow. Although the laws passed so far have not yet been used on a mass scale, and some provisions cannot be executed, they do play the role of a "bogey" which is used to discourage people from political activism and force them to self-censorship.

Two sides of the coin

Regardless of the authorities' plans to control the cyber world in a similar way as the physical world, the internet and digital technologies remain one of the few areas where the true modernisation of the Russian state takes place. The last number of years have witnessed a drastic increase in Russians accessing the internet, particularly mobile internet. As a result of this, large parts of the Russian society are now active online and have access to digitalised public services.

On the other side of the coin, the Russian state has gathered large amounts of data on its citizens, including their activities and political views expressed online. For over a decade this has been especially the case in Moscow, the wealthiest part of Russia, which is inhabited by around a tenth of the country's population. The city's mayor, Sergey Sobyanin, reportedly set for himself an ambitious goal of creating a "smart city" programme which is aimed at the large-scale digitalisation of public services and urban space. Upon its implementation, Moscow ranked first out of 40 places in the 2018 United Nations' ranking of cities with the best developed e-administration.

This accomplishment, however, means that the Moscow city authorities are in possession of huge quantities of data that can be used to enhance urban demographic, transport or supply provision planning. It can also be used to effectively manage the so-called information risk, including the monitoring of social media in order to recognise people's attitudes towards initiatives and decisions of the local

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government. The authorities claim that the algorithms used as a part of the "smart city" system are aggregated and data are depersonalised. However, the functions of these algorithms show that they can easily be used for personal identification. Even more worrisome is that the procedures of data collection and their use are not available to the public.

In 2019 Moscow ranked 18th in the global ranking of cities with the most developed urban monitoring systems (measured by the number of CCTV cameras per 1,000 residents). Since 2017 this system has been using – on an increasingly greater scale – facial recognition techniques, which is in no way regulated by Russian law. There have already been cases of data collected in this way used for the identification and punishing of anti-government protesters.

Lastly, digital technologies, apart from their role in the security of Putin's regime, are also a huge source of profits for Russian state enterprises as well as their large volume of contractors. This is especially true for Rostec corporation whose CEO, Sergey Chemezov, is one of Putin's closest acquaintances. They worked together back in the KGB and now Chemezov is one of the main beneficiaries of Putin's kleptocratic rule.

Pandemic surveillance

COVID-19 only accelerated the above processes. The fight against the spread of the virus, which includes the monitoring of social adherence to restrictions related to quarantine and self-isolation, has naturally increased the digitalisation of the public sphere. At the same time, the pandemic has become a testing ground for surveillance techniques, personal data collection and their larger application. It has also increased online censorship and allowed for the mastering of election fraud techniques. All of these will no doubt be used in the future to further eliminate political opponents and suppress social discontent.

Among the most important surveillance innovations are special QR codes ("digital passes") which were introduced in many Russian regions to allow for the control of people's movement, as well as the "social monitoring" application which has been introduced in Moscow. The app was envisioned as a device for monitoring the health status of those who are at home in quarantine. It also enables speedy access to emergency medical assistance.

The application also tracks the geographic location of its users and obtains an unidentified amount of their data. While installing it on their devices, phone owners agree to provide access to almost everything that is already there. As a result, sensitive data are delivered to the city council's servers and are in no way protected.

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The authorities can also control the observance of public health regulations through geographic location data which is provided by cell phone operators and they have access to the geographic records of bank card payments.

The speed at which the implementation of these technologies in Russia took place, not to mention the frequent lack of appropriate technical and financial resources, explains both the number of glitches that emerge from their functioning and numerous complaints about system errors. The latter can cost users high fees for the alleged breach of quarantine provisions and lead to data leakages which in Russia are already a serious problem. However, its causes are not only limited to poor technical protection of data. The selling of personal data by officials of public administration and security services is also quite common.

The use of facial recognition software has also expanded greatly in Russia. Back in January 2020 Moscow authorities purchased the FindFace technology from NTechLab (one of its shareholders is the state-controlled Rostec corporation). According to media reports the software allows for "the tracking of suspicious activities in selected houses and stairwells". This, for example, can translate into a full quarantine for some areas, but also the identification of registered residents and non-residents. Moreover, Russian doctors were instructed to photograph all patients diagnosed with COVID-19. These photographs were added to databases and allowed the facial recognition software to improve its functioning.

Importantly, the use of anybody's biometric data without their written consent breaches personal data legislation and the constitutional right to privacy. Based on the observations of Roskomsvoboda, an organisation monitoring online freedom in Russia, surveillance usually changes people's behaviour in public spaces and discourages them from using their constitutional rights, including the right to public gatherings. Considering that there is no independent judiciary in Russia and security services are notorious for breaching and bending the law, the potential cost for a citizen of being falsely identified is high.

> The fight against the spread of the virus has naturally increased the digitalisation of the public sphere.

With the pretext of preventing panic and disinformation referring to the course of the pandemic, Russian authorities increased censorship in media, including online. They did so by expanding the already existing censorship laws to include criminal liability for spreading "fake news" on public health issues. This includes information on the scale of the pandemic in Russia which is not in line with the official version presented by the authorities, but also information on the authorities' reactions, readiness of the health care system to fight the pandemic, etc. These regulations were introduced at a time when official data on the pandemic were

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highly unreliable. In some regions, for example, COVID-19 statistics were underreported by almost twentyfold. This was partially a result of methodological and testing problems, something rather common in many countries worldwide. Much more often, however, the underreporting was politically motivated.

One of the reasons for the manipulation of COVID-19 numbers was the regime's rush to hold a vote on the amendments to the Russian constitution. This was deemed crucial to cement the current authoritarian regime and allow Putin to remain in power even for 16 more years. Under the pretext of increased epidemiological risk, this time Russians were allowed to cast their vote also electronically. However, this form of voting, which was already tested in Moscow regional elections in 2019, proved to be highly non-transparent even by Russian standards. Illustratively, the Kremlin-backed candidates who then ran in districts where e-voting was used obtained much better results than those who ran in districts with traditional polling stations.

In Russia e-voting is indeed a black box. In addition to some serious technical deficiencies, it lacks the guarantee of secrecy or any form of control over the counting process. Hence, it is impossible to prove any malpractice. This, in turn, gives wide room for manoeuvre to those who want to rig the results or exert administrative pressure on voters. Unsurprisingly, many reports pointed out violations during the constitutional vote, which took place between June 25th and July 1st. They included: trading personal data, online registration (or voting) on behalf of somebody else, as well as forcing employees to vote online so that their superiors could control their participation in this constitutional "plebiscite" and guarantee a larger turnout.

Forecasting trends

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly accelerated the implementation of advanced technologies in Russia which had been planned earlier but tested only on a limited scale. Their increased use by the state will not end with the pandemic, but will determine the "new normal" where civil liberties are restricted more than ever before.

It is only a matter of time how fast the data collected during the pandemic will be integrated into state-controlled databases which store extensive data on Russian citizens. Already in April 2020 the long-planned legislation was passed to establish a unified federal register, which will contain many kinds of information about each citizen. Until now these data were dispersed in different systems or were only available in paper form. The register is Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's flagship

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project. Officially, it is meant to improve the quality of state management, which includes forecasts on long-term demographic and socio-economic trends as well as to enhance public services.

Given the situation in the Russian Federation, there are many questions as to: who will have access to the register and by what criteria but also in what way will the information be used and how to protect the data from leaking or trading. There is considerable risk that this register could be used for political purposes like, for example, repressing oppositionists. It is possible that with time the register could be linked with the "digital personal identification document" programme that would replace traditional paper IDs. Also worrisome is the idea to introduce – following the steps of the Chinese – something called the "social credit system", which initially would only be applied to immigrants. It could include digital profile of a migrant linked to a special application and contain information on their social and legal status, biometric data, health status and criminal record.

While the discussion on the need to regulate the digital dimension of the government's anti-pandemic activities is quite vivid in the West, Russia seems to be following the Chinese path, even though not as advanced. In the future, which is expected to bring about a deep economic recession and further decrease in public support for the authorities, the Kremlin (out of fear of large social protests) will attempt to perfect the existing defence mechanisms. Consequently, a greater use of digital technologies in Russia may lead it to adopt a model of rule which is less based on direct suppression (something that would be quite costly, politically) as it is on persuasion and manipulation techniques. Such forms of control and influence would possibly entail a better concealment of the real nature of Russian authoritarianism. NEE

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The pandemic's toll on Lviv

KATARZYNA ŁOZA

Lvivians have much in common with Italians. They enjoy the company of others and lead social lives. They cannot live without coffee and gossip, and they gladly start conversations with strangers. Maybe this is why we have the highest infection rates in Ukraine.

I live in Lviv, where I work as a tour guide. I tell people stories. Today I have a story to share with you. It is about Lviv, Ukraine and guided tours in the time of coronavirus. The pandemic did not come to us unexpectedly. After all, we had been watching the news. It did, however, come suddenly, like a wave that covered the entire tourist sector and beyond. On March 9th, I was returning to Lviv from a weekend away in the mountains. Life was going on as usual. That day I picked up an advance payment for a hotel group stay that was planned for June. I also received an e-mail informing me of a cancelled trip scheduled for March 21st. This request surprised me and seemed unfounded at the time. After all, we only had one confirmed case of coronavirus in all of Ukraine! I suggested we should observe the situation, but the following day I changed my mind, thus returning the advance payment.

After that things changed pretty rapidly. The following day we received notification that our kids' school would be closing within two days. The school was going to begin teaching remotely. Gatherings were prohibited, public transport was brought to a halt and most shops were closed. Cultural institutions and a majority of stores were forced to shut their doors, followed by restaurants and cafés, and then, finally, churches. One of the restaurant owners decided to close his business before there was a decision made by the authorities. "If it even saves one life – it is worth it," he said. Today, we know that one of his premises – a jazz club – did not survive the crisis and it will not re-open after the pandemic.

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Homeward bound

From today's perspective all these measures seem logical, yet every one of these restrictions was a blow. On Thursday we decided to postpone for a week a movie we were planning on seeing. Little did we know that the next day all cinemas would be closed for several months. On the fora dedicated to tour guides, there were discussions on whether to return advance payments and postpone scheduled tours. Some ridiculed the threat, while others encouraged visitors to come: "I urge the desperate to join the tourist traffic in the direction of Ukraine. But not in groups larger than four busses at a time because only gatherings up to 200 people are legal in Lviv" (Maria Pyż, "A remedy to the panic is a trip to Lviv"). Someone wrote that he was surprised that his group which had scheduled for the first week of May suddenly cancelled.

The situation really illustrated who feels at home and where. My daughter, who studies in Warsaw, returned to Lviv on the day they announced the first restrictions. Meanwhile, a few friends, who have been living in Ukraine for many years, returned to Poland on the first day of the quarantine. Massive queues were forming in Korczowa, on the border with those attempting to enter Ukraine – trucks, busses and cars were forced to wait dozens of hours to cross. A majority of the returnees were Ukrainians working in Europe. Their most popular destinations were from Poland and Italy, which made them frequent targets for accusations that they were bringing the virus back home. We can imagine how this is somehow similar to how lepers were treated in the Middle Ages.

Everything was closed, including borders. Lviv was emptying out. It also became more beautiful.

One of the first people in Ukraine who got infected brought the virus from Italy. After her return, she took an active part in social activities – participating in demonstrations, and meeting the village leader. Once it was confirmed she had the virus, she shared videos of herself on social media begging for her neighbours not to set fire to her home.

The following weeks put any doubts and discussions to rest. Everything was closed, including borders. Lviv was emptying out. It also became more beautiful. Spring had arrived earlier than usual. At first we were happy that we would have more time for reading books, watching TV shows, taking walks and anything else that had eluded us in normal times. It turned out there was much to do in the house, especially watching over the kids. Schools shifted most of their responsibilities to parents, and classes were rare or only consistent of homework. Older teachers did not always cope with the internet and new technologies. Children, on the other

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Photo: Jorge Láscar (CC) www.flickr.com

The centre in Lviv is usually a bustling place, full of locals and tourists. During the pandemic lockdown, the city emptied out.

hand, quickly learnt how to disturb lessons and write assessments online with the aid of aunts and uncles.

Highest infection rates

Ukrainians, from the very beginning, did not take the virus seriously. Only 10 per cent stayed at home after the first easing of restrictions in early May. Thirty-seven per cent left their homes multiple times a day. They did not care about social distancing, or properly wearing face masks. They gathered in small clusters on trams discussing the current situation.

Lvivians have much in common with Italians. They enjoy the company of others and have active social lives. They cannot live without coffee and gossip, and they gladly start conversations with strangers. This is maybe why we have the highest rates of infection in Ukraine. The Lviv region, with a population of 2.5 million

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people, has the most confirmed cases in the country (almost 9,000 by early August), more than the larger Kyiv region (above 7,000). After the closure of parks, pedestrians would warn each other about the location of police patrols, as fines for violating the quarantine were between 17,000 and 34,000 hryvnia (522–1044 euros). There were jokes about how it was easier for sober pedestrians to get fined than drunk drivers. It did not, however, discourage people from walking and fines were really a deterrent than something to be actually enforced.

Companies were quick to adapt to the new set of circumstances by releasing dedicated products. Soon socks appeared on the market that had "stay at home" or "wash your hands" written on them. Other motifs drawn on the socks were toilet paper and buckwheat (basic necessities in Ukraine), or even pairs of socks depicting the national bard, Taras Shevchenko, in a face mask asking "Have you already written your testament?" (Shevchenko's *Testament* is one of his most famous poems).

The pandemic has revealed the dire situation of the Ukrainian health sector, which was already an open secret.

The pandemic has revealed the dire situation of the Ukrainian health sector, which was already an open secret. Facing a disaster, state run hospitals, lacking basic supplies, began to beg for help and additional funding. Ukrainians, who are accustomed to corruption in hospitals where every procedure has its price, were reluctant to answer the call. They pointed out the previous greed and irregularities in how hospitals functioned. At the same time, it was the doctors and nurses who would sacrifice themselves the most, working in difficult conditions with untrusting patients – who sometimes had to wait two weeks before receiving test results. Some doctors would pay the ultimate price – like the head of the Army Hospital in Lviv, Ivan Hayda, or the head of the rescue service in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ihor Kovaliuk. A friend of mine who was a doctor also died, after intubating an infected patient during an operation.

Disinformation

During the first weeks of the quarantine there were also many reports of scams occurring. Many were connected to the trade of disinfectants and face masks, which suddenly disappeared from pharmacies. Later these would return to the market at twice the price. Headlines in the newspaper illustrated the seriousness of the situation: "Armed robbery on a car transporting face masks. 10,000 were stolen"; "Italian police have arrested a Ukrainian woman selling face masks on the street in Milano". The price for a face mask on the black market would reach 90 hryvnia

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(2.70 euros) a piece. Before the pandemic they were priced at 8 hryvnia (25 euro cents) and now just five hryvnia (15 euro cents). The same price change affected disinfectant products. The police even shut down an illegal factory making such products and falsely labelling them as "German" cleaning products.

The amount of false information circulating around the virus was incredible. For example, towns were sprayed with a toxic substance from helicopters; hospitals would only accept coronavirus patients while others would die at home; and pensioners would get a benefit from the state if they only stated the number on their credit card. These misgivings were often created and spread by specific people, sometimes the same ones who disseminate Russian propaganda. A few people were arrested for spreading these falsehoods.

A unique centre for disinformation was the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

A unique centre for disinformation was the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, whose leaders would deny the risks and were calling for participation in their services. The former patriarch of the Kyiv Orthodox Church, Filaret, blamed the coronavirus pandemic on homosexuals. He claimed that Holy Communion, shared among the parishioners with the same spoon, was incapable of becoming infected. In the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, Patriarch Pavel, known for his passion for glamour, also claimed that the best protection against the virus was faith. Frequent visits to the church and walking the Way of the Cross would offer even better protection. Unfortunately, almost all of the monks at the Kyiv monastery became infected with coronavirus. Police cut it off from the world for an entire month and Pavel ended up in hospital. From there he asked his faithful for more generous financial contributions because of the situation.

Another outbreak was in the Pochayiv Lavra in Volhynia, an important pilgrimage destination. Authorities were forced to cut off access to the town and monastery. The head of the Pochayiv Lavra, Volodymyr, supported a statement of the Moldovan Orthodox Church which blamed the authorities for working with Bill Gates, who they claimed was responsible for spreading the virus in order to insert microchips into people alongside the vaccination and to control them via 5G technology. Volodymyr noted: "This statement is relevant to the highest degree and is in tune with the largest challenges of modernity which the Orthodox Church faces."

There were also rather funny situations when the clergies of different faiths would drive around their parishes with cars, trucks or even helicopters trickling holy water on the surroundings, while chanting prayers against the disease. There were rebellious clergy who would break the quarantine by letting in parishioners through the back door, praying at night or even openly during the day. The deputy

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mayor of Dnipro found a strange way to punish such clergyman by digging a deep ditch in front of the entrance to the church. He proclaimed that he had a vision the night before that there would be a water pipe failure and an unexploded bomb in that ditch.

Waiting for a spark

The longer we were stuck at home, the more uncertainty and frustration grew in society. Conspiracy theories were abundant with people exclaiming: "I don't know anyone infected – so the virus cannot be real." These notions were enhanced because of the low trust Ukrainians have for their authorities. It was said that they would prolong the quarantine in order to steal more, get rich on taxes, raise slaves who would work for a bowl of soup, and so that pawn shops and banks could get rich. Other ideas included the destruction of small businesses, the introduction of anti-Ukrainian legislation that would destroy the nation or topple the government. There were even rumours that doctors were infecting themselves to get compensation and that oligarchs had secured respirators for themselves because they did not count on the national health service.

The authorities did not do much to strengthen trust in them. During the pandemic the minister of health changed twice, with as many as six central headquarters responsible for combatting the virus. Journalists discovered that in Koncha-Zaspa, an upscale neighbourhood close to Kyiv, restaurants were open during the quarantine. Of course, only "their own" were let inside. One member of parliament claimed that he was just using a trail behind the restaurant, where he walked with another MP keeping a distance of two metres, while naturally discussing the current state affairs. Someone else who broke the quarantine rules was President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who went to a café with his co-workers while his wife was in hospital with COVID-19. They all received a fine of 17,000 hryvnia (522 euros) with the exception of Zelenskyy. Lawyers are still struggling with the question if it is possible to fine the president. The Supreme Court is still investigating the case.

We tour guides, like many others, have been forced to live different lives. Some of us live off our savings and others aim at developing new skills or hoping the crisis will be over soon. Others have a second source of income and can sleep safely. Some even organise tours for their colleagues. It is not all about the money, of course. Yet for the majority of us, tour guiding is not only a job but a way of life and self-realisation, a way of charging our batteries before the off season hits.

In the words of one of my closest friends: "I am under the impression that I am on a holiday 'at my own expense', like in a different reality which I don't know

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when it will end … Some of my thoughts are about changing my way of life, even though I have worked in this profession for 18 years. I am a person that can work only with something which brings me joy, so I hope for a situation that will affect me. I am waiting for a spark. I have no time at all as I can finally do the things I was unable to earlier. I read, cook, return to the profession I was educated to do, embroidery, fashion and sewing. I hope that I can return to music and maybe write something, or not. In the summer I go to the countryside for fruit and berries. Honestly – I am happy."

In the first two months of the pandemic in Lviv there were some 800 cases of COVID-19. After two months, the quarantine was slowly lifted. It was removed slower in Lviv than other regions because the infection rates were higher here. During this time there were more than 6,000 infections. The real number is unknown as there have only been 17,000 tests carried out for one million people.

Paradoxically the streets are full with open beer gardens and restaurants. Beauty parlours, spas and gyms are also frequently attended and you can go for a walk in the park. Public transport is loaded with passengers to the brim. Foreign travel destinations have been replaced by the Black Sea coast, as Ukrainians are not allowed into most other countries, while many others have already spent the money they were saving for summer holidays. Nonetheless, we want to be happy. But still, we cannot go to the cinema!

Translated by Daniel Gleichgewicht

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Hardly a Georgian dream

Confronting COVID-19 in the midst of an election year

MACKENZIE BALDINGER

Like much of the world, Georgia has experienced the first half of 2020 in a way that could not have been predicted. The ruling Georgian Dream party faced the difficult choice of sparing economic losses or imposing strict regulations to maintain public health. The COVID-19 virus, while largely curtailed in Georgia by decisive action, has left many economic woes in a country that will only be intensified by an imminent election.

This year is shaping up to be unlike anything that could have been anticipated. This was a year that many expected to see dominated by Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, the Summer Olympics in Tokyo and a highly-contested US presidential election in the autumn. Instead, the first six months saw a global shutdown and subsequent economic and health crisis caused by COVID-19. The country of Georgia, which anticipated ten months of mud-slinging and campaign promises in the run up to its October parliamentary elections, quickly found itself as pre-occupied as the rest of the world with mitigating the effects of the virus. However, as the country has emerged and celebrated its successful efforts in avoiding a public health crisis, the government and electorate are once again turning their attention to the coming election and the country's economic situation.

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Precarious position

The current Georgian government, by many accounts, has proven itself successful at stemming the spread of COVID-19. At the end of April, the United Nations Secretary General lauded the efforts taken by the administration. This included the closure of all land and air borders, the shuttering of non-essential businesses and a mandatory curfew and public mask order. In July, the Schengen area re-opened to Georgian citizens and the EU Ambassador to Georgia, Carl Hartzell, praised the "robust" and "early" steps taken by the government, announcing "I could not think of a better place to be right now than Georgia."

In addition to the approval of international partners, Georgia's case numbers and the government's approval ratings present a true success story. At the end of July, the country had reported just over 1,100 cases of the virus and only 16 deaths. A recent study by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) found that the Georgian public predominantly supported the early actions taken by the government and that trust in public institutions increased during the first months of the pandemic.

As the country emerged from its first wave of the virus and was freed from many socio-economic restrictions, the public's attention shifted to the upcoming election and the overall state of the economy. Towards the middle of May, public surveys showed a significant increase in the percentage of people that viewed the economic cost of the government's restrictions as worse than the actual virus itself. This was not the case in March and April. Reports revealed that the average monthly household income in Georgia almost halved from approximately 350 dollars to 210 from March to May. At the same time, 13 per cent of households reported having no income during the month of May. In addition to lost income, a World Bank analysis shows that Georgia's economy is set to contract by 4.8 per cent this year, making 2020 the worst year for the economy since the country transitioned from communism in the early 1990s. The credit rating agency Scopes has warned that the country's high level of dependence on imports and foreign direct investment, as well as high levels of debt held in foreign currencies and a depreciating Georgian lari, have put the country in a precarious economic position.

> Georgia's case numbers and the government's approval ratings present a true success story.

Given the worsening situation the Georgian Dream government now faces the challenge of maintaining public support in the months leading up to the election. In June the government released its anti-crisis economic plan that proposed an amended budget for 2020 and new initiatives to mitigate the economic impact

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of the pandemic. The plan was divided into three stages. The initial phase of the economic plan featured generous subsidies and tax breaks, many of which were implemented in March and April. For three months, starting in March, the government subsidised utility bills for 1.2 million families and offered deferment of loan payments. It also offered an 80 per cent subsidy on business loans taken by small hotels and deferred all property and income taxes for businesses related to tourism until November.

The second phase of the Georgian Dream party's anti-crisis economic plan features a range of social benefits aimed at supporting the population in the short-term. One of the largest expenditures of the new budget is a six month scheme that offers 200 lari (approximately 62 dollars) per month to those that are unemployed, a benefit for which a staggering 350,000 citizens are currently eligible. The government has also offered six months of income tax exemptions for monthly salaries up to 750 lari, as well as a 600 lari allotment for families that are registered as "socially vulnerable." These social assistance programmes coincide with the implementation of previously scheduled pay raises for certain sectors of the labour force. In the original pre-COVID-19 budget for 2020, the governing party planned to raise salaries for teachers, police officers and some doctors. In addition, it also planned to increase state pensions. These scheduled raises were set to take effect in July and September and were harshly criticised by opposition parties that viewed the initiative as buying votes.

It is no surprise that the additional social benefits announced in the wake of COVID-19 have drawn similar condemnation by the opposition. Representatives of multiple parties, including the European Georgia Party and Lelo, have criticised the government's lack of plans to stimulate the economy in the long-term and create jobs. The opposition has also highlighted the fact that the six month period of increased social benefits conveniently ends directly after the October parliamentary election.

Balancing the budget

The Georgian Dream government's raft of social assistance programmes and pay increases have not come cheap. According to the government's amendments to the 2020 budget, in addition to a projected economic decline of four per cent, the government expects to lose 1.8 billion lari in revenue (approximately 587 million dollars) due to the economic slowdown and implemented tax breaks. Despite the significant decrease in tax revenue, the amended budget reflects an increase in expenditures of 1.5 billion lari (approximately 490 million dollars). The government's

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Central Laboratory at the Academician Nikoloz Kipshidze University Clinic, Tbilisi, Georgia, receives the equipment of the PCR laboratory for COVID-19 diagnostic.

proposed budget amendments present a worrisome increase in spending, with a large portion of funds devoted to short-term social assistance before the election.

The new budget is justifying its increased expenditures and lost revenue through two main sources: assistance allocated from international partners and debt. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government announced that three billion dollars had been allocated to help mitigate budgetary shortfalls in the form of loans and grants from international financial organisations like the Asian Development Bank, the German Credit Institute for Reconstruction and the International Monetary Fund. However, despite the outpouring of international support, the government took an unprecedented amount of foreign debt to rectify this year's budgetary imbalance. The Georgian Dream government had announced in 2019 that it was planning to take a record amount of public debt in 2020, which many saw as a way to fund pre-election programmes that would garner support from the electorate. The amended budget from June shows that the public debt is now predicted to increase by seven billion lari this year, of which 5.2 billion will be foreign debt. This development is concerning for Georgia's macroeconomic stability.

Not only has public debt increased from 47.5 per cent of GDP to 54.8 in the course of one year, but 77 per cent of it is now foreign-owned debt. Despite the Georgian National Bank's best efforts to stabilise the lari, it has continued to de-

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preciate in value. This continued depreciation will make foreign debt increasingly expensive for the government and more difficult to maintain. Opposition parties have seized on this downfall in the budget, with one member of parliament from the United National Movement party pointing that "54 per cent of the budget is donated and borrowed funds," something that did not even happen "during Shevardnadze times."

October is coming

As the election looms, the government's rapid expansion of short-term social benefits and dangerously imbalanced budget is leading to concern over the long-term macroeconomic consequences of an economic plan that does not seem to look past October. Despite widespread criticism from the opposition regarding these shortcomings, a recent study by the Caucasus Research Resource Center found that the increased social benefits are receiving widespread support from the public. Furthermore, a poll done by Edison Research in July showed that 39 per cent of respondents are planning to vote for Georgian Dream. With 20 per cent of respondents currently undecided, even a coalition of the United National Movement, European Georgia, and other opposition parties, does not have enough support to defeat the Georgian Dream.

With less than two months until the election, the Georgian Dream government seems to be in a solid position. However, recent criticism from international partners – which is related to an agreement signed by the opposition and the ruling party on March 8th – has the potential to derail the party's path to success. Before COVID-19 shut down the country in mid-March, the united opposition and the Georgian Dream government agreed to begin the transition to a proportional voting system. This would see 120 parliamentary seats out of 150 allocated based on a proportional vote. The agreement, which was deemed by international partners as a major success, was almost derailed when the opposition accused the government in May of failing to honour part of the agreement by refusing to release three opposition leaders from prison. What would have been a domestic dispute between the opposition and ruling party became increasingly complicated when the Chair of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jim Risch, called for both sides to fully honour the agreement, including the "release of political prisoners."

With less than two months until the election, the Georgian Dream government seems to be in a solid position.

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This charged rhetoric was further intensified in July, when the US House Appropriations Committee further stipulated that the United States may withhold 15 per cent of designated funding for Georgia if the government does not take adequate steps to strengthen democratic institutions and uphold the rule of law. This development may not seem to have direct implications for the election, but it could further complicate the ruling party's diplomatic relations with strategic partners and add a level of credibility in the eyes of the public to the opposition's criticism.

Like much of the world, Georgia has experienced the first half of 2020 in a way that could not have been predicted. The Georgian Dream party, like every other national government, faced the difficult choice of sparing economic losses or imposing strict regulations to protect public health. The COVID-19 virus, while largely curtailed in Georgia by decisive action, has left many economic woes in a country that will only be intensified by an imminent election. Massive amounts of spending on short-term social programmes in an effort to temporarily inflate the economy and garner support, is threatening to leave the country vulnerable with unsustainable levels of foreign debt and no real vision of how to stimulate the economy and create jobs in the long run. These measures, however risky long-term, seem to be strengthening support for the ruling party and paving the way towards its victory in October. While the road to victory seems in sight for the Georgian Dream party, the events of 2020 have taught us that a lot can happen in the course of three months and no political party is immune to COVID-19. NEE

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The cost of saving Europe's asparagus harvest

ALEXANDRA WISHART

In our "Europe without borders" that stipulates all European citizens have the same inalienable rights, the reality is very far from the ideal. The COVID-related scandals surrounding seasonal workers, slaughterhouses and overcrowded living facilities have brought an unspoken societal consensus to the forefront – namely, which lives we deem most valuable and worthy of protection.

As the economic plunge caused by COVID-19 erodes prosperity across the European Union, the distinctive vulnerability of migrant workers and minorities has been increasingly exposed. Although this discussion has focused on the staggeringly high mortality rates among the black and minority populations in the United States and the United Kingdom, a much less discussed, yet equally beleaguered, group includes seasonal and precarious workers from Central and Eastern Europe employed along both sides of the Dutch-German border, whom the economic slump provoked by the pandemic has turned into a disposable resource at greater risk of infection.

Steep price

Recent scandals involving COVID-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses, agricultural facilities, greenhouses, logistic warehouses and other locations related to the food industry on both sides of the German-Dutch border have exposed the low-

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er safety standards that the Dutch and German governments require for the most vulnerable foreign workers. Although food-supply experts predicted a shortage of essential workers in the sector during April and May due to the plunge in demand caused by slow economic activity, the worst-case scenario did not materialise. While some of these foreign workers have stayed home, the vast majority of them answered the call by the Dutch and German governments to save the asparagus season. However, their exposure to COVID-19 due to overcrowded living facilities and exploitative labour regulations means that the price these workers have paid is steep.

Political scientists like Pieter Van Houtem would have depicted Kleve – and the surrounding villages near the border – as a community within a borderless Europe. Although open borders have allowed the formation of an immensely profitable market, its existence has come at the cost of the most vulnerable cross-border workers. Their economic need and lack of legal protection has turned such workers into alluring prey for businesses unconcerned about confining them to exploitative and overcrowded living conditions as long as these practices guarantee them a profitability otherwise threatened by the lockdowns.

Such practices take place across the German-Dutch border. Often, workers are crammed into houses on the German side from which they are routinely transported to the fields and factories on the Dutch side. Given the non-existent political will to protect these workers – as well as their lack of local political representation in either Germany or the Netherlands – the policies that allow their exploitation have remained unchanged over the last number of years. Although the appalling circumstances these workers face have been an open secret for years, interest in the social inequities that they experience has only recently surfaced because of the pandemic. This newfound attention on their plight might finally prompt local politicians to change policy at the regional level. A ticking bomb for public health, the most recent outbreaks in Velp and Kleve have shown that these workers' precarious living conditions were highlighted only once they were recognised as a potential contagious threat for Dutch and German communities.

> The lack of political will to protect foreign workers have allowed policies of exploitation to remain unchanged.

The many temporary workers from Bulgaria, Romania and Poland living in the German-Dutch border region have sparked a rise in COVID-19 infections among Kleve's seasonal work force. Since no other community in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia has seen more confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in one week, this region has acquired a reputation for being a "corona hotspot", as the socially conservative local newspaper *Rheinische Post* reported on June 6th.

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Given that all 42 newly registered infections have been detected among seasonal workers – thus shooting the average infection rate up to 13.5 within ten days, surpassing the 10-day guideline that Germany has set as the maximum per 100,000 inhabitants – their housing facilities have become the target of widespread inspections, with a total of 45 houses screened in the process.

All workers had been housed on the German side of the border while working at a meat processing plant in the Dutch town of Helmond – a common practice intended to evade stricter housing regulations on the Dutch side. Since recent infection outbreaks in slaughterhouses have caused a nation-wide outcry in Germany, local officials such as Kleve's administrator, Wolfgang Spreen, have found themselves forced to make a commitment to increase testing capabilities. However, without public pressure on the regional government to crack down on the municipality's neglect, no significant change has really taken place.

Hitting a nerve

An article by Julia Lörcks in the local German newspaper *Rheinische Post* discusses a joint policy proposal to set up a working group intended to improve living conditions among temporary workers. Proposed by the FDP (Free Democratic Party), the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the Green Party, this measure was rejected by the CDU (Christian Democrat Union). A prominent member of the local branch of the CDU, Andy Mulder, was quoted stating that "a politically-motivated working group would not contribute to solving the issue but instead only absorb necessary manpower/energy." His statement represented a direct rebuke to demands by the provincial government of North-Rhine Westphalia to provide seasonal workers with dignified employment and housing conditions. Even though city officials have been turning a blind eye to this practice for almost two years now, criticism has finally hit a nerve due to the pandemic.

Looking from the other side, however, one cannot help but wonder if this could not be seen as a German problem imported from the Netherlands? The Dutch policy regarding the seasonal workers has not been more successful in addressing the issues they face. In the Dutch city of Velp, close to Arnhem and the German border, the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation (NOS) reported that over 28 temporary workers had been identified as "probably" infected by coronavirus – it was categorised "probably" due to the poor testing efforts of the Dutch government and the country's inability to account for new cases. After putting the entire living complex under quarantine, it became clear that the majority of these workers were employed by the meat industry and also came from Central and Eastern Europe.

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Similar scandals erupted in Germany, these workers were mostly Romanians who had to endure overcrowded housing and working facilities which, in turn, contributed to the spread of the virus.

The role of temporary employment agencies is of central importance to this discussion. Many of them have confined workers to poor housing conditions, such as the case involving 50 migrants in Rijen. The Dutch federate trade union (*Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging*, FNV) emphasised that 50 workers had to share one kitchen and three showers at La Cigogne, a hotel where they were all housed. A sign of the precarious situation in which Polish and Romanian workers find themselves is the threat of eviction they now face as a result of the lockdown. Temporary employment agencies offer accommodation to workers as part of their "services" unless their contracts are terminated, which for many workers would mean homelessness.

Workers who earn up to seven euros an hour in a horticulture facility often work shifts that regular Dutch or German workers would hardly tolerate. They start at 5am and often work until late into the night – including holidays. Even though some employers literally stack up workers in their improvised housing facilities to maximise their profits, the rents for these unenviable housing conditions can go up to 400 euros per month. Although labour unions such as FNV have criticised these practices, any change to this lucrative "business model" is unlikely. On both sides of the German-Dutch border, it is common practice for temporary workers who work on farms to also receive housing, making them effectively a type of "modern-day serf", according to a MP for the Dutch far-left Socialist Party (SP), Jasper Van Dijk. Many are unaware of their employment rights, face challenges due to language barriers, or are afraid that losing their jobs will also imply getting their housing, transportation and community taken away.

Workers who earn up to seven euros an hour often work shifts that Dutch or German workers would hardly tolerate.

The hierarchy of "Europeanness"

While Black Lives Matter protests across the US and inside the EU cast light upon the prevalence of institutional and systemic racism in our societies, they also provide insight into the complex relations among class, race, ethnicity and religion necessary to explain these events in our own backyards. Especially in the context of the EU, hierarchies between politically and economically privileged majorities and racialised minorities, both among and within member states, are often concealed

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behind the façade of institutional equality – even though they should be odious to the liberal democratic principles that the EU is supposed to uphold. The result is a system of racialised exploitation that has received little attention; while "Europe without borders" is belied by recurrent discord between Northern and Southern European politics, a neglected, yet equally racialised, fault line runs along Eastern and Western Europe.

The empirical reality is that within "Fortress Europe" a closing of external borders for immigrants from outside the EU and a focus on the attraction of specific workers in order to bypass labour shortages in certain segments of the economy have led to keeping disposable bodies at bay. This mechanism of exclusion is being constantly reaffirmed by the dramatic aesthetics of black and brown bodies continuously washing up along the shores of southern Europe. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that hierarchies of "Europeanness" also involve a much less discussed split between Western and Eastern Europe.

Hierarchies between politically and economically privileged majorities and racialised minorities are often concealed behind the façade of institutional equality.

EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe represent a particularly interesting case given that they have experienced a different historical trajectory than Western EU member states and are still considered – and, arguably, still imagine themselves – as recent additions to the "Global North". As a result of joining the EU, Eastern EU members have thus been granted an unusual upgrade in the hierarchy of geographical imaginations that influence international politics. Having been part of what used to be the "second world", much of Central and Eastern Europe has faced their own struggles regarding their position on the geopolitical board; notions between centre and periphery have established a hierarchy between what might be considered quintessentially European countries and those that simply qualify as European enough.

Therefore, the COVID-related scandals surrounding slaughterhouses and overcrowded living facilities have brought an unspoken societal consensus to the forefront – namely, which lives we deem most valuable and worthy of protection. In this hierarchy of "Europeanness", determining which bodies are most deserving of security, many temporary workers seem to fall in-between the grid: white enough to pass superficially, their accent quickly gives them away as migrants; European, but somehow not the right kind of European, thus justifying their treatment as second-class citizens; tolerated but hidden away in enclaves of their own, accused of not integrating while simultaneously exploited, they lead their existences in the shadows of their host societies.

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Products without any value

In our "Europe without borders" that stipulates all European citizens of having the same inalienable rights, the reality is very far from the ideal. It remains difficult to imagine that a similar treatment of Norwegian or Swedish nationals would be met with the same public indifference.

The second-class treatment that many Central and Eastern Europeans are subjected to in Germany and the Netherlands can be interpreted as the manifestation of this geopolitical hierarchy. Within scholarly debates, social scientists refer to the power relationship as the Self/Other" Theory. The "Self" refers to, in this case, the white, native majority of the German-Dutch borderland, while the "Other" represents the Central and Eastern European migrants. The body of the temporary workers as the "Other" serves as a constant reminder to the host countries' societies that they are the outsider and exist to construct an otherwise heterogeneous mass of people as one. While the body of the "Other" is created through the boundaries of social interaction, they are actively being created in the process.

The reason they are so crucial to the majority society is highlighted by sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman, who states in his book *Wasted Lives*: "Defined primarily through the combined discourses of character, personal responsibility, and cultural homogeneity, entire populations expelled from the benefits of the marketplace are reified as products without any value and are disposed of. Like leftovers in the most radical and effective way: we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking."

The fact that these temporary workers' living conditions and treatment have become a priority only due to the alleged health threat they pose because of COVID-19 supports Bauman's analysis. Moreover, in the current market economy, he adds that: "With the social state in retreat, and thanks to the rapacious dynamics of a market fundamentalism unchecked by government regulations, the public and private policies of investing in the public good are dismissed as bad business, just as the notion of protecting people from the dire misfortunes of poverty, sickness, or the random blows of fate is viewed as an act of bad faith. Weakness is now a sin, punishable by social exclusion."

No end in sight

This social exclusion that many of those temporary workers face is especially true for those migrant groups who historically have always been at risk – economically and politically. Removed from the prospect of decent jobs, productive education,

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satisfactory health care and access to other services, as well essential necessities such as safe shelter, many join the ever-growing ranks of a socio-economical precariat, only less visible. In the case of those temporary workers, Bauman's statement that dominant "power is measured by the speed with which responsibilities can be escaped" perfectly encapsulates the unfolding situation in the border region.

With no end in sight for scandals involving temporary workers' living conditions and intensified by the stipulated health threat they pose due to COVID-19, one can conclude that within the EU we need to address our own internal blind spots: namely, the fact that some European workers' lives matter more than others, and that this reality is carefully disguised by transnational exploitation practices of an already vulnerable group – Central and Eastern European workers. Cloaked by the institutional veil of equal worker protection rights within the EU, it will be one of the bigger challenges of today's European society to unmask the practices of business owners and politicians profiting from this ongoing injustice and to demand the abolishment of a second class in our own societies. NEE

Within the EU, we need to address our own internal blind spots.

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Even before the pandemic, we have been living in isolation

MARINA SHUPAC

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on both Moldova and the breakaway region of Transdniestria. Moldova remains on the so-called "red list" of countries due to its high number of COVID-19 cases. Transdniestrians, meanwhile, face even more severe restrictions. Since March 16th a state of emergency was declared in the para-state and its borders with Ukraine and Moldova have been closed.

COVID-19 harshly hit the population on the banks of the Dniester River – those from Moldova, on the right bank, and those from the breakaway region of Transdniestria, on the left bank. While the people of Transdniestria have been living in a symbolic isolation for the past number of decades, the measures imposed by the de-facto authorities there during the outbreak made the region even more isolated. However this has not stopped the people of the para-state from exploring alternative ways of connecting with the outside world and with each other.

Virus of tensions

The first COVID-19 cases were diagnosed in Transdniestria on March 21st. The virus was first confirmed in a 60-year-old woman who lives in Bender and a

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37-year-old man from Rybnitsa. Their tests were sent to Chișinău, Moldova's capital, for confirmation. Since then, collected samples from Transdniestrians have been regularly sent to a Chișinău-based laboratory. This caused concerns from the Transdniestrian side. The region's media reported that the first Transdniestrian person died from COVID-19 while her test was still being processed in the laboratory. On April 3rd the Moldovan minister of health, Viorica Dumbrăveanu, reported that the Moldovan Agency of public health trained seven professionals from Tiraspol (the so-called capital of Transdniestria) to be able to conduct tests on their own. According to Igor Dodon, Moldova's president, around 300 tests from Transdniestria had been processed in Chișinău, and another 500 people from the region had bought medical insurance in order to be treated in Moldovan hospitals during the first month of the pandemic.

A week after the news about the laboratory testing was announced, tensions rose again between Tiraspol and Chișinău. The Moldovan minister of reintegration, Cristina Lesnik, accused Tiraspol of ignoring the dangers of coronavirus. The Moldovan government invited authorities from Tiraspol for a meeting with the health protection committee to discuss joint measures during the pandemic, but the Transdniestrian authorities ignored the invitation. According to Lisnik, they do not have access to reliable data from the region, and access of Moldovan doctors to Transdniestria is blocked. Rhetoric heated up when, in July, the Transdniestrian leader, Vadim Krasnoselsky, called the Moldovan side "toxic" and said they are unable to control the pandemic. He urged the international community to help Chișinău in dealing with "the catastrophe" and claimed that the COVID-19 situation in Moldova has a negative effect on Transdniestria and security in the region.

The Moldovan government invited authorities from Tiraspol to discuss joint measures during the pandemic, but the Transdniestrian authorities ignored the invitation.

Pandemic borders

While the authorities from Tiraspol and Chișinău are disputing who is worse in terms of managing the pandemic, COVID-19 continues to affect people on both sides of the Dniester. Moldovan passport holders have been denied entry to most other countries, and Moldova is currently on the so-called "red list" due to its high number of COVID-19 cases. However, Transdniestrians face a double layer of restrictions, which were imposed on them not only by other countries, but their own authorities. Since March 16th a state of emergency has been declared in the para-

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state, and its borders with Ukraine and Moldova have been closed. Only those with exceptional circumstances, diplomats and farmers, can still travel to Moldova.

Those wishing to leave the region are asked to submit a request to the authorities in Tiraspol. This system might be in place at least until the end of September. One of the founders of the first Transdniestrian Human Rights Cinema Festival Chesnok ("Garlic"), Alexandra Telpis, says that because of the newly introduced system she feels reluctant to visit her parents in Transdniestria. She started to work in one of the EU-based organisations as a volunteer shortly before the pandemic. "I am not sure if I can leave the region once I get there. The criteria upon which the authorities decide whose request to leave is accepted and whose is denied is very unclear," she says.

On July 2nd Tiraspol suddenly cancelled all permits issued to those who requested to leave the region. According to the authorities, Transdniestrians were visiting Moldova and becoming infected. This has led to the situation when those living in Transdniestria, but traveling to Moldova for work, are no longer able to do so. It has also affected those planning to visit relatives or attend funerals.

The travel restrictions forced Transdniestrians to take an unprecedented step – to go out and protest. On July 2nd dozens of people from the Transdniestrian town of Rybnitsa blocked the bridge between Rybnitsa and the Moldovan town of Rezina. The protesters demanded Tiraspol to renew the freedom to travel to Rezina, where most of them worked.

Tiraspol based journalist Vitalii Shmakov believes that the travel restrictions are among the measures which have had the worst effect on Transdniestrians. "This impacts you psychologically. Even before the pandemic we have been living in the so-called isolation. Now it became even more obvious. Many people used to occasionally travel to Odesa or Chișinău and suddenly they found themselves locked inside," he says. Border closures have also impacted Shmakov's life. He planned to spend a few months in Georgia and the Czech Republic for professional reasons, just as the restrictions were suddenly announced. Stuck in Tiraspol, he found himself more focused on the work of the NGO called Art pohod – which he and a few other Transdniestrian-based journalists registered in Tiraspol at the beginning of the year. However, to his surprise, many of the Transdniestrians he spoke with agreed on the necessity of the border restrictions and even proposed to suspend transportation between Transdniestrian towns.

> The travel restrictions are among the measures which have had the worst effect on Transdniestrians.

According to Shmakov, the border closures have hit local businesses who have ties with Ukraine or Moldova. "Many Transdniestrian businessmen tried to re-

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orient their business into the local market, but not everyone succeeded. Some started to invest their efforts into local Transdniestrian tourism." Shmakov, at the same time, mentions that migrant workers from Transdniestria, who came back to the region during the pandemic from Russia and the EU, are now trying to return to the countries where they previously worked.

Impact on civil liberties

The lockdown has led to a shrinking of space available for Transdniestrians, not only in geographical terms but also in terms of civil liberties. During the pandemic an unprecedented number of criminal cases have been opened on the grounds of extremism. On March 20th Krasnoselsky approved a new strategy on countering extremism in Transdniestria for 2020–2026. According to him, for the past few years the number of threats in Transdniestria has significantly increased.

Evgheni Dunaev, the leader of the Tiraspol-based NGO Apriori, says that the strategy was adopted without any public consultations. In an online live stream, arranged by Dunaev, he highlighted that his organisation submitted a request to the authorities to organise a public debate around the strategy, but it did not succeed. As reported by the Moldovan online media NewsMaker.Md, since the adoption of the strategy at least three "extremism" cases have been initiated against local journalists and opposition activists. One of the cases involves a young journalist, Larisa Kalik, who published a book titled *Year of Youth* containing anonymous interviews with ex-soldiers of the Transdniestrian army. Printed in a very limited number, the book was also published online. It was presented in Tiraspol at the end of last year, but at the beginning of this year the Transdniestrian security forces started to show an increasing interest in Kalik's work. After she has fled the country, she learnt that she potentially faces five years of prison because her book is considered extremist by the authorities.

According to NewsMaker, another case was initiated at the beginning of June against a member of the opposition Communist Party of Transdniestria, Alexandr Samonia. He is accused of writing anonymous Facebook posts, which instigated social hatred, and for insulting Krasonselsky, the Transdniestrian leader. He has also fled the region. This happened at a time when his party colleague, Oleg Horjan, is still imprisoned. Horjan was arrested in 2018 after organising a protest in Tiraspol.

The last known "extremism" case relates to protests organised in Rybnitsa following the cancelation of travel permits during the pandemic. The day after the protest, the opposition activist Gennady Chorba was arrested. Tiraspol suspected him to be the main organiser of the protest. Soon afterwards he was accused of

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extremism, and the region's media, controlled by the authorities, started to actively portray him as dangerous. "The first Transdniestrian" TV channel called him a "pro-Chișinău activist" in one of its reports. The growing number of extremism-related accusations raises serious concerns among the remaining critical voices in the region.

Vulnerable groups

COVID-19 has seriously impacted the well-being of those from vulnerable groups in Transdniestria. This includes women suffering from domestic violence, as cases dramatically increased globally during the lock-down period. While there is no law which protects victims of domestic violence in Transdniestria, Rezonans, a local NGO, began running services for women at risk of domestic violence during the pandemic. They set up a helpline and provided shelter and counselling. Moreover, in a commentary for NewsMaker, representatives from Rezonans highlighted an enhanced collaboration with the Transdniestrian police force. According to them, local police were helping to spread posters and were very receptive to checking on cases of presumed domestic violence. Apparently the pandemic also brought about some positive outcomes.

When asked about the pandemic's influence on those with disabilities, Tiraspol-based activist for disability rights, Alexandr Kovalchuk, smiles ironically: "We have a living experience of such critical situations. I feel myself as a fish in water". Kovalchuk, who himself uses a wheelchair and is a journalism student as Tiraspol State University, says that due to the pandemic many activist and educational activities have transferred to online, which makes it easier for him to explore his potential. "Thanks to the remote character of work, I can travel anywhere. If not for the pandemic, I would not have had a chance to take part in so many international forms of training" he says. However, according to Kovalchuk, the lockdown has had a negative impact on residents of closed psychiatric institutions of the region, who have not always had the access to personal protection equipment and the means to follow social distancing rules. These places have imposed strict rules on movement and some of their residents do not leave the institution at all. Both in Moldova and Transdniestria psychiatric institutions became hotspots for COVID-19 outbreaks. For example, 72 people from the psychiatric institution in Bender were infected in May.

Both in Moldova and Transdniestria psychiatric institutions became hotspots for COVID-19 outbreaks.

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While many people lost their job due to the pandemic, Kovalchuk is also afraid that it will be even harder for those with disabilities to find employment and to reintegrate themselves into society. He recalls that after an accident where he lost his ability to walk and spent the next 10 years in isolation, he feared going out because of society's negative attitudes towards those with disabilities. He says that participation in human rights training offered by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Tiraspol has changed his life. However, Kovalchuk fears that empowering Transdniestrian people with disabilities still living in isolation as a result of common prejudices remains on hold: "I hoped that the quarantine would make everyone more sensitive to the everyday realities of people with disabilities who are cut off from the outside world. Unfortunately, from what I can see, the quarantine made people even more angry and selfish. I know cases when vulnerable people were receiving humanitarian assistance during the pandemic, and their neighbours were envious because of this," he recalls.

While many people lost their job due to the pandemic, it will be even harder for those with disabilities to find employment and to reintegrate into society.

Room for hope

Despite uncertainty and hardships brought on by COVID-19, there is hope among the people of Transdniestria. Transdniestria is not an exception – this is truly a worldwide phenomenon. Tiraspol State University student, Alexandr Tolochenko, recalls that he joined a movement of volunteers who helped elderly people during the crisis. Around this time he was also taking his final exams online. "To my surprise, I even enjoyed the distance learning," he admits. Prior to the pandemic, he made a decision to stay in Tiraspol instead of moving to Moscow as a postgraduate. Tolchenko says that the lockdown made him feel like he has made the right decision. "The pandemic showed how important it is to live near your relatives."

Alexandra Telpis shares her hope that even though the Human Rights Documentary Film Festival, Chesnok, did not take place this spring as expected, it will still be possible to organise it in the autumn. She is inspired by the fact that the Moldovan documentary film festival, Moldox, will take place offline in September. However, as Telpis admits, "the Moldox Festival has access to public spaces which we do not have in our region." Moreover, the Chesnok festival is supported by the Apriori NGO, which is in danger of being shut down by the Transdniestrian au-

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thorities after a new law on NGOs was adopted in 2018. According to Telpis, the Chesnok festival sent numerous, unsuccessful requests to the authorities asking permission to organise screenings in public spaces.

On the other hand, Kovalchuk says that he is motivated to launch a production in which Transdniestrian based people with disabilities will reflect upon the meaning of happiness in their life. Kovalchuk is determined to amplify the voices of people with disabilities and to encourage them to leave their "isolation" after the pandemic.

Storytelling, focused on the region, excites Vitalii Shmakov as well. During the pandemic he and his colleagues from the newly established NGO, Art Pohod, were informed that their media project application was approved by donors. Now the team plans to produce a documentary series about significant historical landmarks from both banks of the Dniester River. While Shmakov acknowledges that he has had to cancel his plans to organise an exchange project among citizen journalists from Transdniestria and Moldova, he feels enthusiastic about his new project, which "could help people from both sides to look at their joint history from a new perspective".

Marina Shupac is a human rights journalist with NewsMaker.md, an online Moldova-based publication. She is a former minority rights fellow at the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and a former European Parliament Sakharov Fellow.

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Will China's facemask diplomacy pay off?

JAKUB BORNIO

China has recently engaged itself in Central and Eastern Europe. Its influence in the region may become even stronger as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Central and Eastern Europe's location is strategically very attractive – geopolitically and economically. That is why Washington has often called this region a pivot area, a term popularised by the late Zbigniew Brzeziński. With a large part of the region now part of western integration structures (especially NATO), the Kremlin sees it as a threat to its spheres of influence. Thus, the language of Russian strategists includes phrases such as the "American *cordon sanitaire*" or (alternatively) the "Western Limitrophe".

Grand shift

Today's shape and functioning of the world order in general, including Central and Eastern Europe, are determined by a process that can be described as "progressive polycentricity". This suggests that the unipolar moment – the phrase in which the late Charles Krauthammer once used to describe the post-Cold War reality that started in the 1990s and was dominated by western powers – is on its way out. It is being replaced by new political and economic arrangements where China, now more powerful than before, plays a major role. As expected, this geopolitical shift has also led to a change in American foreign policy, which dominated world affairs since the end of the Second World War and which has now redirected attention to East and Southeast Asia. This new trajectory was initiat-

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ed by the Obama Administration, which formulated the US pivot to Asia policy and initiated the Group of Two (China and US). The latter might have been lesser known but it gained widespread currency and scope from experts near the start of the Obama presidency.

The consequences of these two shifts (i.e. China becoming a global player and the US's recognition of that fact) have affected Central and Eastern Europe directly. First was the sheathing of American military might in Europe – a trend that was only reversed after Russia's activities against Ukraine and in reaction to the development of Russia's military power near NATO borders, which led to a greater expansion of Alliance's activities on its eastern borders. Second, the new order brought the risk of reinstituting a check and roll back mechanism in the region known during the Cold War. The difference between the bilateral post-war world and today is that Russia (and not China, like it was the case before) can now get "rolled back" by the US and China, in exchange for strategic concessions – potentially made at the cost of Central and Eastern European countries.

In the last 30 years China's potential has changed dramatically, including its relations with both the United States and Russia. The IMF calculated that between 1989 and 2019, China increased its GDP (measured by purchasing power parity) from around one billion US dollars to almost 28 billion US dollars (including Hong Kong). For comparison, the US's GDP (also measured by the PPP) increased from five billion US dollars to nearly 21.5 billion. In 2019 the nominal GDP of China (together with Hong Kong) was estimated at slightly less than 14.7 billion US dollars, which was around over two-third of the US's nominal GDP. COVID-19 might make this trend more dynamic. China's surpassing of Russia has been even more spectacular. In 2019 China's GDP (measured by the PPP) was more than six times larger than Russia's. Remarkably, GDP, as good as it is as an indicator, is only one of many determinants of the current American-Chinese rivalry. Other factors include the US trade deficit, China's purchases of US bonds and foreign direct investments and many others.

Global aspirations

China's global aspirations were first openly articulated at the time of the Fifth Generation of Chinese Leadership (the current one). These political leaders, who came to power in 2012, also re-oriented China towards Central and Eastern Europe – an unprecedented move. China in the past would only sporadically be involved in the region, limiting its activity mainly to observations – like when Mao Zedong was carefully analysing political changes that took place in Poland and

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Hungary in 1956. In his interpretation both upheavals were aimed at contesting Soviet domination in the region and fit into the wider context of the then growing split between the People's Republic of China and the USSR. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, focused his attention on the moderate modifications of the central planning system that were taking place in Central and Eastern Europe. He also got some experience from work of economists from the region. He wanted to use these foreign experiences for reforms at home. The year 1999 drew the attention of the Chinese leadership to Belgrade where the US, as part of the Allied Force operations, bombed the Chinese embassy.

It was in the last couple of decades that an economically reformed China, part of the international trade exchange system, has undergone a deep transformation in the context of its geopolitical engagement. First and foremost, it has changed from the host of foreign investments to becoming a direct investor. This evolution can be presented in sectoral and geographic terms. Chinese companies have moved from investment in infrastructure to investment in the high-tech sector, where they are acquiring or merging with foreign companies. Similarly, the initial engagement in Africa, Asia and Latin America expanded by Chinese presence in European markets, including those in Central and Eastern European states.

It was in the last couple of decades that an economically reformed China has undergone a deep transformation.

17+1

Chinese initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe suggest that the region is of geopolitical and economic importance to the leadership in Beijing. Yet it is treated as a conglomerate, as evidenced by the name 16+1, which was chosen by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the initiative it launched in 2012 to promote Chinese investments in the region. The name of the format was changed to 17+1 after it was joined by Greece. The latter owns Piraeus Harbour, a strategic location of large-scale investments made by the Chinese company COSCO in recent years. Beijing's goal is to turn the harbour into its gateway to European markets. Indicatively, the 17+1 format does not include Belarus, Moldova or Ukraine. China also does not work with Kosovo which it does not recognise as an independent state.

From the Chinese perspective, this part of Europe is a very distinct area – located on the frontlines and in the context of the EU is on the route used for China's Belt and Road Initiative, announced by Xi Jinping in 2013. It is important to note, however, that there is an alternative route for Chinese goods reaching European

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Photo: Office of the Prime Minister of Poland's Flickr page (CC) https://www.flickr.com/photos/premierrp/

A ceremonial welcome of protective gear (purchased, not granted) from China was organised at Warsaw airport in April. The arrival of the Ukrainian Antonov An-225 was greeted by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in a widely publicised symbolic ceremony.

markets which would include combined transport and the use of seaports in Germany and Russia.

Regardless, the US is the main point of reference for China's foreign policy. Thus it should be seen why it is important for China that some states in Central and Eastern Europe are members of NATO, and that the US is militarily and economically engaged in most of the region. Consequently, it is becoming a potential area of rivalry between China and the US, which could further generate some tension within Euro-Atlantic structures.

The limitation of China in the region is its relatively low potential for power projection. Notably, the first Chinese military vessels only came to the Baltic Sea in 2015 when a Chinese missile destroyer and a missile frigate arrived in Gdynia (Poland). The second time Chinese ships operated on the Baltic was during Russian-Chinese naval exercises called Joint Sea 2017 which overlapped with Donald Trump's visit to Poland and the G20 Summit in Berlin.

The lack of an alternative to American security guarantees for some NATO states, which feel the threat coming from Russia, force Chinese initiatives, no matter how attractive economically, to always give way to the US-ensured security provi-

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sion. Thus, it is not surprising that China locates its greatest projects in countries affected by serious internal problems (for example, Greece in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis), those who do not feel threatened by Russia and want to diversify their economic portfolio (for example, Hungary and its "Eastern Wind" doctrine) and those who are contesting US foreign policy (Serbia) or remain in the so-called grey security area (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine).

The history of post-Cold War crises allows us to see two phenomena in regards to China. First, Chinese leadership draws the right conclusions from crises which has allowed them to avoid the mistakes others make. Think of China's thorough lessons learnt from Soviet reforms and the final collapse of the Soviet Union. Second, China has showed that the experience of downfalls only makes it stronger, as was the case with the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis. Today, the question is how will China come out of the current COVID-19 crisis which is relevant for both its position in the world and engagement in Central and Eastern Europe.

The impact of COVID-19 on Chinese engagement in Eastern and Central Europe was seen in the decision to postpone the 17+1 summit, which was planned for April. The high-level nature of this event was to be ensured by President Xi Jinping being its host, and not the Premier of the State Council – Li Keqiang – as was previously the case. By this gesture, the Chinese leadership wanted to stress that it treats the region as a priority. It was also a meaningful symbol for some countries in the region where earlier enthusiasm towards co-operation with China had faded away. Such was the case in Romania which cancelled a deal it had with China General Nuclear Power Corporation to build nuclear reactors at Cernavodă. The same can be said about Poland or the Baltic states and their attempts to limit the role of Chinese companies in developing the 5G network. The cancelling of the summit does not mean that China has given up on the 17+1 initiative. In May of this year a videoconference was held gathering the national coordinators who co-operate within this framework.

COVID diplomacy

The activities of Chinese diplomats during the pandemic, which is often called "face mask diplomacy" or "corona-diplomacy," have focused on creating the image of China as a state that is effectively tackling the pandemic and is willing to provide assistance (in the form of expert knowledge and material goods) to other countries. This is true regardless of the fact that, in many cases, foreign states were purchasing supplies to counteract the pandemic, while Chinese humanitarian aid

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was limited to supplementing them. At the same time, this strategy is also aimed at questioning the ability of the EU and the US to effectively manage the crisis. Zhao Lijian, spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry, stated already in April that the People's Republic of China provided medical equipment to 127 countries and that Chinese authorities and firms donated protective gear to more than 100 states, regions and international organisations. In a special report that was published in June by the Information Bureau of the State Council, titled "Fighting COVID-19. China in Action", it stated that, prior to May 31st, China sent 29 medical expert missions to 27 countries, exported over 700 billion masks, 340 million pieces of protective gear and 225 million test kits. The report, however, did not mention what shipments were commercial supplies and which ones were humanitarian. An important development for Central and Eastern Europe was the organisation of an online expert conference in the 17+1 format which served as a platform for an exchange of experience and ideas in the fight against the pandemic.

Symbolism during the pandemic period has become an important expression of co-operation.

Corona-diplomacy has also become an element of a wider strategy for building connections between Chinese and Central and Eastern European expert and academic communities. With this aim in mind, the China-CEEC Think Tanks Network, established by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, organised a closed webinar for experts and academics which focused on co-operation in the 17+1 framework. The China-CEE Institute, an NGO headquartered in Budapest, set up a system of mini-grants (with a maximum budget of 12,000 euro per project). The aim of the programme is "to analyse the 17+1 co-operation framework's potentials and challenges in the changing international context, especially after COVID-19".

Symbolism during this period has become an important expression of co-operation. During a ceremony welcoming the arrival of Chinese doctors and medical equipment at Belgrade airport in March, Aleksandar Vučič, the Serbian president, kissed the Chinese national flag. A ceremonial welcome of protective gear (even though purchased, not granted) from China was also organised at Warsaw airport in April. The arrival of the Ukrainian Antonov An-225 was greeted by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in a widely publicised symbolic ceremony. Similarly, a plane with Chinese medical goods was awaited by Czech Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš, and Minister of Internal Affairs, Jan Hamáček, in Prague; and President Igor Dodon in Chișinău. Even though the ceremonial nature of the welcoming event at Warsaw airport was more of a reflection of Poland's internal politics, the positive impact the moment had on China's image on the country should not be ignored.

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Battle for hearts and minds

It is interesting to observe the extent to which global powers engaged in the region tried to use the pandemic to promote their own narratives. The most visible is the conflict of narratives occurring between US/EU and China. Put simply, the Chinese narrative is aimed at building an image of China as a country willing and capable of helping others, one that is effectively fighting against the pandemic. The West is mainly focused on criticising China and blaming it as the cause of the pandemic. The EU's ineffective communication during this period has become one reason why it was accused of being passive.

A completely different strategy was adopted by Russia which, through its channels, tried to use the pandemic to undermine the credibility of European countries and weaken the trust of their citizens in public institutions. The authors of a report on COVID-19 disinformation, published by the European External Actions Service, pointed to a symbiosis of Russian and Chinese activities and stressed that Russia-controlled communication channels were clearly supporting the Chinese narrative. Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic started the process of EU's antagonising of China, which is something that had not been so clearly visible before. Such a situation is favourable to the US which, unquestionably, wants to have the EU as an ally in its rivalry with an ever more powerful China.

According to a special report, *COVID-19 and Europe-China Relations. A country-level analysis*, published by the European Think-Tank Network on China, Beijing has been making huge public diplomatic efforts primarily through its network of embassies, to inform Central and Eastern European societies about China's engagement in fighting COVID-19. This often brings the desired result of more friendly attitudes of local authorities towards Beijing.

The case of the Czech Republic is a special one, however, mainly because of the scandals that were caused by a massive purchase of masks and respirators by the Chinese Embassy in Prague, or the attempts to sell Chinese virus-protection products to the Czech government. Due to the fact that in part they were designated to go to Italy as humanitarian aid, the effect of this action brought the opposite of the desired result. These cases, in combination with reports openly critical of China by Czech intelligence services, have significantly limited the effectiveness of Chinese corona-diplomacy in the country.

Referring to the conflict of narratives, it is worth pointing out to some direct "duels" between American and Chinese ambassadors which took place in the region. For example, the US Ambassador to Romania, Adrian Zuckerman, while commenting for Radio Free Europe on China's communication strategy, accused the Beijing leadership of spreading disinformation which was immediately coun-

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tered by the spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy. The latter questioned the thesis that COVID-19 originated in China, pointing to Chinese engagement in fighting the pandemic and expressing his overall disagreement with the position of the US ambassador. Mutual accusations, in the context of the COVID-19, were also the leitmotif of a dispute that took place between the US Ambassador to Poland, Georgette Mosbacher, and her Chinese counterpart, Liu Guangyuan. Similar messages critical of China, can be easily found on social media of other American embassies in the region.

It is still too early to draw any proper conclusions from China's engagement in Central and Eastern Europe at this moment or predict any future outcomes. Certainly it will be very interesting to see opinion polling which are planned to take place in the next number months. Undoubtedly the more intense efforts undertaken by China during this period prove that the region remains a special interest to Beijing. Therefore, it is reasonable to express some fear in regards to the economic consequences as a result the pandemic, and more Chinese investment and influence in European markets.

If European companies come out of this crisis much weaker, they will become an easy target for Chinese takeovers and mergers. This can be prevented by the European Commission whose competence lies in the functioning of the EU's internal market. However if it does not undertake, together with EU member states and perspective candidate countries to the community, any attempts to counteract the post-COVID Chinese economic expansion, then the pandemic might prove an important demarcation line in the history of Chinese engagement in Central and Eastern Europe.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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Picking strawberries in a pandemic

MAGDALENA CHODOWNIK AND OMAR MARQUES

Recently, there were over two million migrant workers in Poland. When the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic closed down companies and factories, many of them were left out of work. Some of them went back to their homes. Then came another problem – it turned out that the Polish economy does not function so well without foreign workers.

Every few minutes, a new van arrives at the market in Czerwińsk nad Wisłą – a village about 65 kilometres northwest of Warsaw. Crowds of merchants converge around every one of them. The driver does not even have time to park or open the door, the merchants surround him. The vehicle stops, the door opens. Another one arrives, with only a few goods, taking up a third of the van. There are several dozen boxes of strawberries inside. These are the only ones available. The crowd shouts: "How much? How much?"

Huge impact

The market opened on May 15th. "Coronavirus has caused problems here. The number of strawberries is very small and the demand is huge. In addition, prices are now very high – at the beginning, when we opened the market, it was sometimes even above 30 zlotys (around 6.80 euros) for a kilo. Today the average is 22," says Wojciech Klik, head of the Municipal Economy and Housing Department in

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Czerwińsk nad Wisłą. This is the department that also manages the marketplace in nearby Nowe Przebojewo.

The price of strawberries has been affected by the weather – unfavourable temperatures, wind, low sun exposure and long frosts. By this time, the strawberry growing season is around 2.5 weeks late. In addition there is a shortage of workers to pick the fruit. "Every day, someone comes for those jobs, mainly from Ukraine, but these people are unfortunately quarantined. Producers that come to the Nowe Przebojewo market are not happy. The COVID-19 virus is having a huge impact on the strawberry harvest," Klik has said.

Compulsory quarantine for foreign employees can also take place in the field, so they can work.

This situation has been confirmed by Michał Borzycki, a strawberry producer who also came to the market with his van, only partially full. "At first, we had problems maintaining the plantation. Now, we are also having problems with collecting the fruit. As of today, I have only 20 per cent of the staff that I should have compared to the previous year. The borders are closed and there are far fewer people who can work with us – be it for maintaining the plantations or the harvest itself."

Borzycki also employs workers from Ukraine. Today, from the 25 employees who assisted him in production last year, he has only managed to employ six seasonal employees – those who managed to cross the border. He acknowledges that "Consulates are not working as normal. Everything has to be dealt with electronically, and it takes time. But the fruit can't wait. For some of the strawberries, it will be too late – they will probably rot."

Migrants work in the fields, bend low on the ground with baskets attached tightly to their bodies. Every now and again, they approach a car parked nearby, where they place their filled baskets. There, another employee diligently notes down the number of baskets delivered by which employee. The worker returns to the field. Compulsory quarantine for foreign employees can also take place in the field, so they can work, as long as the field borders the farm where they live. They are not allowed to go anywhere else. Those farmers who have fields further away from their farms are unable to bring migrant workers there – the strawberries will have to wait until the employees' quarantine is over.

Those workers who reached Czerwińsk nad Wisłą have faced problems and delays along the way: "I came to Poland two weeks ago, by car, with eight other people. The borders are open to us, but now, transportation to Poland is very expensive. A year ago, the cost of the trip was 50 dollars, and today it is 100. All because of the virus – buses do not run," says Maksim Andrusiv, a worker from Ukraine.

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An aerial view of seasonal workers from Ukraine working on the strawberry harvest in a field during the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Zaluski, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

Strawberry dealers speak to a farmer who has arrived with newly picked strawberries during the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Zaluski, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

A seasonal worker from Ukraine harvests strawberries in a field during the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Zaluski, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

Seasonal workers from Ukraine practice social distancing as they wait to be tested for COVID-19 during the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Czerwinsk nad Wisla, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

Ukrainian citizens wear protective face masks as they walk towards the Polish-Ukrainian border check point on March 28th, 2020 in Korczowa, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

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Seasonal workers from Ukraine are seen in a dormitory as they continue their quarantine during the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Zaluski, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

A seasonal worker from Ukraine walks towards a COVID-19 test centre during the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Czerwińsk nad Wisłą, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

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An aerial view of the strawberry market during the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Zaluski, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

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High costs

Migrant workers also complain about difficulties at the Ukrainian-Polish border. They mention long and exhausting checks, which those with biometric passports have already forgotten. "Many Ukrainians would like to come to Poland, but they cannot. The offices do not work normally, and all documents must be obtained. You also need more money for transport," Andrusiv continues. "I received the invitation and I applied for my visa to Poland. And just when I learnt that they were starting to let people pass through the border, I went straight away."

Igor Burban from Ukraine has been working in Czerwińsk nad Wisłą for over 15 years. He helps on the farm and brings seasonal workers from Ukraine to several employers in Poland. This year, however, everything was more complicated. A single journey lasts almost a month for him. He first, travels to Ukraine. Once he arrives there he follows a mandatory two-week quarantine. He then adheres to another two-week quarantine when he gets back to Poland with the other workers.

"I came to Poland as soon as the regulations had been relaxed and then, went back to bring more Ukrainians," Burban says after returning from Ukraine. "Now I have to quarantine here. I will go through this quarantine, 14 days, and then, when I go to Ukraine again, I will have to quarantine there again. Another 14 days. It takes me a whole month to bring a group of seasonal workers from Ukraine. And the cost of these trips is very high."

Burban says that everything has been made more difficult by the coronavirus. He recalls previous years: "Now, procedures are very demanding and time consuming. It used to be easier, you could come with a biometric passport. Those who wanted, could stay. They were given a place to live and a job contract. And now, you have to send an invitation, which takes two weeks. Later, the document is sent by post, which again takes a long time. And people in Ukraine are waiting. The pandemic has made the economic situation worse for all of us."

Burban spends all his days and nights at the farm. He cannot go outside, not even to the store. On the farm where he lives, basic food is provided – potatoes and other vegetables. The employer or those who have already finished their quarantine can go to the shops. Then they bring him more products.

Swabs

Tents are set up in Czerwińsk nad Wisłą, next to the town hall. Soldiers, because they are the ones who are responsible for the initiative here, have been working since the morning. They have set up signs and marked paths. This is where the

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coronavirus test point for foreign employees is being set up. Fruit and vegetable producers who employ seasonal workers from abroad must bring them to the testing point.

"This is a pilot swab collection point for coronavirus testing," explains Joanna Bala, director of the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund's regional branch in Warsaw. "People who came to Poland from abroad are surveyed. It is a formal requirement, obligatory for all those who cross the border, also for the employees who work for our farmers, the so-called 'farmer's helpers'. Every farmer is obliged to report the arrival of such an employee and the number of people currently on the farm. This employee from abroad must appear for examination no later than the seventh day after their arrival."

Employees are divided into groups. If coronavirus is detected in one person in the group, then the whole group must be isolated and subjected to a two week quarantine.

Cars pull up, one after the other. Workers disembark and queue up. Most of them hold Ukrainian passports. They approach the registration area in two metre intervals. They then follow the path to the testing point. After the examination, they return to their cars and from there to the farms. There, without leaving the area, they will be waiting for the results.

"A farmer who has migrant workers on his farm is obliged, according to the guidelines of the Chief Sanitary Inspector, to bring, while maintaining all forms of security of course, the farmer's helpers and let them be tested," Bala continues. Depending on whether the result is positive or negative, there are guidelines on how the farmer must proceed. Here, everything depends on how the work is carried out and organised. Usually, employees are divided into groups. If coronavirus is detected in one person in the group, then the whole group must be isolated and subjected to a two week quarantine.

Near the queue stands Tomasz Gmurczyk, a local strawberry producer, observing the situation. "Today I still have enough workers," Gmurczyk tells us. "But the weather is improving. Most likely, more employees will arrive at my farm around the weekend. But how will it really be? We'll see. Will they cross the border and reach my farm? I don't know."

Gmurczyk emphasises that the situation on his plantation is still under control if – along with the improving weather – migrant workers will start arriving to help him collect the fruit on time. However, not everyone is in this situation. "There are farmers who do have enough employees, but there are also those, who have no one. You don't know what will happen next, and the season has just begun," Gmurczyk says.

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The Polish economy needs immigrants

At the beginning of the pandemic in Poland, many foreign workers found themselves in a very difficult situation – some lost their jobs overnight and even their accommodation, which is often arranged by employers. Many of them did not have savings to live on in Poland without a job (it was also not known how long the pandemic would last). Not earning money also meant becoming impossible to send financial support back home to families. When other countries began to announce the closing of their borders, many of the migrant workers packed their bags and returned to their native land.

"A lot of people left Poland at the beginning of the pandemic – the companies closed down, so they went home. And now, arranging the trip back is expensive. But also, we cannot come back all at once," says Maksim Andrusiv. "We cannot all work with strawberries, there are not enough strawberries in Poland! And what about those who left when other companies or factories closed? Where would they come back to work? You have to wait for the pandemic to end."

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, over two million foreigners worked in Poland. These were two million people who had found jobs and who were needed on the market. This means that they were needed by the Polish economy as well. When the crisis hit – we immediately felt their absence. The economy has long ceased to be simply a domestic issue. People from other countries work in production and in the markets in which these products are sold.

Producers of strawberries from the "Strawberry Basin", as people tend to call the Czerwińsk nad Wisłą area, often sell their products on a wider scale. Of course, they sell to the local markets, retail or to retail chains, but also to foreign companies that buy Polish fruit and send them westward. These products end up in other European Union countries or the United States. Polish strawberries, mostly harvested by foreigners, reach tables around the world in the form of jams, syrups and wines.

Waiting for employees

Towards the end of May and the start of June, the situation in the "Strawberry Basin" was very difficult. Adverse weather in April meant that this year's harvest was not as abundant as the previous year. This was the biggest problem for producers. Later, a drought came, but fortunately most strawberry producers in the region had irrigation systems and managed to continue operations without much damage. Later, there were shortages of employees, which was exacerbated by the coronavirus. The producers also had to rely on a smaller pool of labour compared

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to the previous year. Of course, other harvests, such as cucumbers and other vegetables, have faced similar problems. The lack of seasonal workers casts a broad shadow on agricultural production in Poland in a wider sense.

"The coronavirus outbreak has had a very negative impact on the labour market. The biggest problem is the lack of seasonal workers. After talks with farmers, I assess that the demand for seasonal workers is today (end of May) only being met at 30–40 per cent," explains Emil Koprowski, head of the Załuski gmina – a locality 50 minutes outside of Warsaw. "Producers probably won't be able to pick all the strawberries this season."

The municipality is trying to help farmers during the crisis by seeking solutions on the domestic labour market. "We also try to act ourselves," Koprowski continues. "We have started a promotional campaign encouraging residents of eastern Poland, living along the eastern borders, to work at the strawberry harvest in the Załuski Gmina. We have sent letters to offices, counties and other localities in those regions. We were able to find farmer's helpers among Poles. In this difficult economic situation, we should look for opportunities within our country."

The head of the Gmina admits, however, that finding employees in Poland is not easy and that the help of labour (mainly) from the East is essential for farmers and the proper functioning of Polish farms. "Our work for now is to minimise the losses," Koprowski concludes. NEE

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The art of constitutional seduction

The 2020 case of Russia

OLEKSANDR MARUSIAK

On July 3rd 2020 Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the official publication of the revised version of the Russian constitution, based on the Russian-wide voting on amending the constitution. The motivation of the process was clear – to allow Putin to stay in power almost indefinitely. Yet it also reveals the legal tricks and manipulation Russian authorities have used to make significant changes to the country's legal order.

Imagine you are a skilled autocrat ruling over a nation for a long time. Unlike your dim, obsolete neighbours, you have successfully developed a personalist regime without any flagrant constitutional violations or manipulations. Even if you ever engaged in a constitutional modification process, you have always been careful and attentive, even to the tiniest technical issues of such an enterprise. No one can ever question the legitimacy of your previous endeavours because you are the master of legal disguise.

Suddenly during the nth term in office, a constitutional restriction preventing you from being president for life starts to bother you. Certainly, you have succeeded in overcoming similar challenges in the past, but the current situation looks different and "Day X" is inevitably getting closer. There are, of course, many scenarios on the table you can implement in advance, but you still hesitate on how to

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solve this puzzle with the maximum personal benefit. Most likely you understand that such a risky and deceitful proposition would require the immaculate formal procedure to create a halo of legitimacy over it. What are the odds that, instead of developing a constitutional reform as it should be, you will undermine the legitimacy of your reign by creating a controversial and questionable outcome?

We will likely never find out the real motivations why Putin initiated and developed the 2020 constitutional reform in the way that he did. As any true autocrat, he has a right and privilege to act both rationally and non-rationally towards the constitutional system without fear of consequences. Nevertheless, unlike all previous constitutional alterations, this ambitious reform was backed with significant negligence towards the established and previously exercised parameters, which makes the whole venture both unconstitutional and implausible.

The essential content of the 2020 Law on Amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation "On Improving the Regulation of Certain Aspects of the Organisation and Functioning of Public Authority", its legal nature and the technical proceeding of adoption were intentionally ruined with no coherent reason or foreseeable gain. Effective since July 4th 2020, the constitutional amendment law partially or completely reviewed 41 current articles of the 1993 Constitution of Russia and inserted five new ones. This effort was the most extensive intervention into the text of the Russian constitution since its adoption. But the most disturbing component of this process was the Russian-wide vote, which took place between June 25th and July 1st 2020, and was the ill-example of imitating democratic referenda practices.

This effort was the most extensive intervention into the text of the Russian constitution since its adoption.

How to seduce public opinion with an unpopular notion? The following legal sleight of hand, which Putin used to develop and implement the 2020 amendment law, could be quite useful if you are seeking more power.

Trick 1: Conceal your intent under a large mix of nonsense

Despite the previously established order in Russian constitutional law, the law on the amendment to the constitution is literally a single constitutional amendment towards one constitutional subject; the 2020 constitutional amendment law, however, is a set of different unrelated amendments designed and titled as one amendment. For example, in 2008, two constitutional amendments on various subject matters (the president's and parliament's terms of office and the supervisory

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Photo: President of Russia website (CC) http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/photos/big/BOR5mtYIRRCy7Ci6hiiIIkUrYkHLePBl.JPG

Russian President Vladimir Putin during a videoconference meeting with the working group on drafting proposals for amendments to the Constitution in July. This process was the most extensive intervention into the text of the Russian constitution since its adoption in 1993.

authority of the State Duma towards the government) have been simultaneously introduced into the constitution as two separate constitutional amendments, and each amended only two articles.

The 2020 process was completely different. All necessary alterations towards public authority (especially the nullification clause, new powers of the president, the supremacy of national law over the international legal order, and federal structure modification) are cleverly mixed-up with ideological commands on such topics as: God, marriage, children, animals, the Soviet Union, historical truth, the thousand-year history of Russia, patriotism, defenders of the Motherland, the language of a state-forming nation, pension and social security benefit indexation, ecological culture, etc. Such tantalising amendments (some of them, by the way, looking so odd and ironic in the constitution!) are meant to conceal the primary intention of policymakers and to act as a magnet for public attention.

Trick 2: Outshine procedure with populism

Russia's constitution is very clear on the means of its amending. An amendment shall be adopted by the supermajority in both houses of the Federal Assembly (two-thirds of the State Duma and three-quarters of the Federation Council), and it

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comes into force after ratification by parliament of no less than two-thirds of federal units of Russia. No additional actions are needed. The 1998 law "On the Procedure of Adoption and Entry into Force of the Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation", sets the procedural mechanism for adoption and ratification of any constitutional amendment. Four previous constitutional amendments were introduced in the Russian constitution by using this very procedure.

The process was designed more like a pseudo-democratic style of voting, far from a genuine reflection of public opinion.

However, in 2020, this process was complicated by engaging the constitutional court and a plebiscite for completion of the amendment process. The 2020 amendment law clearly specified that without the positive conclusion of the constitutional court and a successful people's vote, the amendment itself will be ineffective. The idea of a people's vote here looked particularly controversial and populistic. Due to COVID-19, the one-day vote was initially scheduled for April 22nd, then changed to July 1st and extended for seven days (including, June 25–30 for early voters). Even worse, the voting process was designed more like a pseudo-democratic style of voting that was far from a genuine reflection of public opinion.

Trick 3. Use language as a legal weapon

A fascinating language trick was applied which probably eludes non-Russian speakers. The 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted by a nationwide vote. This vote is also applicable if a new constitution of Russia would be drafted by the constitutional assembly. A referendum (same term in Russian) is a legal implementation of the nationwide vote, which was established by the constitution and by the 2004 Federal Constitutional Law "On Referendum of the Russian Federation".

However, the 2020 amendment law invented a new term – the "Russian-wide vote". Since a Russian-wide vote is not a nationwide vote, the standard referendum procedures do not apply towards this ad hoc performance. The vote was organised under a limited set of controversial rules of the constitutional amendment law. Russia's central election commission also issued many by-law instructions establishing the technical nuances of the Russian-wide vote sometimes beyond the parameters established by the law mentioned above. And since the 2020 amendment was designed as a single document, the citizens were obliged to vote in the non-referendum for the whole amendment package, not selectively for the separate elements.

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Trick 4. Break the constitutional order with the constitution itself

According to Article 135 of the Russian constitution, Chapter One (The Constitutional System Foundations), Chapter Two (Rights and Freedoms of Man and Citizen), and Chapter Nine (Constitutional Amendments and Review of the Constitution) are unamendable. In other words, these chapters may not be revised by the Federal Assembly. Article 16 (2) additionally stresses that no other provision of the constitution may contradict the fundamental principles of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation established by Chapter One. To review these chapters, the constitutional assembly shall be convened (by the way, for 2020, there is no federal constitutional law on this matter yet). The constitutional assembly shall either confirm the current version of the constitution or draft a new one, which shall be adopted by the assembly itself or by nationwide vote.

Yet, the 2020 amendment law has many provisions affecting these matters. For example, the law:

- Requires an adoption procedure, different from the rules of Chapter Nine;
- Foresees the possibility of creating the federal territories – extra-legal units with no mention in Chapter One;
- Secures the prevalence of the national law (i.e. Russia's Constitution) over international treaties and decisions of international bodies, which contradicts Chapters One and Two;
- Inserts into Chapter Three new basic ideological provisions (instead of Chapter One) and some social regulations affecting human rights (instead of Chapter Two).

Since the amendment law could not amend Chapters One, Two, and Nine, it broke the current constitutional arrangement, creating many collisions within the updated version of the constitution. Rather than adopt a new constitution using a nationwide vote, an unconstitutional procedure was used. According to the amendment law, the constitutional court was obliged to issue a conclusion whether the constitutional amendment contravenes Chapters One, Two and Nine. It was to no surprise that the court overlooked any problematic norms in its 52-page conclusion.

Trick 5. Consider a hyper-speed constitutional procedure

Exploring the time frame of the 2020 constitutional reform, it is impossible to not notice that the amendment was developed in a hurry within an implausible timetable. The amendment was initiated on January 15th when Putin established a working group for preparation of the constitutional amendment draft (75 people

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included). On January 20th the president submitted the draft to the State Duma. One January 23rd the State Duma adopted the draft in the first reading. Then on March 10th, the State Duma adopted the law in its second reading, a day later in the third reading.

On March 11th the Federation Council adopted the law. The following day, the required number of ratifications by the parliament of the federal units was achieved. By March 13th all of the federal units had ratified the law. On March 14th Putin signed the amendment and issued the inquiry to the constitutional court. Two days later, the court confirmed that the law did not contradict the Russian constitution. By March 17th Putin signed a decree calling for the Russian-wide vote on April 2nd (it was cancelled on March 25th – see above).

The voting eventually took place between June 25th and July 1st. The law went immediately into effect on July 3rd with Putin signing a decree on the official publication of the revised version of the Russian constitution, which was published one day later on July 4th.

The aftermath of the 2020 constitutional reform

Most importantly, both President Putin and former President Medvedev can now each hold the office of president for two additional terms – 12 years in total if no office term change will occur in the future. In fact, Putin will be considered like the late General Secretaries of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – an immovable leader for life. Even if Putin (unlikely, but still theoretically possible) refuses to be re-elected in the future, this reform opens a wider window of political manoeuvres for him. For example, an honorary but secured retirement or chairing of the State Council.

A short list of some other memorable constitutional alteration that are not listed above, include:

- Any other future President of Russia (except Putin and Medvedev) can hold the office of the President for no more than two terms.
- The President of Russia can dismiss the Head of Government with no need to appoint new ministers and other government staff, and the president can (not the head of government) carry out the general management of the state.
- The president heads the State Council – previously an advisory body, now a public body – and the Security Council – an existing public body headed by the president. Both have uncertain constitutional status, yet large executive discretion;

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- The President of Russia appoints up to 30 senators/representatives (up ten per cent from the general number of the upper house) to the Federation Council, including up to seven senators for life.
- A permanent resident of any foreign territory incorporated into the Russian Federation (i.e. by now, a permanent resident of the occupied Crimea and Sevastopol) is allowed to become president.
- A former president becomes a senator for life, unless he or she refuses.
- A former president is granted immunity for life which can only be withdrawn by at least both two-thirds of senators of the Federation Council and two-thirds of the members of the State Duma.
- The number of judges of the constitutional court is reduced from 19 to 11.
- The President of Russia submits to the Federation Council a motion on the termination of authority of judges of the constitutional court, of the supreme court, of the cassation courts, and of the appeal courts.
- Local authorities and bodies of state administration are merged into a unified system of public authority with no explanation of such transformation provided.

In the end, the 2020 constitutional seduction manoeuvre is a fascinating case on how to use a quasi-democratic instrument to prolong the authorities of incumbent political leader of the state with no respect for previous legal practises of even technical issues of national the constitutional system.

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A triumphant referendum?

OLGA IRISOVA

Russian officials and state media outlets have called Russia's recent vote on constitutional amendments a "triumph". What does the result tell us about the state of Russian society? How did Russians living abroad vote? According to official data, Russians living in the Baltic states voted in favour of the amendments to the constitution at a higher rate to Russians living in Russia or Russians living in other EU countries. Why was this?

On July 1st Russia's nationwide voting on constitutional amendments – designed primarily to give the current Russian president, Vladimir Putin the opportunity to remain in power until 2036 – came to an end. According to Russia's Central Electoral Commission, more than 57.7 million voters, or 77.92 per cent of those who voted, supported the amendments, while 15.7 million, or 21.27 per cent, voted against it. The turnout, according to official reports, reached almost 68 per cent.

Such a high margin of support for the amendments inspired many Russian officials and experts to claim that the Russian people have, once again, given Putin the power to fulfil his role as president (even though there was a whole package of amendments, it was nevertheless obvious, from the beginning, that the key amendment was the resetting of term limits for Putin, or "zeroing" as we call it in Russia). Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, did not hesitate to call the result "a triumphant referendum of trust in President Putin". The chair of the Federation Council's Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Building, Andrey Klishas, claimed the Russian Constitution of 2020 was more legitimate than the previous referendum in 1993 when fewer than 33 million people voted for the constitution – this time around it was 57.7 million.

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Falling approval

Yet it became obvious that this "triumph" exists only in the speeches of Russian politicians and journalists, aimed at legitimising the current regime in the eyes of Russians and the world. From the beginning, the Russian authorities took all necessary steps to ensure the correct result, including: an information blockade on opponents of the amendments (they were not provided with free air time, while the website of the campaign against the amendments was blocked by Roskomnadzor, the Russian state communications regulator); a ban on mass events adopted amid the coronavirus pandemic; coercion of workers from state and state-affiliated companies; new restrictions for observers and media workers willing to observe procedures in polling stations; massive propaganda in favour for amendments; and, most importantly, the expansion of opportunities for early elections, which opened up even more opportunities for fraud. According to Stanislav Andreychuk, a member of the "Golos" Movement for the Defence of Voters' Rights: "Almost 60 million people had already taken part in the referendum by the time the main voting day arrived (four-fifths of all those who allegedly put their ballots into the box)".

All this happened against the backdrop of falling government approval ratings and growing public discontent with the socio-economic situation in the country, aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic, and the actions of the authorities. Discontent is especially noticeable among the Russian youth. According to the Levada Center, Russia's leading independent polling organisation, 59 per cent of young Russians (under 30) believe the country is heading in the wrong direction. It is noteworthy that in Russia, unlike other countries, the coronavirus did not lead to any "rallying round the flag" effect. In fact, support for authorities decreased in the wake of the pandemic.

The vote on the constitutional amendments also highlighted – and which can hardly be called a triumph – the expansion of socio-demographic groups critical of the Kremlin's current policy. In previous elections those with higher education levels, higher income and those from larger cities were more inclined to resort to protest voting. Yet in this referendum another unexpected group joined them: the military. Pavel Luzin, an expert on the Russian Armed Forces, found that at a number of polling stations linked to military bases, the percentage of those who voted "no" exceeded not only the nationwide result, but the result of the region where these polling stations were located. But it may not have been the military which is so dissatisfied with the regime. As Luzin notes, "direct vote-rigging at the level of precinct or territorial election commissions in garrisons and closed towns is limited if not absent … so the chances are that the higher percentage of 'no' votes (compared to the official national average) among some garrisons and closed towns

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is not an anomaly. Rather, it could be the result of real voting in the absence of coercion and falsification. Hypothetically speaking, voting at such polling stations can be treated as an indicator of real attitudes towards the constitutional amendments".

In any case, there is a growing dissatisfaction with the authorities and an increase in protest moods – especially among younger people and in particular regions (e.g. Khabarovsk). Authorities are well aware of these trends. After the new constitutional amendments were passed, a law was adopted which enables elections of any scale to be held within three days. This will open the door for even greater fraud, further complicating public control over the implementation of electoral procedures.

"Another Russia" – Russians living outside Russia

The voting trends of Russians living abroad have always been followed closely. Some observers are trying to find a confirmation that there is "another Russia" that is much more critical of the current government, while others seek confirmation that the Russian diaspora support the power of a "strong hand". As usual, the truth can be found somewhere in between, but the devil is in the details. On the one hand, if we compare voting on constitutional amendments with voting in the 2018 presidential election, we see that the share of protest voting has increased significantly. In 2018 Putin lost only one polling station abroad, while this time around 69 polling stations abroad have voted against the constitutional changes. At the same time, fewer polling stations were opened abroad – 254 vs 394 in 2018 – due to the coronavirus pandemic. Russians were not allowed to freely travel abroad during the pandemic, so it is safe to assume that these were predominantly Russian citizens residing in foreign countries who voted abroad. Therefore, it is not surprising that significantly fewer people voted at foreign polling stations this year. Yet, given that voters this time were not Russian tourists but Russian residents in foreign countries, this year's result might be more representative in terms of the electoral preferences of "another Russia".

On the other hand, the amendments were still supported by the majority of Russians who voted abroad – 68.07 per cent. Polling stations located in post-Soviet countries unsurprisingly showed a high percentage of those voting "yes", which is largely due to the widespread presence of Russian media there and the supposedly low degree of integration of Russians into the societies of these countries. In Kyiv, for example, the amendments were supported by 67.02 per cent of Russians, in Lviv by 77.42 per cent, in Odesa by 80.99 per cent, and in Kharkiv by 76.19 per cent.

By contrast, many Russians living within the European Union voted against the amendments: 82.04 per cent in Prague, 83.4 per cent in Kraków, 80.49 per cent

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in London, 77.32 per cent in The Hague, 66.45 per cent in Paris, 67.6 per cent in Berlin. However, there were other polling stations located within the EU where the number of Russians voting in favour of the amendments exceeded the Russian national result. Russians residing in Baltic countries, in particular, showed one of the highest support for the current regime. In the 2018 presidential election, Putin received 85 per cent of Russians voting in Lithuania, 95 per cent in Latvia, and 94 per cent in Estonia. Amendments to the constitution were supported by 92.7 per cent of Russians in Latvia (while the result in polling stations in Daugavpils and Liepāja exceeded 96 per cent); 89.65 per cent in Estonia and by 79 per cent in Lithuania. Russian propagandists use these figures to confirm the thesis that Russians living in the Baltic states allegedly experience oppression in these countries, and therefore can easily be mobilised to support Putin, who is eager to protect them (this narrative of Putin as a defender of compatriots is widespread in Russian media aimed at a Russian speaking audiences outside of Russia).

Russians residing in Baltic countries showed one of the highest support for the current regime.

Diverse community

It is common to portray Russian communities in the Baltic states as a united group, however these communities differ significantly – in terms of numbers (in Latvia and Estonia, Russians make up a significant part of society, while in Lithuania this group is less numerous), in structure (for example, in recent years, Russians, persecuted for political reasons or fearing such persecution, tended to move to Lithuania more often than to Latvia or Estonia), and in attitudes to what is happening in Russia (the main differences we see is not between countries but between different waves of migration – among those who moved from Russia in 21st century, we can find more active opposition to Russia's authoritarian system).

Vytis Jurkonis, a project director with the Lithuanian branch of Freedom House, emphasises that "there is a desire [in Russia] to show that Baltic countries are quite similar in terms of their policy towards ethnic minorities and the Russian-speaking population in particular. But if you know that the share of Russian speaking people in Estonia and Latvia is about 25 per cent and just five per cent in Lithuania, then it becomes strange to equate them." Jurkonis also notes that "the degree of integration of Russians in all these countries is different, and this is not only because in the 1990s Lithuania had the luxury of granting citizenship to all people living in the territory of the country. In any case, one should not exaggerate the influ-

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ence of Russia's policy towards compatriots – especially in Lithuania". According to Jurkonis, most Russians living in the Baltic countries are migrants. In Tsarist times quite a few Old Believers moved to Lithuania and neighbouring countries; in Soviet times it was mostly workers who were relocated here. Now we see that journalists and political activists persecuted in Russia move to Lithuania, while in Latvia, for example, the headquarters of the Russian independent media, *Meduza*, is based there.

While we see that Russian communities in these countries are diverse, the largest diaspora is from Soviet times. Stanislav Andreychuk, a member of the "Golos" movement believes that "some of these people [relocated in Soviet times] failed to properly integrate into the new society and thus may feel nostalgic for Soviet times". Russian propaganda – both TV (for example, First Baltic Channel, NTV Mir-Baltia, etc.) and numerous online media outlets (like Sputnik) – targets this group directly. The authorities of the Baltic states are well aware of this problem, taking various steps to solve it – such as supporting their own media in Russian language, developing strategies to combat disinformation, and blocking propaganda resources. Lithuania and Latvia recently banned the broadcasts of the state-controlled Russian television network, RT.

It is noteworthy that many of the Russian media outlets operating in these countries during the referendum campaign focused mainly on the social amendments and kept silent on everything related to the redistribution of power and the zeroing of presidential terms. Pro-Kremlin media focused on the amendment of Article 69 of the constitution, which introduces a norm on supporting compatriots abroad and was framed as having the aim to improve the lives of Russians living in the Baltic states. This resonates with the sentiments of some Russians living in the Baltics, particularly those who have failed to integrate.

There is another category that presumably could have supported the amendments: Russians who have benefited economically from the Putin regime. Andreychuk notes that "there are quite a large number of wealthy Russians in these countries. For example, those who have invested in these countries to obtain a residence permit in the EU or simply bought real estate. These people are also more likely to support the regime that gave them an opportunity to earn money – they are in favour of maintaining the status quo."

Mood of Russians abroad?

It is impossible to assess the real contribution of "newcomers" to the distribution of voting results. Julia Krivonosova, a junior research fellow at Ragnar Nurkse

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Department of Innovation and Governance with the Tallinn University of Technology, notes that "in recent years, the outflow of specialists from Russia to the Baltic states has increased 3–4 times. In order to understand how this new wave affects the distribution of votes, one could look at a snapshot of the voting results at each polling station over several years. However, voter lists at polling stations abroad are not formed in advance, but during voting day, so there is no way to establish whether newcomers participate in the elections or not."

At the same time, there is data that indirectly suggest that those who have recently moved outside of Russia do not seek to actively participate in elections. It is known that since 2013, 120,000–150,000 people leave Russia annually, but the number of those who voted abroad did not change that drastically – just 24,300 more Russians voted in 2018 abroad compared to 2012.The practice of voting abroad without prior notice theoretically opens up opportunities for the same person to vote several times in different polling stations. This year a Russian resident of Israel was able to vote three times. First, she voted online, then voted at the Russian Embassy in Tel Aviv, and then at the consulate in Haifa. This leaves some imprint of mistrust on the voting results abroad, although a number of experts believe the elections abroad are held with less falsification than in Russia. Yet according to Andreychuk, "a lot depends on a particular country. For example, in [the breakaway republics of] Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniestria, a high level of manipulation can be expected. In the Baltic states this is probably a less significant problem."

All of this raises a question: Are the results from the polling stations in the Baltic states indicative of the mood of Russians living there? The short answer is no. First of all, it is obvious that despite all the statements about a high turnout, this is not entirely true. For example, only 1,221 Russians voted in Lithuania this year, while the Russian Ambassador to Lithuania, Alexander Udaltsov, himself estimated the turnout at nine per cent (at the same time, it should be kept in mind that Russians residing abroad with national/work visas are unlikely to be counted in these statistics, so in reality the turnout may be even lower). Secondly, the results obtained in polling stations in Baltic states show one simple thing – it is easier for the Russian authorities to mobilise supporters abroad than for the opposition, which even inside Russia was split into those who called for voting against amendments and those who called for boycotting the vote. Yet for Kremlin propagandists, who have managed to mobilise some of the Russians living in the Baltics, it is much more fruitful to ignore all the nuances and report on the unconditional support of Russians living abroad. NEE

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In Church we trust

The case of the Moldovan Orthodox Church

ANASTASIA POCIUMBAN

The relationship between religion and society differs in most post-Soviet states. While the Orthodox Church in Moldova clearly enjoys widespread popularity in the country, it has chosen to focus on promoting a "traditional agenda", often associated with discrimination towards women and minorities.

The Ukrainian Church's official independence last year raised issues regarding how religion impacts geopolitics in post-Soviet countries. Despite this, the country's former president, Petro Poroshenko, was neither the first nor the last political leader to use religious sentiments as part of an electoral campaign. The current Moldovan President, Igor Dodon, did so during the country's previous elections. While there are numerous studies analysing the role of the church in politics and social movements, this discussion investigates the church's role regarding conflict mitigation or instigation. By examining situations prone to conflict, we can try to determine whether the Orthodox Church in Moldova (OCM) serves the purpose of uniting the people or fostering polarisation. Such an issue remain of great importance for a country where more than 90 per cent of the population declare themselves Orthodox.

Several questions need answering in order to create a fuller picture of the church's standing in Moldovan society. What is the relationship between the different churches in Moldova? What is the church's role in politics? Does it have a

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position on LGBTQ+, and on religious and ethnic minorities? What is the position of the church on the spread of disinformation and fake news? How has the church addressed the COVID-19 pandemic?

Relationships between different churches in Moldova

In Moldova the church enjoys a high level of public trust, with 70 per cent of the population stating they have confidence in the organisation. In contrast, the second most trusted institutions are city halls, which only has a 38 per cent public trust rating. Mass media scores 32 per cent, while parliament comes in last with 11 per cent. At the same time, according to the same barometer, slightly more than 52 per cent of Moldovans feel that none of the political parties represent them.

As stated above, 91.4 per cent identify themselves as members of the Orthodox Church of Moldova (OCM, a self-governing body under the Russian Patriarchate). Furthermore, 3.7 per cent are members of the local Bessarabian section of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Only 1.9 per cent declared themselves as atheist or non-religious. In this context, the church, in particularly the OCM, plays a visible role in people's lives and has considerable ability to frame and influence political narratives and popular beliefs.

The Bessarabian priests accuse the state of favouring the OCM and are trying to reclaim certain territories through the European Court of Human Rights. However with the exception of occasional altercations, the OCM and the Bessarabian Church – being both Orthodox – peacefully co-exist with little interaction between each other. While these two churches have no visible conflict, issues arise when we look at other religions. Moldovan legislation continues to privilege Orthodoxy and has even forced the Muslim minority to remain registered as a non-governmental organisation. This is despite the creation of a more simplified process of religious registration in 2016, and consistent attempts by the community to take advantage of these changes.

> The church plays a visible role in people's lives with the ability to frame and influence political narratives and popular beliefs.

Other issues that religious minorities face from state bodies relate to property, building permits and general discrimination. There are data confirming that Orthodox priests can de facto veto and influence the spaces used by minority religious groups (for example, cemeteries and burial places). There are even examples of people destroying menorahs, being led by OCM priests. None of the cases were taken to court, and the OCM did not apologise on behalf of the priests nor

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make any statements calling for respect to be shown to other religious groups. Furthermore, many state schools have Orthodox religious objects on display and often only Orthodox priests are invited to conduct religious education.

Despite the constitution of Moldova guaranteeing the right to religious freedom and forbidding any discrimination on religious grounds, in reality the Moldovan Orthodox Church enjoys a more favourable position than other group when it comes to religious registration, education, and practice. Moreover, there is no condemnation from the OCM regarding hate speech and religious discrimination performed by its followers. It seems, then, that the Moldovan Orthodox Church only contributes to conflict between people of various religious faiths within the country.

Relations with the LGBTQ+ community

The Moldovan Orthodox Church openly discriminates against sexual minorities, particularly LGBTQ+ groups. In May the OCM wrote a letter to the government asking to ban any demonstrations conducted in support of LGBTQ+ rights. Church representatives say these kinds of events "affect moral principles, rights and liberties of other people". The week prior, in Chișinău, a march was held in support of sexual minority rights. The OCM arranged a "Family March" counter-protest, which was organised by the church to combat alleged "homosexual propaganda". In previous years, marches supporting LGBTQ+ rights resulted in violence, which to a large degree was instigated by Orthodox followers and priests.

> Despite the constitution of Moldova guaranteeing the right to religious freedom, in reality the Moldovan Orthodox Church enjoys a favourable position.

The church's message is clear and its official position is that the LGBTQ+ community has no place in Moldova. Moldovan President, Igor Dodon, a strong supporter of the OCM, has also publicly declared his support for the "traditional family", stating that he will not allow the "infiltration of foreign values in Moldovan society". Due to this rhetoric, it comes as no surprise that church leaders supported him during the 2016 presidential campaign. Any open support of the LGBTQ+ community by priests is publicly condemned and punished by the church. For example, Maxim Melinti – a priest in Ghidici, a village not far from Chișinău – received an award last year from a pro-LGBTQ+ organisation, called Genderdoc-M, for his work with the community. As a result, the church suspend-

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ed him from his role and banned him from officiating services. He was forced to apologise in front of the church, as well as refuse his award. This case presents an example where the church could have played the role of mediator, or indeed supporter, of sexual minorities. Dodon's statement in 2018 where he "never promised to be the president of gays" appears to complement the church's own feelings.

Social divisions

In 2018 Moldova hosted the World Congress of Families (WCF), an event which was opened and led by President Dodon. During the occasion, the Moldovan leader made clear his devotion to traditional religion, stating that due to "Being the Leader of the country, in which for many centuries Christianity played a key part, I tend to support all initiatives related to the unification of society and its return to true values, written in the Bible." The congress, which took place a few months before the elections, was criticised by Moldovan civil society as a means of imposing church approved ideals upon the country and what constitutes a "normal family". Other important topics discussed at the event included the banning of abortion, reproductive health, and the role of women in society (i.e. that they should stay at home and take care of the family).

The Orthodox Church of Moldova is no stranger to politics and has often used its power to promote strengthening relations with Moscow.

In general, the WFC opposed everything which goes against its definition of "natural families". This includes abortion, gay marriage, in-vitro fertilisation and divorce. The organisation is connected to extreme right-wing and conservative parties and is known to not only promote hatred against LGBTQ+ organisations and women's rights but actively fight against them. In line with these traditional beliefs, many Orthodox Church representatives participated in the congress, displaying the church's promotion of these ideas.

Even though Moldova's constitution does not include the church in decision-making processes, the OCM (subordinate to the Russian patriarchate) is no stranger to politics and has often used its power to promote strengthening relations with Moscow. Indeed, the church has directly accused the EU of promoting the "wrong" kind of values and has often appeared to act as an instrument of Russian influence within Moldova. "The voice of the church and the voice of Russian politicians – not all, but the overwhelming majority of Russian politicians – are the same. For me, Russia is the guardian of Christian values," said the bishop from

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Balti, Moldova's second largest city, in an interview with the *New York Times*. The bishop also added that the EU requests too much in return for financial support and encourages Moldovans to alienate themselves from God.

Another example of the church's interference in politics is its campaign against Moldova's anti-discrimination laws, which makes reference to unfair discrimination in workplaces based on sexual orientation. The church opposed the law's terminology, which eventually caused it to be renamed the Law on Ensuring Equality, thereby removing active reference to discrimination. In 2012, when the law was discussed in parliament, the OCM's official website republished a piece from a book called *The reality to which we are striving* by Valeriu Ionas. The article, which is titled "anti-discrimination law or the beginning of dehumanisation in Moldova", argues that homosexuality is inhuman and that EU officials wrongly view the acceptance of such practices as "civilised". Ionas's work asserts that the EU is demanding that "sick people" be allowed to actively spread the "sickness of homosexuality". The fact that the article is published on the OCM's official website without any disclaimer illustrates the official position of the church. This is another example where the church engages in politics, thus creating an association between the EU and anti-Orthodox values.

Official communications on the Orthodox Church of Moldova's website tend to portray anti-Orthodox values as closely connected with the EU.

The OCM's website also regularly publishes news related to Putin, including articles named "Putin was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize" or ones related to the Russian leader's invitation to the Patriarch of Jerusalem to celebrate 1025 years of Russian Christianity. This news has no relation to Moldova. Exchanges of congratulatory messages on various occasions between the Moldovan Metropolitan and Putin are also regularly published. The church's feelings on the EU (usually just generically called "Europe") are often reflected in articles with titles such as "Russian Church is worried about legalisation of unisex 'marriages' and abortion" and "Increased secularisation in Europe or Sweden: legalisation of polygamy and abolishment of weddings has started". Most news is re-published from the website ortodox.md or other Orthodox websites, especially those from Russia. It is not a surprise then that in May 2019, Metropolitan decorated Putin with a friendship award.

The official communication on the Orthodox Church of Moldova's website tends to portray anti-Orthodox values as closely connected with the EU, political liberalism and western education. Women's rights are also sometimes included in this list. For example, one article discussed how women's demands to enter Mount

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Athos signals the end of the world, and that Greece is under pressure from international organisations, especially the European Parliament, to allow this. Meanwhile, Russia tends to be associated with Orthodoxy and the protector of traditional family values. Current support for potential membership of both the EU and Eurasian Economic Union is slightly more than 30 per cent. The church's role in shaping public perceptions of Russia and the EU is another example of how it contributes to divisions in society with regards to the country's geopolitical development.

Fake news

Another issue is whether the church contributes to the spread of fake news and disinformation, or if it tries to combat it. Ion Andronache, a former student of Moldova's theological institute, created a YouTube channel describing how he sees the role of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world. In one of his videos from March 2019, he discussed fake news and presented examples where priests share articles that are often produced or influenced by electoral campaigns. Examples include claims that presidential candidate Maia Sandu would bring 30,000 refugees into Moldova, as a promise to Angela Merkel. Another popular piece of fake news shared by priests involved allegations that Maia Sandu, the current leader of the Party of Action and Solidarity and former Moldovan prime minister, is a homosexual. Fake pictures spread supposedly showing her kissing another woman on the streets of Munich. Other articles shared by priests included stories claiming that a mosque will be built in the centre of Chișinău.

Some priests, led by Bishop Marchel of Balti and Falesti of the OCM, even organised a press conference ahead of the 2016 presidential election, where they stated that people "have to choose between two candidates – a Christian and a non-Christian, a patriot and non-patriot". They called Igor Dodon a Christian patriot because "it is normal to have an attitude in favour of the church". At the same time, it was claimed that Maia Sandu's attitude is "not normal" and that Orthodox people should not vote for her.

The Diocese of Tiraspol-Dubasari is part of the Moldovan Orthodox Church. It is connected to the OCM, but it is also in direct contact with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Federation. Priests in Transdniestria agree to follow the OCM as long as it follows Russia. The church's website actively promotes its connections with Russia and includes a news feed integrated with the website, Christianity.ru. Therefore, the understanding in Transdniestria is that the OCM is, before all else, part of Russian Christianity and that minorities, including Orthodox ones, are negative influences. For example, the Bessarabian Church is simply re-

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garded as an occupant. From this we can see that the OCM, and the church in Transdniestria, have found a way to co-exist, with an understanding that the Russian Patriarchate rules over them both.

Coronavirus and the church

Many of the Moldova churches first disregarded the state of emergency introduced by the Moldovan government in mid-March and organised services to offer communion. According to the Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Chicu on March 22nd, at least 375 churches had indoor services, using one shared spoon to offer communion. Afterwards, attendances decreased and some churches received fines for breaking the rules; however services have continued in villages and small towns. The Metropolis of Moldova said they do not approve of this, but will not take any measures to deter the priests.

> During the current health crisis, the church has not served as a role model in encouraging people to stay at home.

The Moldovan president has sent mixed messages and has not actively participated in the debate over church services. On the one hand, he mentioned the importance of self-isolation and to respect the measures introduced by the government. On the other hand, he said that priests could visit worshipers at home during the Easter weekend. Asked whether the priests would be punished, Dodon replied: "It is unclear where the higher risk of infection is – in the church or in the supermarket." Following the government's rules, the churches were allowed to hold Easter masses without attendees and stream them online.

The church also asked the Moldovan government for financial support, since donations decreased during to the lockdown. However, the president said there was no public money for this and that the OCM should rather look for support from the private sector. During the current crisis the OCM has not served as a role model in encouraging people to stay at home – and only later did they join efforts to combat the spread of the COVID-19 (indeed, some churches are still breaking the law by holding mass sermons).

Additionally, a text published at the end of May on the official website of the church, shared a number of conspiracy theories and fake news, including claims that a vaccine, financed by Bill Gates, is supposed to introduce microchips into human bodies that would then control them with 5G technology. Another paper published by the OCM criticised the church's closings as disproportionate. It states that the church understands the risks of getting infected, but these risks shall be

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assumed for the "eternal life". This type of official communication, in a time of crisis, is not only misleading and dangerous, it puts lives at risk.

The Orthodox Church of Moldova has demonstrated a tendency to foster polarisation in society, instigate conflict (especially towards the LGBTQ+ community, but also towards religious minorities) and involve itself in politics. This can be seen in the way it has portrayed the EU as spreading decadence and Russia as the protector of traditional values. There are no known cases where the OCM has promoted tolerance or unity in any social conflict in Moldova.

It would be interesting to see what the OCM could achieve as a societal mediator, rather than an instigator of conflict. In a country where so many people declare themselves Orthodox, the church could potentially act as a unifier of people around messages of tolerance, rather than division and discrimination. NEE

This article is the outcome of a project within the 2018–2019 Democracy Study Centre training programme of the German-Polish-Ukrainian Society and European Ukrainian Youth Policy Center in Kyiv, supported by the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany. #CivilSocietyCooperation.

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Dirigisme 2.0

The way to go for the region?

MICHAEL RICHTER AND JAKUB A. BARTOSZEWSKI

Most countries of Central and Eastern Europe that are now members of the EU developed impressively since the collapse of the centrally planned economy. Yet, Poland and other countries in the region still lack their own capital to compete on a global scale. The merger of Poland's two state-owned refineries, Orlen and LOTOS, could illustrate a solution – selective state-ownership in crucial sectors.

Economic power is not shared equally across the European Union. Only one out of all EU companies in the Global Fortune 500 ranking is based in one of the new member states that joined the union after 2004. The remaining 112 companies are based in the "old" EU. Yet, as the case of a merger of two state-owned Polish oil companies shows, this unparalleled level of inequality is not being addressed by Brussels. Rather, the European Commission's attitude suggests that it prefers maintaining the status quo. This is only strengthening already existing inequalities across the common market. At the same time, the Polish case hints at a potential new path of economic development for the region of Central and Eastern Europe – one that we refer to as "Dirigisme 2.0".

A tale of two refineries

The largest economic experiment of the 20th century, communism, left a bizarre economic legacy in certain European countries. Poland illustrates this phenomenon

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with several unusual cases. One of them is the existence of two nationally-owned oil companies, Orlen and LOTOS. Their gas-focused cousin, PGNiG, is left out of this story. Of course, Poland is not a petrostate, so the two companies concentrate on refining imported oil into gasoline and other products. Orlen is the bigger player in this pair, being around twice the size of LOTOS in terms of revenue. Neither company is the hegemon of the Polish gasoline retail market, with Orlen and LOTOS respectively operating around 23 per cent and six per cent of all the country's petrol stations. Technically, the two companies are competitors. However, it comes as no surprise that state control over each has created some peculiarities regarding their competition.

The merger of Poland's two nationally-owned oil companies would mean following the same trajectory as giants like BP and Exxon Mobil.

In February 2018 Orlen announced plans to acquire LOTOS. The merger of the two would mean following the same trajectory that oil business giants such as BP and Exxon Mobil followed years ago. Capital is the main strength that both refineries share. Being larger means having a greater chance of successfully entering the global energy game and becoming a multinational corporation. Yet, these plans have alarmed the European Commission which fears a possible monopoly in the union's East. Following EU competition law, in July 2019 Orlen filed an application for the commission's approval of the planned merger. In response, the body opened an "in-depth investigation". As Commissioner Margrethe Vestager said: "The commission is concerned that the proposed transaction would reduce competition in several markets." A year later, the commission presented its requirements. Instead of a full merger, Orlen would be allowed to acquire 70 per cent of LOTOS. The company would also have the right to only half of the refinery's production, provided that LOTOS sold 80 per cent of its petrol stations. At the same time, Orlen would have to make a number of other commitments. The most elaborate of these conditions includes the financing of a new Polish jet fuel import terminal that will later be transferred to another company upon its completion. Given these unfavourable conditions, the situation raises several questions surrounding the decision's fairness. Could this merger really create a new economic leviathan?

As the saying goes in Poland: "The point of view depends on the point of sitting". Comparing the position of "Orlen-LOTOS", the potential company that could result from the merger, with other players certainly offers a different perspective. Figure 1 demonstrates last year's revenues for the world's top five largest publicly traded oil companies, as well as those of Orlen-LOTOS. Even after the merger, the alleged Polish "leviathan" would still remain a small player on the global stage.

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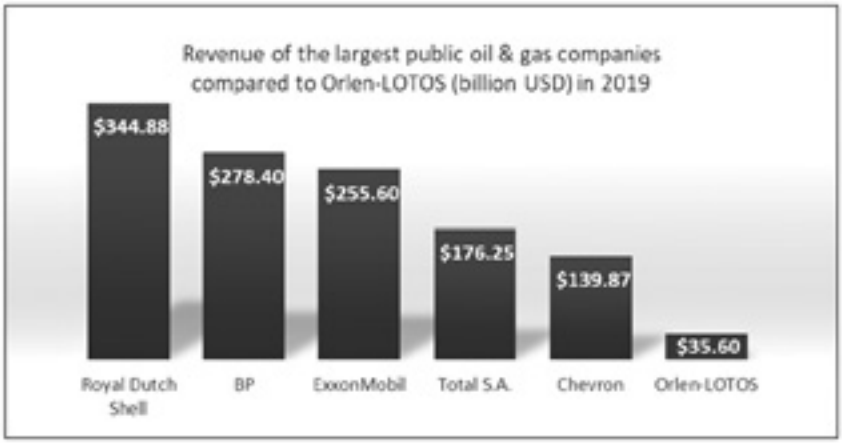

Figure 1 Comparing the size of oil majors and Orlen-LOTOS

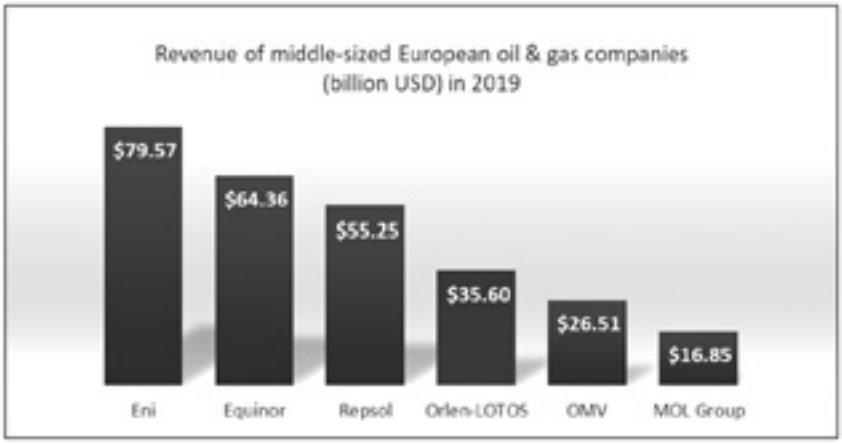

Figure 2 Comparing the size of EU oil companies and Orlen-LOTOS

Figure 2 shows a similar comparison with middle-sized European oil companies. We can clearly see that even on this level-playing field that the Polish company would still be far from the dominant player. In fact, it would become more or less an average-sized enterprise, remaining in the middle of the pack amongst other companies that wish to join the global energy game's "premier league".

Is the threat of an economic leviathan real? It depends on how we perceive it. With the two companies' combined presence still remaining a minuscule force on the global stage, this threat does not appear to be substantiated. This is especially true when we consider the fact that the two competitors in fact have the same owner, the Polish state. The merger would not change much in that matter.

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Disparity in economic power

Why is the Orlen-LOTOS case important? The Polish case is the tip of an iceberg illustrating a much larger problem within the EU. The topic of disparity in economic development between the EU's East and West is not new. Yet, as living standards across the EU level out, a new problem needs to be addressed. This is the unequal distribution of economic power between the "Old" EU and the "New" EU, i.e. the states that joined after 2004.

Corporate mergers are a natural process in a free-market economy. They lead to the creation of multinational enterprises with global reach, influence and capital large enough to undertake game-changing projects. In a way, the process can be compared to evolution – companies, like cells, combine to create larger corporate organisms. Less profitable ventures perish, whereas stronger companies are favoured and continue to grow. In this context, the main difference between the old and new parts of the EU is where these processes were allowed to take place without interruption. The newer states only re-embraced capitalism three decades ago, whereas its more traditional members have benefited from this system for the past three centuries. This has allowed the evolutionary processes more time there to select the winners and losers of the economic game.

How economically important is the EU's East on the global scale? A glance at the 2019 Fortune Global 500 list offers a staggering answer. The ranking is a compilation of the world's largest 500 companies ranked by revenue in any given year. In 2019, there were 113 EU companies on the list, an impressive result which proves the overall economic power of the organisation. Yet, as we look at this number from a closer perspective we might wonder how this power is distributed between the older and newer parts of the union. The answer serves as perhaps the best illustration of the disparities in economic influence facing the EU. Out of the 113 EU companies, only one of them was located in the new EU. This constitutes less than one per cent of the total.

Indeed, the countries of the "New" EU currently have no enterprises that matter globally. As Orlen notes in one of its press releases: "Mergers of oil companies in other European countries have already taken place. Examples of this are … Norway's Statoil and the resulting Equinor, Spain's Repsol, Portugal's Galp Energia, Italian ENI, Austrian OMV and France's TOTAL."

What the Orlen-LOTOS case shows is that the European Commission is ignoring the fundamental differences in economic development between EU members. The decision of the commission to dismantle LOTOS and command Orlen to build strategic infrastructure for its competition is justified as follows: "Through this combination of refining capacity and import potential, the purchaser will

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Figure 3 Comparison of the number of "Old" and "New" EU firms in the 2019 Fortune Global 500 ranking

exert a competitive constraint similar to that of LOTOS before the transaction." The body is right in saying that on paper the merger would result in a monopoly in the Polish market. However, this attitude, which is also largely applicable to cases of two private companies in a western economy seems to ignore the fact that the two entities already have the same owner and that it has been coordinating their competition for the past 30 years. Also, given the significantly smaller size of the new EU economies, perhaps it makes more sense to replace the country-based approach towards competition laws with one that focuses on the region as a whole. This would help create an environment in which new member states are more likely to finally develop companies capable of competing with the giants in the "Old" EU.

Far from adopting a patronising approach, the commission should acknowledge that late entrants into the free-market economy still need to go through certain evolutionary processes that will allow them to develop globally competitive industries. A one-size-fits-all approach towards competition laws will only prolong and deepen an already unequal share of economic power between the East and West. Blocking the merger also importantly creates a precedent for taking similar decisions in the future.

A step into the past or a path towards the future?

Besides the question of whether a merger of big players in a specific sector is justifiable, another crucial dimension is apparent in this case. This is namely the fact that this merger relates to state-owned entities. The (in)famous Washington

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Consensus, which provided the guiding "recipe" for economic transformation processes in the CEE region, proclaimed privatisation as one of its central pillars. Privatisation can be defined as the "withdrawal of the state from resource allocation and ownership of production assets". Therefore, does the process of creating bigger state-owned conglomerates constitute a return to the past?

It is necessary to note two important factors when addressing this issue. Firstly, in the present, there are good examples of the state acting as a central player in crucial economic sectors. Secondly, it is also questionable whether countries like Poland will be able to develop their own capital stock without the state taking an active role in keeping, aggregating, and developing national capital.

The first point is linked to the common perception that state capitalism in Europe naturally resembles a Russian model. If the relationship between business and state is too close, the traditional argument goes, then either side is vulnerable to being "captured" by the other. In such a case, businesses may pursue political objectives or politics may realise the objectives of the business sector. However, it is important to acknowledge the fact that it is not simply the proximity of private companies and the state that defines their subsequent relationship. Ultimately, individual institutions play a key role in this relationship. Javed Burki Shahid and Perry Guillermo defined this as the "rules that shape the behaviour of organisations and the social system. In other words, there is a growing awareness of individuals in a society".

Does the process of creating bigger state-owned conglomerates constitute a return to the past?

It is true that in a system without checks and balances, where these rules are subject to the considerations of ruling elites, market mechanisms will suffer in the face of corruption. Gazprom is seen by many analysts as one of the world's most corrupt companies, with losses due to corruption now amounting to 40 billion dollars annually. Rosneft and Lukoil, Russia's other energy giants, are also believed to be tools of the Kremlin, although the latter is formally under private ownership. Yet when looking at countries like Finland or Norway, where some branches of the economy are under direct state ownership, it is clear that within a system of strong state institutions, healthy state-owned companies can exist and develop.

Secondly, it is worth looking at the underlying logic and necessity of this merger. With strong and largely transparent state institutions already in place, one might still ask whether this merger could actually bring any tangible benefits. For this, one must admit that capital markets in Central and Eastern Europe are completely different from Western Europe. This is due to the fact that citizens have only been accumulating sizable wealth over the past 30 years. This aspect is reflected in the

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"net international investment position" of the concerned countries. This indicator shows whether a country's economic agents, such as companies or individual investors, possess more assets abroad than foreigners in a respective country.

If this is the case, then the position is positive. The global expansion of domestic companies and the subsequent acquisition of groups abroad increases this position and can therefore be seen as a sign of a healthy and competitive economy. Not surprisingly, at the very top of the ranking, one can find traditionally strong and globally-competitive economies, such as Norway, Switzerland and Germany. In this context, claiming that "capital has no nationality" has been shown to be a myth. It also shows that too strong a reliance on foreign investment can make a country more prone to economic shocks.

At the bottom of the table lie countries that are well-known to be less resilient to crises, such as Spain or Greece. Also, practically the whole CEE region has a negative asset position, as seen in the graph below, which shows susceptibility to potential economic shocks and the lack of sufficient outreach of its companies:

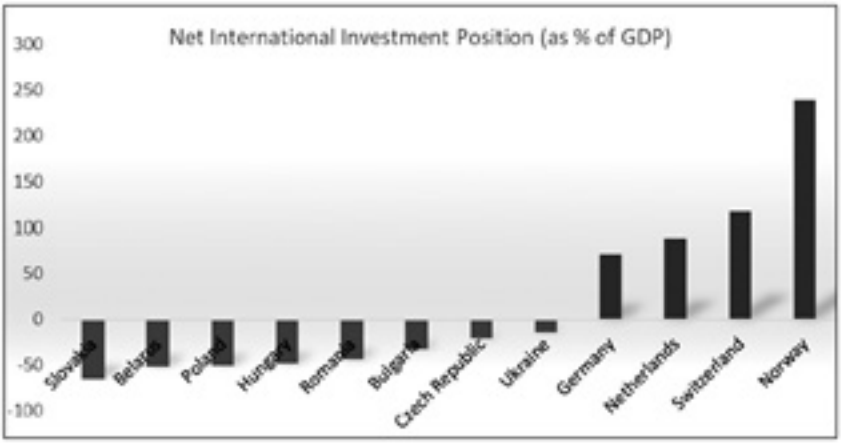

Figure 4 Net International Investment Position of selected CEE countries and Western European Countries in 2019. Source: IMF, 2019

Developing national champions

Due to missing private capital the necessary infusion needed in order to build national wealth at a global level must come from the state, which must be capable of redistributing capital for specific long-term investments. Particularly in such a relevant sector as energy, which covers many long-term trends, the state might

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strategically approach these challenges and create many positive spill-overs to related sectors. This holds true due to the fact that its planning horizon and scope can be much longer, as state-owned capital can prioritise economy-wide planning over specific sectoral aims.

Moreover, once state-owned capital begins to grow it can usually be kept without the need to privatise or sell stakes. This allows for the company to take on regional or even global importance and allows for economies of scale to take effect. This subsequently decreases short-term costs and increases long-term prospects. It is worth noting that societal attitudes towards state ownership and interventionism are favourable in Poland and therefore fit into the general socio-economic context. It should also be remembered that countries like France were characterised at the peak of their economic growth by highly interventionist economic development policies, usually put under the umbrella term of "Dirigisme". Therefore, a "Dirigisme 2.0", in a Polish version in particular and a regional version in general, might now be necessary in order to start developing national champions with a global reach.

As a result, when asking whether the merger between Orlen and LOTOS would constitute a path towards a "Polish Gazprom" – the frame of this question should be changed. Rather, we should ask whether this Polish giant could become the country's very own Equinor (based on the Norwegian example) and a step towards a more resilient and competitive development model? What makes Gazprom and Equinor differ fundamentally is the environment in which they operate. As such, Poland needs to maintain a high level of institutional transparency, as only then will it be able to move towards a positive European model of partially state-led development policies. This is exemplified by the Norwegian model or a "Dirigisme 2.0". If this is achieved, positive long-term spill-over and growth effects will be able to take place in the country.

This model could characterise the next step on the development path not only for Poland, but for the region as a whole. Poland, however, due to its critical market size, could lead the way and serve as a role model for other countries to follow suit. This would help it reclaim a position similar to its role during the economic transformation of the 1990s.

Broader perspective

Most countries of the region of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly those that became members of the EU, developed impressively since the collapse of the centrally planned system. However, as the analysis above shows, Poland and other countries in the region still lack their own capital to compete on a global scale.

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A solution to this is selective state-ownership in crucial sectors, which aims to upscale and develop these companies at the international level. Embedded into a system of strong competition and institutional control alongside transparency, such companies have the potential to follow the Norwegian or former French model – a "Dirigisme 2.0" for the region. Mergers are a natural way to achieve this development and the Orlen–LOTOS should be understood in that broader perspective.

It is a natural and pragmatic step forward as long as the institutional conditionalities are upheld. It can be expected that mergers will take place more often in the future, not least due to the economic fallout created by the COVID-19 crisis. Given the needs of these regional states to pursue greater influence in world economics, the European Commission should ensure competition by removing trade barriers within the single market instead of preventing or complicating potential mergers. The continued existence of disparities within the economic power of the EU also suggests the need to revise the one-size-fits-all approach towards competition laws. NEE

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Beyond 2020

What's next for the Eastern Partnership

This special section is dedicated to looking at the future developments, current achievements and some disappointments as a result of the European Union's Eastern Partnership programme. As we passed the 10th anniversary in 2019 and are completing the 20 deliverbales for 2020 – now is a time to add some serious discussions on how the programme should be shaped for the future. This section gathers experts from the EU as well as each member country to provide a unique perspective and deep insight on the state of the Eastern Partnership and what might come next.

Read on pages 108–150

Katarina Mathernova and Kataryna Wolczuk **The Eastern Partnership. Between fundamentals and integration**
Hanna Bazhenova and Tomasz Stępniewski **Zelenskyy's Ukraine and the Eastern Partnership**
Nugzar Kokhreidze **Georgia and the EU need to stay focused on integration**
Oktawian Milewski **A reality check for Moldova-EU relations**
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The Eastern Partnership

Between fundamentals and integration

KATARINA MATHERNOVA AND KATARYNA WOLCZUK

By signing Association Agreements with some countries of the Eastern Partnership, the EU has embarked on a foreign policy experiment. In essence, it is an offer of integration without accession to promote transformative reforms in neighbouring countries. This necessitates a change in the nature of the support that the EU typically offered in the past.

The European Union has offered the six Eastern neighbourhood countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – a privileged relationship with the eventual aim of economic integration into the EU's single market. To some, this offer has proven attractive as evidenced by the conclusion of the Association Agreements and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, however, have opted for a looser relationship within the framework of the multilateral Eastern Partnership.

The scale of the AA's "transformative" ambitions initially exposed a gap in the EU's own capacity to drive domestic reforms in the countries of the Eastern neighbourhood. The most significant steps to address this weakness have been taken in relation to Ukraine, where the EU has engaged more strategically in the reform process. The EU has shifted attention from simply exporting its rulebook (the *acquis communataire*), backed with development aid, to supporting more fundamental reforms of state institutions and economic structures. Increasingly, this has become a blueprint for supporting reforms in all Eastern Partnership countries. The EU has moved from a somewhat formulaic insistence on the implementation of

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the *acquis* to a greater understanding of and responsiveness to the more granular needs of the partner countries.

Challenges

Despite the challenges Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have encountered in the period leading up to the signing of the Association Agreements, it was widely assumed that the full and rapid implementation of the complex agreements would follow. For the governments, civil society and the EU, the Association Agreements appeared to represent a ready-made blueprint for comprehensive reform. This proved to be anything but true.

While post-Soviet states are ostensibly endowed with the requisite state institutions (e.g. a cabinet of ministers, judiciaries, anti-monopoly agencies, energy regulators and so forth), many, if not most, have proved to be dysfunctional. The eastern neighbours inherited Soviet state structures that were not only unfit-for-purpose in the post-communist era, but had increasingly fallen into the hands of predatory networks who exploited them for their own rent-seeking purposes. Over time, these networks have corroded the capacity of the institutions to function to the benefit of society while facilitating rent extraction. The outcome is that the state as a whole lacks the capacity to design, implement and enforce rules in a competent and neutral way, which is necessary to deliver public goods and to maintain public trust. The long-standing nature of these phenomena means that there is no quick fix. Public protests and revolutions can bring corrupt regimes down and thus give a tremendous boost to democratic changes; however, these institutions remain remarkably resilient to reform. Yet to sustain any revolutionary change, they needed to be embedded in institutions. Jean Monet, one of the founding fathers of what later became the EU, famously said: "Nothing is possible without men, but nothing is lasting without institutions."

> The EU-Association Agreement did not resolve Ukraine's predicament – it had more starkly exposed it.

Ukraine has long been in need of fundamental reform. By 2014, this need had become desperate – though the way forward was far from obvious. While civic activism had, in effect, secured a pro-European orientation, public officials in positions of influence lacked the experience and expertise to carry out a reform agenda. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement proved to be a transformative step – albeit in a counter-intuitive way – as after its adoption it became clear that nothing less than a complete overhaul of state institutions was required. In other

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words, the conclusion of the Association Agreement had not resolved Ukraine's predicament – it had more starkly exposed it. In doing so, however, it triggered a series of actions that could bring about fundamental change in Ukraine, albeit only in the long term.

Focus on fundamentals

An association agreement lays out a complex and sophisticated contractual relationship with the European Union. Once it is fully implemented, it results in a far-reaching political association and economic integration with the EU. In exchange for access to EU markets, the Association Agreements require associated countries to adopt significant portions of the *acquis* – the set of EU norms that regulate the single market and the EU's common activities. The level of economic integration offered to the eastern neighbours entails progressive convergence with internal market rules and the adaptation of institutional practices to EU standards.

> Eager to sign the Association Agreements, the negotiating countries rarely examined the fine print.

Yet the intense focus on the *acquis* leaves the EU somewhat rigid in its interactions with third countries. This was evident in the negotiations of the Association Agreeements with the eastern partners. Eager to sign the Association Agreements, including its significance as a political symbol, the negotiating countries rarely examined the fine print and rarely challenged the requirements. At that stage, neither the EU nor the national officials negotiating the Association Agreements fully grasped the nature of this challenge. Indeed, it could be argued that there was a major difference in perceptions. EU officials simply assumed that the countries pursuing European integration had the capacity to take on and administer a highly complex corpus of common rules. Ukrainian officials, however, were confident in the transformative potential of the *acquis*. It would soon be clear that both were overly optimistic.

At the heart of the issue was the fact that the *acquis* was never designed to guide a country undergoing transition from communism through the fundamental reforms. In other words, the *acquis* in itself offered nothing in terms of what Ukraine needed most: the rule of law, democratic institutions, effective and impartial judiciaries, a functioning market economy and an effective public administration, all bolstered by high standards of integrity and public-mindedness of the political class. The reason for this absence is simple: EU member states are expected to have mastered these fundamentals before joining.

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Photo: European Commission

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, participated in the Eastern Partnership Leaders' videoconference on June 18th 2020. The political diversity of the Eastern Partnership countries has called for a calibrated and nuanced strategy for each country.

Prior to the adoption of the Association Agreements, support for fundamental reform was provided by various international donors in the Eastern Partnership countries. In other words, it was piecemeal, ad hoc, unsystematic, and rarely tackled the specific needs of the country. All too often the view that training alone could improve dysfunctional institutions prevailed. Once the implementation of the Association Agreements started, however, the inadequacy of this type of support became evident.

The EU's support for the Eastern Partnership countries in "ensuring a stable, prosperous and democratic future for all its citizens" could only be achieved by effective state institutions. As noted by international development experts: "for donors to simply attend to social and economic needs without sufficient attention to the basic functioning of core political institutions makes no sense". The European Commission recognised the challenge and responded strategically in the wake of the tumultuous events of 2013–14.

Innovative approach to Ukraine

The European Commission responded in three distinct ways. First, in April 2014, it created a dedicated Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA). Second, it re-orientated its assistance from pure technical assistance to institution and capacity building

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through support for comprehensive reforms. Third, it became more strategic in its coordination of assistance.

The SGUA was set up as a task force by the then President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barosso, with the remit to provide assistance and support for reform development and implementation. It is noteworthy that Ukraine is the only third country, (i.e., one that is not a member of the EU) that has been allocated a special task force. The SGUA is staffed by a combination of seconded officials from the commission's sectoral Directorates General and temporary expert staff.

The importance of this innovation cannot be overstated: the internal capacity of the SGUA has allowed it to test and experiment with new approaches in supporting reforms, a model that the European Commission is trying to emulate in other parts of the Eastern Partnership. Originally the SGUA was viewed with some suspicion by other institutional players, even within the EU itself. However its impact has been such that it has come to be widely respected by EU institutions, member states and their agencies, and, last but not least, the Ukrainian administration. One of the SGUA's key achievements has been the creation of effective communication channels between national officials, civil society, the media and western donors in Ukraine. For example, when anti-reform forces sought to undermine certain reform bills, their efforts were almost immediately made public thanks to the SGUA.

Institution and capacity building

Institution and capacity building has become a clear priority of support to Ukraine in the Association Agreement implementation. Strategic priorities have included reform of public administration, public finance management, energy efficiency, decentralisation, judicial and prosecutorial reform, governance and anti-corruption. Original post-Maidan efforts were based on initiatives taken by various think tanks, with the SGUA/EU Delegation helping build reform alliances, raise public awareness, support for the drafting, and making the case for, any new legislation all the way through implementation. This has had a transformative impact on the country in important areas: health, education and pension reforms; decentralisation; energy sector reforms and macro-economic stabilisation; VAT reform; and overall public finance management.

This sector-focused approach allowed for a comprehensive strategy – from capacity-building to policy implementation – that was more effective than isolated and sporadic interventions. This has been aided by the key interplay between the policy dialogue across the sectors as part of the implementation of the Association

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Agreements and the simultaneous technical and financial support for reforms in these sectors.

In strengthening institutions in Ukraine, the EU took even a step further. In partnership with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), as part of broader public administration reforms, the EU has set up a support infrastructure which includes sets of dedicated teams of reformers embedded in the Cabinet of Ministers and across various ministries and agencies. These teams have had dual roles – to design and implement specific sector reforms as well as help reform the ministries and agencies from within, in accordance with international standards of public administration. While managing the reform architecture entails very significant investments of time, money and energy, its benefits are also very clear. Reforms are designed with the full knowledge of local conditions and their ownership is assured.

The EU's Support Group for Ukraine has been able to tailor its assistance and expertise to Ukrainian needs and priorities.

The Support Group for Ukraine – in close cooperation with the EU Delegation in Kyiv – has been able to tailor its assistance and expertise to Ukrainian needs and priorities. As a result, EU assistance has become more systemic, focusing on strengthening state capacity rather than merely funding individual projects or facilitating legal approximation. The EU has been able to deploy a mix of instruments in a comprehensive way, with clear conditions and an accompanying policy dialogue, as well as coordinating strategically with member states and other donors, such as the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). This hybrid/mixed approach is not novel in itself – it has been done elsewhere. Yet its application to stimulate reform in Ukraine represents an important innovation. Thanks to the combined staff capacity of the SGUA and EU Delegation in Ukraine, the EU is able to assist in the implementation of reform much more robustly than before.

This means that the often fragmented assistance commonly seen prior to the SGUA, and which resulted in repetition and inefficiency, was vastly reduced. With the EU as the largest partner and contributor, the SGUA took the lead in organising regular programming meetings with member states. Some of them join the EU either as implementers or as co-financing programmes with the EU. Good examples include Germany and the energy efficiency reform, or Denmark and the programme on anti-corruption which provides support to the new anti-corruption bodies. In addition to EU member states, the SGUA/EU Delegation actively coordinates reform support and joint messaging on key reforms with other bilateral actors, notably the United States and Canada. This is a marked improvement from the pre-2014 assistance.

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The EU, in signing the Association Agreements with the members of the Eastern Partnership, has embarked on a foreign policy experiment. In essence, it is an offer of integration without accession to promote transformative reforms in neighbouring countries. The adoption and implementation have been varied. Moreover, the political diversity of the Eastern Partnership countries has called for a calibrated and nuanced strategy for each country, as foreseen in the 2015 revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This more tailored approach has, in turn, necessitated building more capacity and expertise on the individual countries within EU institutions in order to allow an effective engagement in the fundamental reforms. In the case of Ukraine, by combining the EU's policy leverage with reorienting financial assistance towards reform fundamentals, the EU has managed to influence a number of positive changes. Reform, whether in Ukraine or in the broader Eastern Partnership region is, however, inevitably slow and uneven. Fundamental institutional transformations take many years to take hold. Yet the length and difficulty should not deter the EU from continuing to engage in these reforms.

The significance of European integration for the eastern neighbours thus goes beyond the implementation of the agreements. It extends to root-and-branch reform of state structures. This is a novel and underappreciated aspect of the Eastern Partnership: how intensifying bilateral relations can promote reforms in individual countries – the only way to create a stable, prosperous neighbourhood to the East of the EU.

Reforms will no doubt take time but there is already much to reflect on, learn from and build on. Crucially, as the experience of Ukraine indicates, what matters is that this support strategy has not been done in Brussels *for* Ukraine but, rather, *with* Ukraine. EU and local officials interact more closely than is typical in similar such situations. This is particularly important for fast changing political contexts. In many regards, the EU's novel support in Ukraine is verging on transformational not only for Ukraine but for the EU's role as an international actor. This brings invaluable lessons and experience for the EU's role in the Eastern neighbourhood and beyond. NEE

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Zelenskyy's Ukraine and the Eastern Partnership

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In recent years Ukraine has become an informal leader of the Eastern Partnership. Along with Georgia and Moldova, Ukraine seeks more active co-operation with the European Union and advocates expanding its activities. Nevertheless, the further success of the Eastern Partnership will depend on whether the EU succeeds in developing an effective approach that meets the needs, expectations and interests of all partner countries.

This year the Eastern Partnership celebrated its 11th anniversary. For Ukraine, this time is clearly divided into two periods: 1) the pre-EuroMaidan period and 2) the post-EuroMaidan period with the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union. The political part of the agreement was signed on March 21st 2014 (entering into force on November 1st 2014); while the economic part was signed on June 27th 2014. The aim of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is to integrate Ukraine and other participating countries with the EU. The EU's co-operation with its eastern partners is focused on stimulating political and socio-economic reforms. And it contributes to the deepening of political and economic relations, ensuring compliance of domestic legislation with EU norms and standards, as well as maintaining mutual respect for common values.

Undeniably, the greatest issue the EaP is faced with is the perception of the project in geopolitical terms: the states have to make a choice – either be with the EU or be with Russia (when listening to some EU decision-makers, it seems that these are the only available options). This may be the greatest drawback of the pro-

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ject. When Poland and Sweden initiated the EaP, they did not foresee the signatory countries would face such a plight. This issue is extremely challenging and entails several difficulties (in the case of Ukraine, these are existential in character). Unsurprisingly, a policy which would lead to EU membership would be the most effective. Yet the lack of such a prospect (as currently found in the EaP) deprives the EU of serious leverage as far as these countries are concerned.

Ukraine's achievements

The extension of trade relations was an important result of the co-operation between Ukraine and the EU within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. The EU largely liberalised access to its market in April 2014 by providing Ukraine with Autonomous Trade Measures and eliminating 95 per cent of its tariffs on Ukrainian industrial goods and 83 per cent on agricultural and food products. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) fully entered into force on September 1st 2017. Currently, the EU is Ukraine's main trading partner. Ukraine's trade in goods with the EU totalled 45.7 billion US dollars in 2019 and amounted to 40.1 per cent of the country's total trade turnover. The country's key trading partners in the EU are Germany, with goods turnover of 2.4 billion dollars in exports and six billion in imports; Poland with 3.3 billion dollars in exports and 4.1 billion in imports; and Italy with 2.4 billion dollars in exports and 2.1 billion in imports. As an important consequence of this process, dozens of export "newcomers" from Ukraine access the EU market every year.

> The extension of trade relations was an important result of the co-operation between Ukraine and the European Union.

Ukraine was the first of the Eastern Partnership countries to receive a visa liberalisation action plan for short-term trips of its citizens to the EU. This occurred during the Ukraine-EU Summit on November 22nd 2010 in Brussels. However, the visa-free regime came into force only on June 11th 2017. According to the Ukrainian Border Service, between that date and April 11th 2020, Ukrainians made 49 million border crossings to the EU – using both biometric and non-biometric passports.

Owing to the Eastern Partnership, Ukraine was able to participate in programmes that are part of this initiative, as well as within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. These programmes seek to develop small and medium-sized enterprises, education, culture, science and innovation, academic mobility, urban infrastructure and other areas. Ukraine received the largest amount allocated for the implementation of the EU4Business projects, which is

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy meets Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement in Kyiv. For Zelenskyy and his administration, the Eastern Partnership is part of the general road to European integration and a bridge to EU accession.

aimed at financing small and medium-sized enterprises and providing access to European markets and knowledge. The country is also one of the largest beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ programme in the Eastern Partnership region. As many as 4,695 Ukrainian students and 4,361 university professors, as well as 2,872 professors and 1,123 students from Europe, took advantage of academic exchange opportunities during 2014–2019.

In 2017 the EU issued the "20 Deliverables for 2020" – a roadmap of 20 key actions to be implemented by partner countries for closer co-operation with the EU. This document is an addition to the Association Agreement. According to the Monitoring Report of the Ukrainian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Ukraine made progress in 19 out of 20 areas in carrying out reforms and achieving goals by the end of 2019. The progress was registered in the areas of rule of law and anti-corruption, infrastructure development, judiciary, public administration, security, development of small and medium-sized enterprises, implementation of the DCFTA, environmental protection, and visa liberalisation. The energy industry remains the only problematic area.

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The signing of the Association Agreement, including the DCFTA and the introduction of the visa-free regime with the European Union, induced Ukrainian authorities to diversify the Eastern Partnership. In 2017 Ukraine proposed the launch of a new format of co-operation with partner countries called the "Eastern Partnership Plus" (EaP+). This initiative provided for the intensification of EU relations with those countries that have signed association agreements. It aimed to include Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in the customs, energy and digital unions and in the Schengen area, as well as to stimulate closer co-operation in security and defence with the EU. However the idea of introducing a new Eastern Partnership format did not find support at the level of heads of states or governments during the fifth Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels on November 24th 2017. At the same time, Ukraine's proposal does not contradict the concept of a multi-speed Europe, which is somewhat popular within the European Union.

For President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his administration, which came to power in May 2019, the Eastern Partnership is part of the general road to European integration and a bridge to EU accession. At the same time, the Ukrainian government continues to take an active part in the initiative beyond 2020. It supports the idea of the "EaP+", or "EU+3" format, which provides Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia with more opportunities to co-operate with the EU.

Areas for growing co-operation

During the ministerial video conference of the Eastern Partnership on June 11th 2020, Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's foreign minister, named the main priorities of his country within the Eastern Partnership. These include the expansion of free trade opportunities and the introduction of an "industrial visa-free regime" (signing of the Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Goods – ACAA); access to the EU Digital Single Market; the integration of energy markets; and the joint implementation of the European Green Deal. Kuleba also proposed to expand the EU economic recovery programmes to encompass the Eastern Partnership region (regarding EaP members); to consider the possibility of moving supply chains closer to EU borders, in particular to Ukraine; and to involve partner countries, especially Ukraine, in projects within the Euro-Asian connectivity strategy.

The foreign minister further proposed setting up a discussion panel on countering disinformation to work out appropriate solutions and involve partner countries in the activities of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. He also suggested expanding the work of the EU Network and Informa-

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tion Security Agency and the EU Rapid Alert System to include other interested parties. Lastly, Ukraine has called for the intensification of co-operation in the sphere of security and for the EU to become more involved in resolving conflicts in the Eastern Partnership region.

Zelenskyy, speaking at a video conference of EU leaders and Eastern Partnership leaders on June 18th 2020, stated that Ukraine aspires to be a full member of the European Union. At the same time, he stressed that Ukraine can help improve security in the region by participating in peacekeeping missions, EU military and security projects, initiatives aimed at countering information and hybrid threats. Zelenskyy noted that, in the future, the EU and partner countries should focus on areas that have been neglected before the coronavirus quarantine, including digitalisation, further integration of transport links, access to the European payment system, loans for small businesses and other practical instruments. This will help the region's economies to emerge from the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Zelensky expressed gratitude to the EU for the new macro-financial assistance programme, worth 1.2 billion euro, and for its humanitarian assistance.

Ukraine has called for greater co-operation in the sphere of security and for the EU to become more involved in resolving conflicts in the Eastern Partnership region.

Russia-Ukraine war and implications for the eastern neighbourhood

The countries of the Eastern Partnership do not function in a vacuum but are influenced by internal and external factors. Among the external ones, actions of both the EU and Russia seem critical. The EaP states find themselves forced to consider Russian political and geopolitical objectives in their own decision-making. This is done in order to identify Russia's tactical, but also strategic, objectives towards the post-Soviet states. It can be said that since the very beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, Russia had intended to destabilise the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine in order to disconnect the areas from the country or to turn them into "occupied territories" or establish a quasi-state in the area (as in the case of Transdniestria).

Importantly, Russia widely uses propaganda in the conflict with Ukraine. The West should take measures to curb Russian propaganda. Ukraine is experiencing not only a news blackout but a disinformation campaign which is intended to destabilise the internal situation in the country. Russian propaganda is spread by Russian mass media – television being an important instrument. The EU there-

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fore needs to find ways to support independent (or, at least, not pro-Russian) media channels – maybe even consider setting up its own. An example is already in operation with the Belsat TV channel, operating from Poland, addressing Belarus.

According to Russian politicians, swift democratic reforms in Ukraine pose a serious threat to Russia's interests and its political decision-makers. Clearly, Ukraine's democratisation will only be possible with the assistance and close co-operation with western structures. Russia is well aware of this fact and it is the reason for its strong opposition to the prospect of Ukraine becoming an EU and NATO member. One may go as far as to claim that Russia's strategic objective is to prevent Ukraine's democratisation and integration with the West.

Sergey Karaganov, a recognised researcher who frequently comments on Russia's international policies in western media, has stated that Russia will never become a global superpower unless it succeeds in being a regional one. As a consequence, Ukraine is critical for Russia's supremacy. Undeniably, Russia is capable of becoming a regional superpower and of playing a key role in international politics in the future. However the war with Ukraine questions its ability to achieve this objective.

Despite the above, the fact that Russia, in the past couple of decades, was determined to reintegrate the post-Soviet space ought to be noted. From Russia's perspective, ensuring its hegemony in the space and forcing the West out will enforce its imperial character in the regional and global dimension and will enable a series of lesser socio-economic interests to be achieved. Moreover, in order to protect its zone of influence, Russia has not hesitated to adopt a confrontational approach towards the West. The fact that the dependence of Ukraine and other EaP member states on Russia's influence is considerable ought to be noted. In other words, Russia has numerous instruments to influence the situation in these countries. EU policy-makers are often unaware of this fact.

New approach

In recent years Ukraine has become an informal leader of the three countries that have signed the association agreements and are in favour of implementing the "EU+3" enhanced dialogue format within the Eastern Partnership. Along with Georgia and Moldova, Ukraine seeks more active co-operation with the EU and advocates expanding the themes and areas of activity for the Eastern Partnership. The further success of the Eastern Partnership initiative will depend on whether the EU succeeds in developing an effective differentiated approach that meets the needs, expectations and interests of all partner countries.

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Eleven years since the introduction of the Eastern Partnership, its achievements, objectives and opportunities need to be revisited. A change of both the approach and narration, as far as the EaP and the countries it encompasses are concerned, is necessary. Symbolism is also a vital element of politics, and the EaP summit in 2021, along with a new approach towards the project, would constitute such a symbol. Moreover, the predicament of the EaP countries has been pushed to the background. As a consequence, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Donbas has become a challenge not only for Ukraine's security but also for the wider European and international security and order.

The EU needs to highlight that it was Russia who annexed Crimea, Russia who is waging war against Ukraine and Russia who violated international law. EU sanctions imposed on Russia are a proper response with regards to the fait accompli policy applied by the Russian Federation. As a consequence, the EU should seek to enforce the Minsk II Agreements and its implementation by Russia. The EU also needs to work out a mechanism to respond efficiently enough to emerging crises in its immediate vicinity (especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic).

The situation in the eastern neighbourhood confirms that far-reaching changes are required. It will be difficult to reach a compromise on this issue due to the fact that even the states under the EaP project failed to reach a consensus on whether or not the annexation of Crimea by Russia should be condemned. NEE

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Georgia and the EU need to stay focused on integration

NUGZAR KOKHREIDZE

The Eastern Partnership can boast a list of accomplishments for Georgia and Georgian society. Yet, it seems clear that the Eastern Partnership was never really considered as a path of membership to the European Union. Georgia's government and civil society now need to focus on what the next steps in European integration should be.

"Georgia has one of the highest EU support in the world," said EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell in interview for Georgian TV Formula's "Droeba" programme. The ambassador added that: "About 250 million euros have been allocated for Georgia in the form of grants. These are new grants and new funding. If we talk about rough numbers, the European Union will allocate about 1.5 billion Georgian lari [nearly 415,000 euros] for Georgia".

It has been eleven years since the Eastern Partnership Programme, suggested by Poland and Sweden, was launched. Georgia, as one of the beneficiaries and one of the leaders of the Eastern Partnership programme, showcases more ambition and put great effort towards its European integration. Today, the Eastern Partnership faces new challenges: What will its future be and what will be the new steps in the process of EU integration for these countries? Any decision regarding future challenges remain very important for Georgia.

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Benefits and opportunities

The Eastern Partnership plays an important role in Georgia because it is the main vehicle for the country's European integration. Since 1990, when Georgia set out on its Euro-Atlantic path, it made significant steps towards democratic progress. Moreover, Georgia has benefited from the EU Association Agreement, as well as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). More tangible benefits for citizens of Georgia were brought by visa-free regime with EU and Schengen Zone.

In order to see an even fuller picture of the integration process, it is important to understand that the relationship with the EU began back in 1996, with the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which entered into force in 1999. This was followed by the Association Agreement and the establishment of the DCFTA in 2014.

> The Eastern Partnership plays an important role as it is Georgia's main vehicle for its European integration.

For Georgia the EaP became an opportunity to intensify the process of political and economic integration via bilateral and multilateral instruments. It also provided the possibility to solidify the already ongoing processes taking place in Georgia, which can be broken down into two aspects when considering EU integration: First, is the process on intensifying reforms; and, second, is the important role given to civil society. With the support of a multilateral policy component – which encourages EaP states to co-operate amongst each other – the EU stimulated an additional opportunity to accelerate reforms, establish a forum for the six partner countries and four thematic platforms to share experiences with each other.

National platform

In 2010, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Georgian National Platform was established within the framework of the European Union-initiated program, which currently unites around 200 civil society organisations. The national platform facilitates the goals of Eastern Partnership policies in each of the EaP countries by ensuring active involvement of each partner-country's civil society in the reform process. The national platform is also a stakeholder in the policy dialogue within each country.

The strategic objectives of the Georgian National Platform (GNP) include monitoring and advocating for the implementation of Georgia's Association Agreement on the national and EU levels. It supports dialogue between the authorities

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and the private sector and civil society; to communicate the importance of Georgia's European Integration efforts to the wider public and to ensure the effective functioning of the platform for the achievement of its mission and objectives. The main aspects of the GNP functioning are related to the promotion and realisation of the Eastern Partnership goals. The establishment of the Georgian National Platform has contributed to the institutionalisation of structural dialogue and civil society becoming an important instrument of dialogue with the government. Meetings of the GNP's coordination council, working groups and its subgroups regularly take place.

According to the EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Georgia (2018–2020), the Georgian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum seeks to improve the structural impact of the institution: "Not all leading CSOs are members anymore, reflecting divergent views within the CSO community. Part of this divide comes from the fact that those CSO promoting human rights and good governance are more exposed to disagreements with the government whom they try to hold accountable; on the other hand, the CSOs more active in the regions and focused more on service provision exercise less of a role of watchdog therefore are less likely to enter into rows with the government (but still face difficulties with local authorities)".

At the same time, civil society organisations need more financial support to organise activities and work for having a relevant voice in the decision-making process. Yet, financial assistance for the Georgian National Platform is low and new ways need to be found to solve it. The new EU roadmap outlines the current status of civil society in Georgia, reviews priorities set out in the period covered by the previous roadmap, and sets out new priority areas for future engagement along with a sectoral approach. The roadmap is the result of the EU Delegation and EU Member States' input, comprehensive consultations with civil society organisations in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Telavi (the latter two representing two of the four focal regions in the next EU programming exercise), as well as external assessments of indicators and of the enabling environment for civil society.

Accomplishments

The Eastern Partnership can boast a list of accomplishments for Georgia and Georgian society. Thanks to the EaP, more than 300,000 Georgian nationals travelled to the Schengen area without a visa since the introduction of the visa-free regime. According to an April 2019 survey, at the start of 2017, around 90 per cent of Georgia's population never travelled to any EU or Schengen zone country,

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while five per cent only travelled once, and only three per cent travelled multiple times. In 2015–2018 Georgia received 25 per cent of the total budget from the EaP's international credit mobility regional budget. 3,613 Georgian citizens were granted Erasmus Mobility Scholarships during this three year period. Over the past two years, 26 academic organisations from Georgia have been involved in 21 international research projects and received 2.2 million euro in research grants.

Since the signing of the Association Agreement, including the DCFTA, there has been a significant increase in trade with the EU. Georgian exports to the EU grew from 624 million US dollars in 2014 to 730 million dollars in 2018. Trade growth did not have a positive effect on the export of Georgian agricultural goods to the EU. However, the European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD) assists many farmers in Georgia. The total budget of the programme in the period of 2013–2022 is 179.5 million euros. The important challenge is to reassess the effectiveness of EU support, revise outcomes and define more measurable indicators.

According to the data from 2019, the EU has allocated 120 million euros to Georgia annually (32 euros per capita annually) to promote reforms in public administration, justice, and support for agriculture. Forty-one per cent of Georgians would like to see the EU play an even greater role in sectors like healthcare, education and employment.

In terms of democratic development, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, during the last 11 years, the democratic performance of Georgia has varied only slightly. Georgia has only managed to improve its score from 4.62 to 5.5 on a 10-point-scale. Georgia remains in the "hybrid regime" category, which means the state needs to focus more on the democratic transformation. Today, Georgia is preparing for parliamentary elections which are scheduled to be held this coming October. This election will be important test for Georgian democracy.

Georgia is preparing for parliamentary elections which are scheduled to be held this coming October.

In his article "Eastern Partnership: What's next for Georgia?", Vano Chkhivadze, the EU Integration Program Manager at the Open Society Georgia Foundation, mentioned the necessity to "urgently require deep and comprehensive reform, internal diversification and a tailor-made approach to respond to the ambitions of EaP front-runner countries. Otherwise, there is a risk that the EaP countries could lose their enthusiasm and the EU's ability to promote the democratisation process within the Eastern Neighbourhood may weaken. The EU might consider maintaining the EaP format. However, there is a need for internal restructuring, providing more incentives to

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the EaP states that are keen on moving closer to the EU, together with setting up an institutional mechanism of co-operation."

What's next?

It is clear that the Eastern Partnership was never really considered as a path of membership to the EU. The stated goals were only about economic integration and political association. The EU has made it clear that it will not consider any new role (especially the status of a candidate country) to its Eastern Partners in the near future, or using any new tools to support them. However, the EU's Global Security Strategy states that the EU may reconsider its sectorial and regional strategies in the near future.

One important document about recommendations regarding the Eastern Partnership – titled "Proposal of Georgian Think Tanks on the Future Strategic Direction of the Eastern Partnership" – was prepared by six Georgian think tanks: the Georgian Center for Security and Development (GCSD), the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation), the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation, with support of the Open Society Georgia Foundation. The authors in the proposal describe all fields of EU-Georgia co-operation: economic prosperity and human capital development, good governance, rule of law, security (conflict transformation), inclusiveness and differentiation, trade and economic Links, and civil society involvement.

The document suggests ways to renew and target EU investment in support of the political project, namely to prioritise human rights programmes and civil society development). It also proposes more investment in human capital (e.g. education and life-long learning), mobility (legal migration partnership) and infrastructural development. It noted a greater need for security co-operation in the fight against radicalisation, as well as more proactive EU engagement in transforming protracted conflicts in the region. Support for regional connectivity across new sectors such as information and communication technologies and, where relevant, trade and energy policies, could foster job creation and sustainable development, as well as much needed intra-regional co-operation in a contested and fragmented region.

The authors of the document also argue that the EU should explicitly tailor the incentives offered, as well as the format and structures of the partnership. An EU membership perspective may be a distant prospect for now, but it should not be taken entirely off the table. Trade and security policy can be addressed through a two-layered approach involving specific configurations for the three frontrunner

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countries. A DCFTA area, with a view to developing a European Economic Area is suggested on the former. On the latter, the document acknowledged that these countries are current or potential strategic allies and security partners for the EU, whereas there are barriers to CSDP co-operation with CSTO member states. They conclude that the EU should strike a balance of differentiation and inclusiveness among the six partners. Ultimately a new approach should complement the existing multilateral track rather than replace it completely: the "more for more" incentive should remain for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus to come closer to the EU – contingent on them implementing necessary democratic and structural reforms.

Georgian society, especially civil society organisations, expect that in the future the EU will focus on empowering non-governmental organisations, involve them in policy composing and assessment and monitoring process of EaP implementation. The EU and Georgia have to agree on a clear vision about their relationship by 2030. The Georgian government should demonstrate clear progress in the implementation of the Association Agreement, especially in the area of judiciary, high-level corruption and social issues; and it should concentrate on the long-term policy planning process and fulfil a more detailed cost-benefit analysis.

The EU, in turn, needs to take into account the role of Russia in weakening the integration process of Georgia with Europe, and it should assist to reinforce European values and provide peace, security and prosperity. In the end, the EU should not abandon the idea of the Eastern Partnership and should motivate and reward the efforts that have been made by Georgia. NEE

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A reality check for Moldova-EU relations

OKTAWIAN MILEWSKI

In understanding the impact of the Eastern Partnership in Moldova, it is worth examining what it has failed to deliver for the Moldovan state and society. In this regard, it is a cliché that the strategy "started as a transformative mechanism and ended as a stabilisation and differentiation package of norms and measures". Moldova has not become more stable or predictable, more prosperous or functional – and definitely not a place where the majority of its citizens would prefer to get old.

By mid-2020, and one year after the fortuitous change of political power in Chișinău (after the politician/oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc fled the country in June 2019), the state of Moldovan-EU relations has continued to be plagued by the same structural institutional pathologies for at least the previous three to four years: systemic corruption, state capture, shady transactions, divisive political identity, beleaguered institutions, legal nihilism, endemic poverty, and the list goes on.

The state of plagued institutions and dual perceptions (where Russia would be an accessible alternative to the EU) about the country's strategic orientation have been a constant of the Moldovan political system since the beginning of Moldova's independence. The decade-long Eastern Partnership programme, even if not designed so, came to be perceived as a challenge to the system by the great majority of stakeholders in Chișinău. To the disappointment of many in Brussels and Chișinău (among the pro-EU circles), the association status which Moldova man-

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aged to achieve in 2014 did not succeed in reforming the social-institutional and political fabric. Association status only came to be accepted as a reality in as much as it could represent a source of rent-seeking and legitimisation, especially among the ruling elites.

Imitating Europeanisation

What is new are attempts at reforming the system, including the political culture of Moldovans. And it is a matter of interpretation as to what degree Moldovan stakeholders have succeeded in Europeanising their country over the last decade, yet it is a matter of certainty that the political-institutional system has not changed enough to consider it a genuine success story. Even before the creation and launch of the Eastern Partnership and the structured dialogue that followed, a majority of Moldovans had a positive perception of the EU and its values.

Nevertheless, the communist governments of the 2000s were compelled to incorporate a pro-EU narrative into their rhetoric – not out of conviction, but in order to ensure that they could further dominate the political landscape. It is due to the attractiveness that Europeanisation and association status has had over the last 15 years that the Moldovan elite has managed to continue with business as usual while imitating the Europeanisation process. Furthermore, only as a result of a gradual acquaintance with the "idea of Europe", the association status became a mandatory and internalised element of political reality for about two-thirds of Moldovans.

The Eastern Partnership programme's evolution produced a pro-EU elite of sorts which has influenced opinions and trends in Moldova. Generally, those who write about Moldova often project a prescription-driven narrative, expecting to extract a "more strategically-applied" approach from Brussels over the next decade. According to this narrative, the multifaceted deliverables of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and a range of other institutional-functional mechanisms are all supposed to generate an upped strategy to reach a teleologic end in an idealised state of integration (i.e. EU membership). At the same time, these same opinion-makers do not hide their frustration with the lack of integration perspective offered from the EU. This approach is supposed to translate in the foreseeable future (say, five to seven years) into grand(er) policies covered by respective budgets, institutions, normative prescriptions, roadmaps and action plans to which the societies within the Eastern Partnership countries should deliver.

However, we should ask ourselves what has the Eastern Partnership delivered structurally different in its decade-long existence, especially from the vantage point

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of the common citizen? Is Moldova in 2020 – eleven years after the "transformative" agenda of the EaP was launched – a qualitatively better place to live for its citizens? The so-called exodus of Moldova's population (about 40 per cent of its citizens have left the country over the last two decades) to EU countries in search of a better life suggests that the transformative agenda has had, at best, a limited impact. It is not a surprise that Brussels speak of "stabilisation" and "differentiation" rather than "transformation". Transformation has, in fact, been rejected by default.

Objective reality

Perhaps it would be more useful to scrutinise not what has been achieved – it is enough to check the grading of any index examining the quality of democracy, governance, prosperity and the level of trust in institutions. Instead, it might be worth examining what the Eastern Partnership has failed to deliver on for Moldova. In this regard, it is a cliché to read any report on Moldova that the strategy "started as a transformative mechanism and ended as a stabilisation and differentiation package of norms and measures". Moldova has not become more stable or predictable, more prosperous or functional – and definitely not a place where the majority of its citizens would prefer to get old.

> 2019 proved that external and independent centres of power from Chișinău can be sources of momentous political change.

By trying to answer the questions above, the EU could better understand how to re-launch the Eastern Partnership as a strategy capable of delivering breakthrough changes for, and with the help of, Moldovans. 2019 proved, time and again, that external and independent centres of power from Chișinău can be sources of momentous political change. The EU took an active part in the negotiations for the formation of a coalition between previously irreconcilable rivals within Moldovan politics. Without the EU, the five-month long interregnum of a genuinely pro-European executive would have been impossible.

But here lies the irony of the "objective reality" of Moldovan-EU relations. The EU had to put its diplomatic-political weight behind informal negotiations with Russian and American "external partners" (as they are called in Chișinău) in order to form a genuinely pro-EU government in a country which has supposedly been building a structured dialogue within the framework of EU conditions. In other words, by the end of the first decade of the Eastern Partnership, and five years after signing the Association Agreement, the EU was still struggling to install a group of stakeholders that would not imitate Europeanisation. Thus, imitation aside, the

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EU did not manage to become, in this period, "the main game in town". It is also an open question whether it really wanted to.

Means not an end

Even if the unexpected escape of Plahotniuc from Chișinău in June 2019 brought the most pro-European prime minister (Maia Sandu) in Moldova's independent history to power, her five-month cabinet only managed to modestly unearth the dysfunctionality of the political system – one that is in a state of slow self-destruction and is mostly incompatible with the goals of Europeanisation. What is left outside our view is the fact that while the Eastern Partnership is a decade-long story of purported strategic interaction between Moldova and the EU, the Moldovan political and institutional system in reality is mainly incompatible with EU rules and values.

Here lies the problem of compatibility. How can EU institutional arrangements fit within a system of oligarchic patronage dominated by contending strategic choices of identity (EU integration vs. Russian structures vs. neutrality vs. unification with Romania)? Even putting aside the identity differences, the Moldovan system is based on informal networks which captured the state at local, regional (see Transdniestria and Gagauzia as distinct regions) and the central levels, and is increasingly connected to informal and illegal flows of resources on the regional and even global level. For them the EU is a means, not an end.

The system that discredited the idea of Europeanisation under Plahotniuc was not a form of innovation – it was a spiralled form of a patronal-clientelist corrupt system which has its roots in the second half of the 1990s, during the rule of President Petru Lucinschi. The system was later finessed by Vladimir Voronin whose "informalised" system subsequently educated a generation of politicians who dominated the last decade and were supposed to be the EU's counterparts throughout the association process. It was under the supervision of this political class that Moldova became the site of the theft of one-seventh of its budget in 2014. Moldova also became a hub of possibly the biggest money laundering scheme in modern history (between 20 and 40 billion US dollars). At the same time, the state protected regional smuggling rings – illegally trading cigarettes, alcohol, medicines, amber, drugs and human organs – and the country lost about 40 per cent of its population due to emigration.

What the Moldovan elite sought most throughout the last decade was legitimisation behind a pro-EU narrative and a source of rent funding, but not Europeanisation as such (not to mention of an membership perspective). One can only wonder what would happen if Moldova had received a membership perspective.

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Should Moldova have been in this position, the behaviour of the elite might have differed, since public demands would have received a very different stimulus.

Bleak prospects

In order to fully understand to what degree the Eastern Partnership has made an impact on Moldova, we could try to imagine what the country would look like if it had not received association status. Obviously, Moldova would be in an even worse place if that did not happen. Yet it is debatable to what degree the association has delivered in terms of quality social goods the state is supposed to provide to its citizens. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that the EU has, to some degree, replaced the Moldovan state as the provider of public goods. It is enough to consider the sheer number of Moldovan citizens working, studying and living in the EU. Roughly 60 per cent of Moldovans who count for labour migrants have moved to the EU for employment reasons (that is, 500,000–600,000 citizens out of an official population of 3.5 million, Transdniestria included).

The most tangible benefit of Moldova's relations with the EU has been framed as the significant increase in trade relations (70 per cent of trade is with the EU). At the same time, Moldova has adopted, and is still adopting, a vast array of laws and norms under the umbrella of the AA and DCFTA, yet there is still a huge discrepancy between the paper reporting and reality on the ground. The EU has also been an essential budgetary lifeline for basically all the Moldovan governments during the first decade of existence of EaP, and it increasingly proved to be a source of humanitarian relief as the coronavirus pandemic has illustrated.

> The vast majority of the best and brightest Moldovans prefer to migrate to EU countries rather than make use of their skills at home.

The situation has only worsened under a chain of events related to systemic corruption scandals, state capture and fake institutional performances. State institutions have not been reformed even if the EU continues to use conditionality to reform the justice system in Moldova. Regarding energy efficiency and climate change, Moldova is, at best, in a state of stagnation. The state continues to rely on energy provided by Russian gas and electricity from Transdniestria, while the gas and electricity interconnection with Romania is seven to eight years behind schedule. Less than two per cent of the total energy output of Moldova is produced by renewables.

Mobility and people-to-people contacts, however, have seen some important deliverables. Moldovans have significantly reoriented their mental map, from be-

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ing introverted and Russia-oriented, to leaning towards the EU. This is reflected in the mentality of the new generation, yet the vast majority of the best and brightest prefer to migrate to EU countries rather than make use of their skills at home. Time and again, this is reflected in the visible ageing of Moldovan society (one of the fastest ageing populations in the world) and in the penury of human resources felt within every social level.

Who will switch off the lights?

On June 27th Moldova marked six years since the signing of the EU Association Agreement, and on July 1st it was four years since the entrance of the DCFTA into force. In this period Moldova's position within the Eastern Partnership has been far from what the EU might have expected. Chișinău's performance on the 20 deliverables for 2020 has been subject to interpretation, and attempts have been made to extract positive evaluations from poor or suboptimal performances. Over the last decade, Moldova has in fact witnessed some of the worst moments of governance since independence.

The EU is compelled to come to terms with the fact that the behaviour of the Moldovan elite, in terms of strategic choices, is also dictated by their multiple identities. These identities are reflected in foreign policy changes with every electoral cycle. They are reflected in the duality of the official narrative, the inconsequentiality of choices that cyclically may be observed in Brussels (and other relevant EU capitals) and the fragility of the Eastern Partnership goals regarding Moldova.

As the EU is planning a new association agenda, starting with 2021, the key words that transpire from evaluation and recommendation reports are "resilience" and "interconnection" along with "stabilisation" and "differentiation". This sounds like a long way from transformation. Meanwhile, a popular but very sad saying in Moldova queries: "Who will switch off the lights in the country?" It is an allusion to the population crisis that has materialised over the last decade as a result of public disappointment. Perhaps in the context of the new agenda for the Eastern Partnership – the question should indeed be: "Who will be left to need resilience?"

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Failed Expectations?

Belarus and the Eastern Partnership

VERANIKA LAPUTSKA

When compared with other members of the Eastern Partnership, Belarus appears to be at the back of the line in terms of projects and endeavours. Belarus has not signed any partnership or co-operation agreements and the last attempt to restart bilateral relations disappeared in October 2019 when Frederica Mogherini's visit was postponed indefinitely. Perhaps the current political situation in Belarus will provide the EU with an opportunity to reassess its policy towards Belarus and Belarus's place in the Eastern Partnership.

When the first Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit took place in Prague in 2009, Belarus seemed to be demonstrating more hope than despair in terms of its internal and external political development. Another wave of western sanctions had just been mitigated and bilateral relations with one of the two major proponents and initiators of the Eastern Partnership – Poland – were reaching a new level of mutual trust and co-operation. Despite the fact that Belarusian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka did not come to Prague himself, unlike his colleagues from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine (Moldova was also not represented by the head of state), Belarusian media portrayed the Eastern Partnership Initiative as a success of Belarusian diplomacy. However, the leadership clearly abstained from the loud statements of the Eastern Partnership being a first step for Belarus's accession to the European Union, unlike other countries like Georgia or Ukraine.

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The EU at that time perceived Belarus in a cautious, but rather supportive way. It appreciated the fact that the Belarusian leader opted against recognition of the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. In 2009, Belarus was also recovering from another run of "gas wars" with Russia and rapprochement with the EU at that point sent a certain signal to Russia, which the Belarusian president could use to his advantage. Everything changed after the 2010 presidential election in Belarus when seven out of nine candidates were imprisoned in the aftermath of the election. Massive repressions targeting Belarusian civil society, mass media and political activists was then launched and lasted for several years.

Sticks and carrots

Since 2010 Belarus became a complicated partner for the EU. Approaches on how to deal with Belarus divided EU members into three main groups. One group led by the Baltic states, Czech Republic, Poland and Sweden, who were simultaneously the most enthusiastic supporters of the Eastern Partnership, distanced themselves from the official communication, but strengthened their support for independent media, political activists and non-governmental organisations and became vocal in condemning political oppressions.

The second group – made up of EU leaders and the large countries such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom – preferred to follow the first group, but in a softer way. They would publicly criticise Belarusian authorities for the violations of freedoms in Belarus and provide assistance to the Belarusian third sector. However, such activities were clearly not the priority of their foreign policy compounded by a vast number of different dimensions and geographical vectors. The third group – and the vast majority of the EU – remained practically indifferent to what was happening in Belarus apart from sporadic political declarations on the national and multinational levels of the UN, OSCE and EU.

The vast majority of the EU remained practically indifferent to what was happening in Belarus, apart from sporadic political declarations.

The EU introduced a number of sanctions aimed at individuals and enterprises connected to the Lukashenka regime and responsible for political repressions and election falsifications. The Eastern Partnership initiative for Belarus was practically frozen for several years, although Belarusian leaders did participate in summits, ministerial meetings and remained somewhat engaged in "politically neutral" aspects such as cross-border, ecological or socially-oriented projects dealing with

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vulnerable groups. In this way, the Eastern Partnership turned out to be in fact the only multinational EU platform where Belarus could engage with EU officials.

Unsurprisingly, such external circumstances led to another round of the enhancement of Belarusian-Russian relations which was interrupted only in 2014 by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The Belarusian authorities found themselves in a complex situation when they continued to be extremely dependent on Russia economically and politically, but had to implement a smart position towards the conflict that involved its two important neighbours. The Belarusian leadership elaborated an idea to play a role of a mediator in the Russo-Ukrainian war and this was highly appreciated by the European leaders who also became engaged in a conflict resolution process.

> The Eastern Partnership turned out to be the only platform where Belarus could engage with EU officials.

This, however, did not change the very cautious vision of Belarus's role in the Eastern Partnership. The authorities understood very well that Russia's aggression which followed the EuroMaidan in Ukraine (the protests which erupted in the aftermath of the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the signing of the Association Agreement) clearly demonstrated that it would be fighting for its allies in post-Soviet territories. In order to avoid a direct clash with its eastern neighbour, Belarus decided it had to be very mindful of possible aggression or any type of economic and political pressure originating from there.

How good are the carrots?

When comparing to other members of the Eastern Partnership initiative, Belarus appears to be at the back of the line in terms of many projects and endeavours. Belarus has not signed Partnership and Co-operation or Partnership Priorities agreements, although even Armenia and Azerbaijan – who also mainly focus on the economic co-operation with the EU – already signed one. The last attempt to touch upon the crucial issues of bilateral relations disappeared in October 2019 when the visit of High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Frederica Mogherini was postponed indefinitely.

In the autumn of 2019 EU-Belarus relations became even more complicated due to the complaints by the Lithuanian authorities on the Astravets nuclear power station which was built at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. Taking into account current plans to launch the operation of the power plant on July 1st this year, despite numerous protests by Lithuanian on bilateral and international level (most

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notably at the EU one), any intensification of affairs between the EU and Belarus in the near future is unlikely to happen as Lithuanian will continue its rhetoric.

Belarus also possesses the most unfavourable visa policy with the EU in comparison to all other members of the Eastern Partnership, despite the fact that the highest number of Schengen visas were issued to Belarusians out of all the Eastern Partnership countries for the last several years. The Belarusian authorities were also far behind the rest of the EaP to sign a visa facilitation and readmission agreement on January 8th 2020. The European Parliament approved a decision on May 14th to reduce the price for Schengen visas for Belarusians from 60 to 35 euros.

Belarus's visa situation looks backwards when compared to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine who have been enjoying the visa-free regime with the EU for several years already. Even Armenia and Azerbaijan signed agreements with the EU on the facilitation of the issuance of visas back in 2014. In addition to that, Belarus is the only state out of the six EaP members that does not have the subcommittee on Justice, Freedom and Security within the Eastern Partnership which enables expert discussions on home affairs. The 2018 External Investment Plan of the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD) included one project targeted at Belarus. Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have all received aid for various projects within the EFSD. The only larger outsider in this regard was Azerbaijan which was not mentioned in the External Investment Plan at all.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which is heavily affecting Belarus, the EU mobilised 60 million euros out of 980 million to tackle the consequences of the virus and assist health systems in the Eastern Partnership countries. This figure is smaller than the assistance provided to Moldova, Armenia and Georgia (who received 87, 92 and 183 million euros respectively), although the number of people affected in Belarus is larger in both absolute and relative terms. Only Azerbaijan received less within this track of EU assistance – 31.6 million euros.

> The European Union is Belarus's second most important trade partner after Russia.

In May the European Commission officially stated that Belarus had appealed to the EU for macroeconomic assistance to cover the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that point Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine were included in the assistance package within the framework of the European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policy involving many countries and amounting to three billion euros.

Undoubtedly, the EU remains a crucial economic partner for Belarus. The EU is the second most important trade partner after Russia. Multiple EaP and EU programmes support Belarusian businesses. The European Investment Bank

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(EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) have been playing an important role in this process providing financial aid for small and medium-sized enterprises. In addition to that, the EU4Business initiative contributed to the funding, training and export support for 4,500 Belarusian companies and the creation of 5,700 new jobs.

The EU plays a huge role in environmental and infrastructure projects in Belarus, but also in its societal development and endorses a dialogue between the Belarusian authorities and civil society. Since the inclusion of Belarus into student and professional exchange programmes, several thousand Belarusians have taken part in these initiatives. Importantly, the EU enhances the development of democratic governance and human rights in the country. An annual forum of EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue provides an opportunity to discuss human rights issues in Belarus. Needless to say, this area remains the most problematic in the bilateral relations and, in many cases, hampers further intensification of the Belarus-EU affairs.

More sticks to come?

Although Belarusians remain generally positive about the EU, their overall perception of it is divided into two major streams. One side is influenced by the disinformation campaigns propagated by both Belarusian and Russian state media omnipresent in Belarus, believes that the EU, together with the Eastern Partnership, can only bring chaos, crisis and devastation to traditional Christian values. The other, more liberal, side is inclined to improvements in living standards and social mobility which can be enhanced by the EU if Belarus becomes closer to it. However, very often this pro-European stream becomes disillusioned with the way the EU tackles human rights issues and democratic repressions in Belarus. Oftentimes Belarusians are disappointed with the sanctions-lifting cycle, not realising that the EU cannot directly interfere in the domestic political situation in Belarus.

In this regard the 2020 presidential election in Belarus will be another test for the EU and the Eastern Partnership on its ability to carry out a wise policy towards Belarus. The protests which took place demonstrated one of the highest levels of social frustration with the Lukashenka and the Belarusian leadership in years. A huge wave of solidarity coming from the Belarusian diaspora all over the world, including those living in EU countries, contributed to the eagerness of Belarus's citizens to react towards the oppression of civic and political freedoms, but also to the lack of adequate measures to tackle the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic by authorities.

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On June 19th, following a number of arrests of potential candidates, journalists, activists and regular civilians, often detained by officials with no insignia, the EU's lead spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Peter Stano, urged the Belarusian authorities to ensure a fair and free election campaign. For the first time a number of Belarusian bloggers and digital influencers became subjects of detention and criminal charges for sharing insider information on social media and publishing live streams from political rallies and protests.

Indeed, the current political situation in Belarus provides the EU with an opportunity to reassess its policy towards Belarus and its place in the Eastern Partnership. Thus far the EU has been unable to impact democratic changes at large despite a vast level of support for Belarusians in different fields and on various levels. The aftermath of the presidential election might lead to another wave of western sanctions and further Belarus's integration with Russia. This would create a new dilemma for European stakeholders, especially for the neighbouring countries who are mostly interested in the European Partnership development such as the Baltic states and Poland.

The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic worsen the situation even further by occupying the top of the EU's priority list. Nevertheless, the democratic voices in the EU remain strong and lessons learnt from previous dynamics with Belarus might create an impulse for a positive relaunch of Belarus-EU relations and a change of Belarus's role in the Eastern Partnership.

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EU-Armenia co-operation at a crossroads

HASMIK GRIGORYAN

The launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 became strategically important for Armenia as it gave a chance for alternatives and a diversification of its partners in the West. The programme not only provided financial assistance to Armenia, but it also enriched the narrative on EU-Armenia relations.

Armenia's relations with the European Union, within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme, have seen many positive developments accompanied by certain setbacks. Thanks to the EaP, the EU has become an important strategic partner for Armenia, introducing a democratic agenda and guidelines for democratic development. Since the EaP began 11 years ago, it has included the signing of significant documents with the EU. Yet due to deviations from the democratic path, Armenian authorities, at times, also backed off on co-operation. The 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia showed there is a desire in the country for democracy. Yet despite these changes, Armenia's foreign policy has not changed, making it difficult to observe tangible results in the advancement of the EU-Armenian relations.

If the EU had a stronger position on democratic values in Armenia, more emphasis on civil society and less focus on official channels, it could be the start of strengthening co-operation in the Eastern Partnership.

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Diversification

If EU-Armenia relations under the Eastern Partnership were measured in terms of democracy assistance, then we could say that the progress of democratisation on the official level has been very slow. However in the case of observing EU-Armenia relations in the realm of strategic co-operation, there is no doubt that for Armenia the Eastern Partnership has been an important political programme.

To understand the role of the Eastern Partnership in Armenia, it is important to analyse Armenia's foreign policy over the last several years. Since the early 1990s, Armenia's foreign policy has been dominated by its military and political partnership with Russia, whereas the partnership with the European Union was mostly on an economic and humanitarian level. Future orientation towards the EU and the West was never prioritised, especially considering the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained in the background. The military co-operation vacuum in the region for Armenia has been filled via co-operation with Russia, and under these conditions it was difficult to imagine that Armenia would make any abrupt changes in that regard.

Future orientation towards the EU was never prioritised, especially considering the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained in the background.

Relations with Russia expanded in the early 2000s and part of Armenia's sovereignty was handed to the Russian Federation. This was visible in the "assets-for-debt" agreement, which gave key state resources, such as electricity, gas and railway networks, to Russia, in return for reducing Armenia's debts owed to Russia. In 2010 Armenia also agreed to extend Russia's military presence until 2049. In December 2013, Armenia transferred the remaining 20 per cent share of its gas distribution network to the Russian-owned company, Gazprom.

Nevertheless, the launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 became strategically important for Armenia as it gave a chance for alternatives and a diversification of its partners in the West. The programme not only provided financial assistance to Armenia, it also enriched the narrative on EU-Armenia relations. In the framework of the Eastern Partnership, Armenia gained an opportunity to negotiate its Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). In terms of successful reforms, Armenians would also get a chance to gain visa-free travel to the EU. As engagement with the EaP and negotiations with EU partner countries increased, Armenia could feel the political presence of the EU grow.

The Eastern Partnership also raised the importance of democratic values in Armenia. Such tools as EaP co-operation subcommittees on justice, freedom and

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Photo: European Commission

Nikol Pashinyan (right), Armenian prime minister, with Josep Borrell Fontelles, the EU's High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, during a visit to Brussels in March.

security – or panels on migration and asylum, the fight against corruption, and integrated border management – introduced important values to the country while serving as guidelines for the democratic reforms process. Many Armenian state institutions benefitted from EU assistance via legislative reforms, an emphasis on good governance, training and capacity support. The EU also assisted Armenia in the harmonisation of its laws with the standards and requirements of the European Council. The EU implemented specific programmes on water management, environment and agriculture, and raising the image of the EU in Armenia.

Lack of political commitment

During the last 11 years Armenia has signed three key documents with the EU. In 2012 Armenia and the EU signed the Agreement on Facilitation of the Issuance

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of Visas, which was followed in 2013 by the signing of the Readmission Agreement. The political partnership between the two sides was reinforced by the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in 2017.

While Armenia and the Eastern Partnership registered important success, co-operation between the EU and Armenia has also had some setbacks, largely due to the lack of political commitment by the Armenian authorities. The partnership did not reach its initially planned Association Agreement and DCFTA. The sudden refusal to sign the Association Agreement in September of 2013 was a dishonest move from the side of the Armenian government. After a long process of negotiations with the EU starting in 2010 and initialling of the agreement in the summer of 2013, Armenia unexpectedly reversed its decision and refused to sign the agreement in the fall ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. The refusal became a clear sign that there is a lack of political commitment from Armenia to push EU-Armenia relations forward.

Relations between Armenia and the EU had some setbacks, largely due to the lack of political commitment by the Armenian authorities.

The developments in 2013, while disappointing, should not have come as a total surprise as there were many indicators that the Armenian authorities had been deviating from its progress on the democratic reforms. The parliamentary and presidential elections of 2012 and 2013 were organised with mass violations and were followed by civil protests. Furthermore, it could be argued that during these years the Armenian authorities were promising the EU to sign the Association Agreement, in order to receive less condemnation about the conduct of the election. What complicated EU-Armenia relations even more was that right after the refusal to sign the Association Agreement, Armenia started the process of accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union, which later became the Eurasian Economic Union.

In light of these events, the European Union needs to develop a stronger position regarding development in the Eastern Partnership countries. The approach of "more for more" is an important tool, however it should be tailored to the development of democratic standards. More support should be provided if a country demonstrates clear commitment to democratic principles, while support should be decreased if the authorities deviate from these reforms. The EU could have reduced its financial support, for example, when Armenia refused to sign agreement.

This is not to say that EU-Armenia relations have had no success since then. Despite the slow process, Armenia has made some visible progress. The Eastern Partnership continues to serve as an alternative platform for Armenia – in 2017

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the authorities signed a new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement. Although the CEPA differs from the Association Agreement, it certainly is an enhanced and much improved legal basis for positive reforms. The importance of civil society was also acknowledged in the CEPA and was institutionalised as a participant in official relations between the two sides.

Certain dilemma

During the Eastern Partnership Summit in June this year, Armenia and the EU began its co-operation with a certain deadlock for a couple of reasons. First, since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia has not made any abrupt foreign policy changes towards the West; and, second, due to the slow implementation of the existing agreements with the EU. In June 2019 the new government of Armenia signed a roadmap on the implementation of the CEPA. The reform agenda includes extensive and important steps including judicial reform, an increase in the number of judges, the creation of a commission on anti-corruption, the development of national strategies in the fight against corruption, the protection of human rights, and the adoption of amendments in the electoral code. Moreover, in February of 2020, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed an agreement to set up a professional commission on constitutional reform.

> The 2018 Velvet Revolution has demonstrated that the Armenian public desires democratic reform.

Here, the main issue is whether the roadmap will be implemented efficiently and in a timely manner. The process has been very slow from the Armenian side. This can be explained by the lack of experience of the newly formed post-revolutionary government, the difficult legacy it inherited from the previous corrupt regime, limited economic networks and of course the threat of COVID-19.

Within the six EaP countries, the CEPA is certainly a positive document. However, it is noteworthy that post-revolutionary Armenia has demonstrated little advancement in its relations with the EU: it has not endeavoured to design a new, more advanced, partnership – in fact, it continues to implement the document that was signed by the previous regime.

In this regard, Armenia faces a certain dilemma. On the one hand, the 2018 revolution was not related to its foreign policy. The newly formed government does not mention any plans for future EU membership. On the other hand, the revolution that was driven by various democratic layers of society, and under Pashinyan's leadership, had clear intentions of ending authoritarianism and corruption.

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This illustrates that moving towards greater partnership with the EU would help achieve the goals of the revolution.

In light of these developments, the EU should also adapt its approach towards Armenia in the Eastern Partnership. Co-operation over the last 11 years has largely focused on official developments and less on civil society. Even when working with civil society, the EU has always supported civil society organisations that closely work with the national government. This policy should be changed, as support of the EU is important for further developing the NGO sector and for preserving diverse actors in the country. The revolution has demonstrated that the Armenian public desires democratic reform.

Certain steps have already been taken place by the EU to support the private sector in Armenia. In 2019 the EU supported private companies in the development of solar energy and energy efficiency as well as tourism. More support should now be given to the democratic civil society organisations that work independently and strive to increase democratic values and monitor policies implemented by the government. The EU should also increase its presence in Armenia by opening European institutions, or democratic centres that would assist the reforms. NEE

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Eastern Partnership and Azerbaijan

Balancing values and interests

RASHAD SHIRINOV

Relations between Azerbaijan and the European Union have focused more on economic, reformative and technical issues than political ones. Both sides agree upon an incremental process, which has its own advantages and seems to have prospects for the future.

Azerbaijan is a country with positive attitudes towards Europe and European culture. Since the 19th century Azerbaijani intellectuals, aristocracy and merchants developed intellectual and economic ties with the West; with first and second oil booms at the end of 19th and 20th centuries respectively, Baku became a hotspot for European political, social and economic enterprises.

A 2020 survey by EU Neighbours east project identified the EU as the most trusted international institution, enjoying a 41 per cent level of trust (up 13 per cent since 2018). Forty-four per cent of Azerbaijani citizens have a positive image of the EU – an increase of 17 per cent since 2016. Only nine per cent are negative about the EU. Thirty per cent of Azerbaijanis are aware of the EU's financial support to the country, and 76 per cent of them felt it was effective. Sixty-nine per cent of Azerbaijanis who are aware of the European Union feel that relations with the EU are good. This positivity notwithstanding, Azerbaijan and the EU have not yet signed an association agreement despite the negotiations which began in 2016. During the EaP summit in June 2020, President Ilham Aliyev stated that 90 per

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cent of the text of the agreement was ready. Let us take a look at the bigger picture to understand the underpinnings of the process. In July 2020, while appointing the new minister of foreign affairs, the president returned to the issue of the agreement and urged the government to speed up the process.

Two sides of the story

The EU, in the context of the Eastern Partnership, defines its relations with Azerbaijan around two key principles. First, the need for a differentiated approach as Azerbaijan is free to choose to what extent it will participate in political association and economic integration. The second principle states that in the implementation of deep democracy, the EU will not compromise on the core values of the Eastern Partnership which can be summarised as democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

On the other hand, in 2018 a new set of priorities between the parties was established. The first aimed at strengthening institutions and good governance, including public administration reform. The second focussed on economic development, sustainable diversification of the economy, support for membership in the World Trade Organisation and improving the business and investment environments. The third focused on connectivity, energy efficiency, the environment and climate action. Mobility and people-to-people contacts, including support for education and human capital, made up the fourth principle.

While the first two principles can be basically interpreted as "you are free to choose, but if you want to integrate deeper with the EU you cannot avoid democracy," the new priorities, adopted in 2018, do not use the language of core values and do not include the areas of democratisation. This seems to reflect the adjustment of priorities towards the Azerbaijani approach. This adjustment has started from the very beginning and reflects the geopolitical and domestic considerations of the Azerbaijani elite vis-à-vis the EU.

It seems that relations between Azerbaijan and the EU have been developing along these two tracks and, at times, have been contradictory. Relations can be viewed within the frame of "values vs interests" – which was a prominent debate in the 2010s particularly with regard to Azerbaijan, an oil country where the EU has strong energy interests and investments. This discussion involved various stakeholders from both sides. Proponents of values claimed that in order to be part of Europe, Azerbaijan should adhere to the European values. Interest-based proponents, however, claimed that relations between EU and Azerbaijan should be strengthened regardless how things stand with regards to core values.

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Since the inception of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, civil society institutions in Azerbaijan have supported the value-based approach and have engaged with various European governmental and non-governmental organisations to advocate the EU for pushing more on democratisation. In parallel, the government of Azerbaijan and the EU, who both advocate more for more interest-based approach, built their own agenda. Hence, the current state of relations between the EU and Azerbaijan can be regarded as a compromise with more proclivity towards the interest-based side.

The EU, which is Azerbaijan's largest trading partner, has invested around 600 million euros into the country.

The EU and Azerbaijan co-operate largely on energy and economic projects. The EU, which is Azerbaijan's largest trading partner, has invested around 600 million euros into the country. With regard to core values, it seems that the EU has accepted the terms of the Azerbaijani side and does not rock the boat too much in terms of democracy and human rights. In turn, Azerbaijan engages with EU projects in the areas of public administration, development of small and medium enterprises, education reform, regional development, and diversification of the economy. Although the EU is usually careful, sometimes it has to prove it does not support revolution in Azerbaijan. In the autumn of 2019 an EU delegation in Azerbaijan issued a press statement responding to allegations claiming that the EU was provoking people to take to the streets. The statement read that EU supports the independence and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

Vulnerabilities

A combination of external and internal factors precluded further integration of Azerbaijan with the EU. On a geopolitical level, Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty have become key determinants in relations with external actors. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the occupation of 20 per cent of Azerbaijan's territory by the Republic of Armenia have become a constant irritator and obstacle for a sound relationship with its neighbours and the rest of the world. For Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh is not a simple conflict but a motivation for post-Soviet nation-building. Therefore, Azerbaijan considers outside actors' attitudes towards the conflict and the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan as the main hint of genuine co-operation.

In this regard, the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on June 19th 2020 has created a wave of appreciation in Baku by the government and civil society. The resolution stressed the independence, sovereignty and territorial in-

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tegrity of the EaP states and emphasised the "external aggression and the on-going occupation of the territories of some of those countries". It also claimed that this undermines the human rights situation, "representing a barrier to enhancing the prosperity, stability and growth of the EaP and compromise EU action, thus endangering the whole EaP project".

The Azerbaijani elite, like many others in the European neighbourhood, has always conducted a balancing act to provide for its national security. In this sense, the European neighbourhood is also a Russian neighbourhood. Russia is another factor affecting Azerbaijan's relations with the EU. However, Russia's power is not only in the form of domination, but also in the form of soft power, a proliferation of hegemonic discourse that included elements such as sovereign democracy, anti-westernism and illiberalism. The Azerbaijani ruling elite has been influenced by this discourse and has started using it. Hence, there is a duality in the relationship with Russia. The Azerbaijani elite had to secure itself from direct Russian interference and influence on domestic affairs, and, at the same time, falling into the hegemonic discourse of the Russian state model.

The domestic vulnerability concerning interaction with the EU was related to the nature of the political regime in Azerbaijan, structured around a strong state and a strong president model with a weak civil society. Anything that would endanger this model would not be accepted and has to be re-negotiated. That is why a pragmatic type of relationship was established since the "democratisation" requirements from external actors would undermine the existing model. Democratisation was replaced with "good governance", "reform in public administration", "anti-corruption" and other demands that do not pose an existential threat to the ruling system. The relations between the EU and civil society in the EaP Civil Society Forum should also be considered in that sense. The Azerbaijani ruling elite's approach to NGOs, particularly those supported from the West, has been unambiguous. The state does not trust those NGOs and considers some of them a nuisance, and even a threat. Allegedly, perceived threats from NGOs was at the centre of the repressions against civil society in 2014. The current format of relations with the EU is a result of lived experience and an inter-subjective knowledge acquired throughout years of negotiations that reflects the interests of both Azerbaijani and European elites.

Way forward

As we can see from above, relations between Azerbaijan and the EU have focused more on economic, reformative and technical matters rather than political

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ones. What both sides agree upon is an incremental process, which seems to have prospects for the future.

Azerbaijan, facing shocks from the current oil crisis, is in desperate need of reform. The changing domestic situation in Azerbaijan since 2015, linked to the fall of oil production and related structural challenges, has generated a strong need for economic and political transformation. This momentum can create a window of opportunity for the EU to step-up efforts to reform the system of governance and public administration. In order to respond to structural pressures, the government of Azerbaijan has embarked on a path of modifying public administration. Yet this has not been a process of political and economic reform that could liberalise society and offer more public freedoms, something that could save the country from radical stresses and shocks.

What the country now needs is a reform plan that would, first, stabilise the economic situation and give new direction to the post-oil economy and, second, pave the way for more political liberalisation and citizen engagement with gradual transformation to a democratic form of governance. The EU has a unique capacity in this regard. It is present in Azerbaijan and has established channels of communication with the government and civil society. The EU, today, also has an ever-increasing legitimacy in Azerbaijan as suggested in public opinion polls. NEE

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Memory should be directed at the future

An interview with Ihor Poshyvailo, director of the National Memorial to the Heavenly Hundred Heroes and Revolution of Dignity Museum (Maidan Museum) in Kyiv. Interviewer: Tomasz Lachowski

TOMASZ LACHOWSKI: You are the director of the Maidan Museum, the fundamental role of which is to commemorate events of the Revolution of Dignity that occurred during the winter of 2013 and 2014 in Kyiv. We often understand museums as institutions that present historical events long after they happened. In the case of the Maidan, we are talking about events that happened only several years ago. When exactly did the idea to create a museum appear and how did you manage to develop the project?

The Maidan Museum as an idea was initiated during the Revolution of Dignity itself. My museum colleagues and I decided to document as carefully as possible what was happening in Kyiv. We realised quite early that what was taking place in the winter of 2013 and 2014 certainly would not be a simple repetition of the Orange Revolution of 2004, and we became well aware that we had to be among and with the people at this exceptional time. The turning point was certainly January 16th 2014, when the so-called "dictatorial laws" were enacted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and violent clashes broke out, even though we had been documenting the protests at the very beginning of the movement.

Our project to document the Revolution of Dignity as it was happening was also inspired by Linda Norris, a well-known US museum expert. On December 1st 2013, shortly after Viktor Yanukovych's militia violently broke up a peaceful student demonstration, she wrote an article titled: "If I ran a museum in Kyiv, right now". I was impressed with her arguments, keeping in mind that her postulates were obvious about museums in democratic states but very difficult to implement in a country like Ukraine. Norris highlighted the need to collect objects used by protesters and,

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most importantly, people's testimonies and personal stories. Her work inspired me to write an article titled "Ukrainian Museums and EuroMaidan: Learning to be with the people" for *Ukrainska Pravda*.

Did other museums also support the idea of the EuroMaidan, which later evolved into the Revolution of Dignity? Or did they have some doubts since the Maidan, no matter how you look at it, stood against the actions of a legally chosen authority?

In Ukraine, 99 per cent of museums depend on state or local authorities, so at that time many museum workers tried to remain neutral by not taking a clear stand. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasising that there were also museums that simply did not support the protesters. The situation was similar as the one in universities: there were those who put their students who participated in the protests on the so-called "black list", and there were others, such as the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, that helped and even mobilised students to get involved in the revolution. In some cases, museum management forbade their employees to go to the Maidan during work hours, making it much more difficult to engage in "anti-government demonstrations". However, the mission of the museums is to serve the public, not the authorities.

How did your initiative develop after the protests in Kyiv came to an end in February 2014?

A year after the events our initiative began to take a legal form. In January 2015 we established a non-governmental organisation called the Maidan Museum and we later united our forces with the Museum of Freedom initiative. On the first anniversary of the Revolution of Dignity we launched the exhibition *Creativity of Freedom: (R)evolutionary Culture of the Maidan* where people could participate in different educational and cultural events about the Revolution of Dignity. Yet the initiative was not always positively welcomed by active participants of the Maidan protests, since they viewed our work with distance and suspicion, considering the museum as a conservative phenomenon with minimum influence. Others emphasised that the Revolution of Dignity itself was still underway and thought that creating a museum so early on would "freeze" the ongoing contestation and distort the memory of the Maidan. But we did not give up on our project and kept collecting personal stories and various artefacts.

For the first anniversary of the Maidan, then President Petro Poroshenko issued a decree on the need to preserve the memory of the Revolution of Dignity as a result of pressure put on Ukrainian officials by the relatives of the Heroes of Heavenly Hundred. Following that decision, on January 20th 2016 the Maidan Museum, now officially entitled the National Memorial to the Heavenly Hundred Heroes and Revolution of Dignity Museum, was formally registered.

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What does interest in the Maidan look like today within Ukrainian society?

Unfortunately, we see a decreasing interest for the Maidan as phenomenon in Ukraine. In 2018 we conducted a survey, which brought us disappointing results. The respondents showed a segmented understanding of the revolution, and its memory was shown to be fading and misinterpreted, even amongst supporters and active participants. The conclusions drawn from the survey are that most respondents do not treat the actors of the revolution as "Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred", but as politicians. We also observed that respondents remembered the negative things more than positive things about the revolution – probably because of disappointment since not all the revolutionary demands were met. Moreover, the survey illustrated that connotations still prevailed. For example, hardly anyone used terms like Revolution of Dignity, but rather "rebellion" or "protest". Nevertheless, over 70 per cent believed that the Heavenly Hundred are indeed heroes and should be commemorated. The survey also pointed out that 60 per cent believe that the Maidan Museum and Memorial are needed.

Did the Revolution of Dignity end in February 2014, symbolically after the escape of Yanukovych to the Russian Federation, or is it still ongoing having in mind that the protection of Ukrainian sovereignty in the east against the Russian aggressor can be named as its next stage?

Analysing this question from the perspective of our institution, it is important to note that the main task of the Museum is to display and analyse these life-changing 93 days of the Revolution of Dignity in a broader context, starting at least from previous Maidan protests: the Revolution on Granite of 1990 and the 2004 Orange Revolution. Yet, we do so without forgetting about the ongoing Russian aggression in Donbas and Crimea. In other words, we strive to present Ukrainians' struggle for independence and sovereignty of their country, for human dignity and rights, for a prosperous future, as a long-term process. However, it is difficult to claim whether the Revolution of Dignity is over or is still ongoing, since participants of the Maidan themselves tend to disagree. I personally think that it is an unfinished story, because the demands of the protestors, such as the end of a corrupted and oligarchic system, were not all met by the state authorities.

During the first scientific forum devoted to the Revolution of Dignity, organised by the Museum in December 2019 in Kyiv, you said that a new field of research, "Maidan studies", is being born. How do you understand this concept?

In our opinion, Maidan studies is a separate scientific discipline that would examine the protest movement in Ukraine in a comprehensive and interdisciplinary way – a peaceful struggle for freedom and sovereignty, for democracy and justice, as well as for human rights

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and national identity. In many universities abroad such analysis is already common practice. For example, I had the opportunity to participate in a conference at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, which runs a programme devoted to the subject of revolutions as such. Such a subject area does not yet exist in Ukraine, but we really need objective scientific knowledge on various aspects of the Maidan phenomenon, in order to use it in constructing narratives, exhibitions and programmes at our museum.

Personally, I deal with the subject of transitional justice as a phenomenon, focusing on attempts to implement some of its measures in post-Maidan Ukraine in the conditions of the ongoing Russian aggression. I have to admit that I was positively surprised that you as a museologist emphasised the importance of this issue, bearing in mind the preservation of the memory of the Maidan and building a positive narrative of it, both among Ukrainians and outside…

For Ukrainian museologists, the concept of transitional justice is a completely new field of interest. It is quite clear that among different transitional justice mechanisms such as criminal justice or reparations for victims, there is a need to provide access to archives, establish the truth and preserve the memory about certain patterns of repressive practices. But I am sure that the cultural heritage of a given nation, especially in times of a crisis, can also become a part of transitional justice strategies. And I see our

Photo by Tomasz Lachowski

role exactly in this matter. We need to remember that the Kremlin's reactions to the Maidan led to the Russian aggression. It is therefore important to clearly identify the reasons that brought people to Maidan in the winter of 2013–2014. The Revolution of Dignity very clearly displayed the modern identity of Ukrainians, including its various components: pro-Ukrainian, pro-European, but also a post-Soviet identity encompassing both those who have always been quite sceptical about the perspectives of integration with the western world, as well as a majority of people not wanting any integration with Russia. The Maiden therefore allowed Ukrainians to discover their own identity, and answer questions as: "Who are we, as Ukrainians?" or "What is important to us? Our common past and future, our language, territory, power?" As it seems, human rights and the fight for dignity of each person are factors that should unite the nation to the greatest extent, in spite of our differences. Building a civil society based on shared democratic values is also one

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of the goals of transitional justice which we as a museum are naturally part of. The important thing now is to complete the investigations of the Maidan crimes. As we know, this is one of the tasks that has not yet been carried out and brings disappointment and a sense of failure. Establishing a system of responsibility and justice is essential to create a platform of dialogue that would foster reconciliation between Ukrainians.

What is the position of the current Ukrainian authorities regarding the memory of the Maidan?

The new government does not seem to be withdrawing from the decisions made by previous authorities regarding the memory of the Maidan. On the other hand, I notice that a majority of representatives of the current government do not have personal ties with the revolution, and therefore do not have a feeling of responsibility, which leads to mistakes or misunderstandings, such as the release of the former Berkut officers under investigation on Russia's demand in December 2019.

One of the manifestations of crafting the politics of history by the Ukrainian authorities in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity was the implementation of the decommunisation laws in 2015. Can the Maidan Museum be seen as a part of this policy?

Our museum, though not directly, is part of the broader decommunisation process because we also refer to other examples of the struggle for an independent Ukraine, human rights and the right of self-determination of the Ukrainian nation. It also needs to be stated that as a museum we participated in the exhibition *Restless Youth: Growing up in Europe, 1945 to Now*, held at the House of European History in Brussels in 2019–2020. We also take part in other international projects which allow us to show to the world the complicated history of Ukraine, our political divisions, including the importance of the language issue, but also the reasons why Yanukovych appeared in Ukrainian politics and how he exercised his rule. In our daily work, we observe a positive phenomenon regarding the desire to preserve memory in new and contemporary forms. There is no doubt that memory should be active and directed not so much to the past but to the future. This ultimately will allow us to better understand the times in which we live. NEE

Ihor Poshyvailo is a muselogist and the director of the National Memorial to the Heavenly Hundred Heroes and Revolution of Dignity Museum (Maidan Museum) in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Tomasz Lachowski is a lawyer and journalist. He has a PhD in international law and is conducting scientific research on the issue of transitional justice in post-Maidan Ukraine. Editor-in-chief of *Obserwator Międzynarodowy* magazine.

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How an absurd legal case turned into a fight for the future of Russian theatre

ALINA ALESHCHENKO

On June 26th Moscow's Meshchansky District Court announced that theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov and his colleagues would face a suspended sentence along with a series of fines. The case of the alleged fraud of the theatre company Sedmaya Studia reverberated throughout the entire cultural community in Russia and abroad.

On June 26th the international theatre community awaited the decision of the Moscow Court regarding the fate of Kirill Serebrennikov. Serebrennikov, a leading director in Russia, was accused of committing large-scale fraud. If found guilty, he could be sentenced to over five years in prison. His case was covered by major European newspapers, from *The Guardian* to *Der Spiegel* and *Le Monde*, and was commented on by various celebrities, both in Russia and abroad. Even those unfamiliar with the case became suspicious when a director with numerous awards, whose work have been shown at festivals in Avignon, Venice and Cannes, was accused of stealing government money, particularly in a country ranked 149th out of 180 in the Press Freedom Index.

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A war between the living and dead

In Russia, the case of Serebrennikov was considered so pivotal for those involved in contemporary theatre that it was called "The Theatre Case". Lev Dodin, one of the country's most renowned directors and head of Saint Petersburg's Maly Drama Theatre, compared the trial to the denunciations of Joseph Brodsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold, which significantly shaped Russian culture in the 20th century. As he put it bluntly in a letter to the Russian drama magazine, *Teatr*, the judge's decision shall be a "verdict of Russian theatre, and therefore all artistic life in Russia".

The comparison to Brodsky's trial, which ended in the poet being sentenced to forced labour and eventually expatriated, can be made not only due to the relevance of "The Theatre Case" but the absurdity of the court proceedings. For instance, the judge asked Brodsky's witness if she herself had ever seen Brodsky "working on his poems", assuming that the poems alone did not provide enough evidence. Similarly, during Serebrennikov's first trial, the prosecutor questioned the very existence of a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This premiered in 2012 and subsequently received the Golden Mask National Theatre Award; in fact, it was still running at the time of the trial. Brodsky's case occurred in 1964; the Theatre Case started in 2017.

The case of Serebrennikov was considered so pivotal for those involved in Russian contemporary theatre that it was called "The Theatre Case".

It began on May 23rd when Serebrennikov's apartment and theatre, the Gogol Centre, were raided by federal investigators. Serebrennikov and his team were subject to interrogation. They were accused of stealing 200 million roubles (about 2.5 million euros) from the state budget. This money had been specifically allocated to Serebrennikov's non-profit organisation, Sedmaya Studia, and its plan to set up a new art project called *Platforma*. This case resulted in public uproar, especially within the arts and theatre world. Lyudmila Ulitskaya, a Russian novelist and winner of many prestigious awards, including the Austrian State Prize for European Literature, commented: "Nowadays all our country has left is a bunch of talented people who are subject to demonisation and attempts to make them leave the country. It is a war between the living and dead. And the dead are winning… It is what George Orwell has warned us about. From 1984 we went straight into 2017".

The case, which has lasted more than two years and has greatly impacted the cultural community, appears especially absurd given the success of the *Platforma* project. It was received well by general audiences and even state press. The money that was allocated by the Ministry of Culture – a subsidy of around 216 million

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roubles over four years – which might seem like a large sum, but not if the scale of project is considered. This is especially true given the fact that Sedmaya Studia originally had no owned venue, so the space had to be rented and fully equipped. Moreover, the programme of *Platforma* included more than 300 events and involved more than 650 participants. This inevitably involved fees related to production teams and cast, as well as material costs for stage elements and costumes. As often happens in Russian practice – not only when it comes to theatre – small purchases and fees are not completed via bank transfer, but are often paid in cash. What the Russian Federal Investigative Committee argued was that the *Platforma* team had not spent the funds properly but had instead "formed a criminal organisation" to appropriate the money.

The case

Alexander Kalyagin, head of the Russian Union of Theatre Workers and the Et Cetera Theatre in Moscow, reacted critically to these charges: "We are put in severe conditions. We have to obey these laws. A law is a law. Is it bad? It is bad, and we speak about it… Anyone who is already a head of the institution and is acting according to this law is automatically guilty". His words reflected what was on everyone's lips: today they came for him, tomorrow they will come for us.

Even the producer who had worked on the *Platforma* project for less than a year, as well as a Ministry of Culture worker, who had not even been actively involved in the project, were caught up in the case.

Here is a brief overview of all defendants:

Kirill Serebrennikov – Russian theatre and film director. He has staged numerous productions in leading theatres, both in Russia and abroad. Serebrennikov also served as head of the acting-directing degree course at the Moscow Art Theatre School, whose graduates formed a non-profit theatre company called Sedmaya Studia. In 2011, the director proposed the *Platforma* project to then-President, Dmitry Medvedev, and following presidential approval, began the project in co-operation with Sedmaya Studia. Since 2012, he has been the Artistic Director of the Gogol Centre in Moscow. He has openly criticised both the foreign and domestic actions of the Russian authorities, such as the Russo-Georgian War and the Annexation of Crimea, whilst simultaneously participating in demonstrations. Serebrennikov is also an active defender of LGBT+ rights. The director was detained in August 2017 whilst he was producing the film *Leto*, which was later selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival. Following this, he was sentenced to house arrest and then released in April 2019 with travel restrictions.

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Crowds gathered in Moscow during the initial arrest of Kirill Serebrennikov in 2017. The director was detained in August that year whilst he was producing the film *Leto*, which was later selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival.

Yuri Itin – former General Manager of the non-profit company Sedmaya Studia. From 2011 to 2017, he was General Manager of the Russian State Academic Drama Theatre in Yaroslavl. Yuri was sentenced to house arrest in May 2017 and also released in April 2019 with travel restrictions.

Alexey Malobrodsky – former Head Producer of the *Platforma* project during the first 11 months of its existence. He was arrested in June 2017 and was kept in a detention centre until May 2018, when he was released (with travel restrictions) after suffering a heart attack.

Ekaterina Voronova – first Executive and then Head Producer of the *Platforma* project, following Malobrodsky. She left Russia before the beginning of the case. As a result, Voronova was tried in absentia and was subject to an international arrest warrant. In November 2017, she issued a letter stating that all the defendants were innocent. At the same time, it confirmed that there were numerous mistakes made in the bookkeeping of the *Platforma* project by Chief Bookkeeper Masliaeva. The letter also confessed that a decision was made to destroy all internal documentation of the *Platforma* project after its completion in 2014.

Nina Masliaeva – former Chief Bookkeeper of the *Platforma* project. She was detained in May 2017 and later sentenced to house arrest. Masliaeva is the case's

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only defendant who has not only plead guilty but has also given testimony against the other defendants. This testimony constituted the bulk of the prosecutor's evidence.

Sofia Apfelbaum – General Manager of the Russian Academic Youth Theatre in Moscow. Between 2012 and 2014, she worked at the State Department of Support for the Arts and was, among other things, supervising the *Platforma* project from within the Ministry of Culture. She was sentenced to house arrest in October 2017, and like the other defendants was released in April 2019 with travel restrictions.

Battle is not over

In April 2019, after almost two years of trials, protocols, petitions and calls for justice from international cultural makers, all the defendants were released and all measures (except travel restrictions) were lifted. In September, the case was returned from the court back to the office of the prosecutor. This decision was made after it was discovered by independent investigators that the market value of the project was in fact 260 million roubles. Since the ministry of culture had "only" allocated 216 million roubles to the project, it was now clear that the Sedmaya Studia team not only did not steal the money, but even managed to save around 44 million roubles. This evidence resulted in the whole Russian cultural community breathing a sigh of relief.

> In April 2019 all the defendants were released and all measures (except travel restrictions) were lifted. But the case was not over.

However, the case was not over. The prosecutor's office appealed the decision and in November last year the case was returned to the Meshchansky District Court. A third investigation was conducted, which concluded that the project costed only 88 million roubles. This meant that around 129 million roubles (around 1.5 million euros) went missing. Naturally, this conclusion was questioned by the defence, as well as theatre professionals, who argued that it was impossible that more than 300 *Platforma* events could have been produced with only 88 million roubles. Despite this, these views were not taken into account. The prosecutor asked the court to send Serebrennikov to prison for six years. Simultaneously, Malobrodsky would be sentenced to five years, and Apfelbaum and Itin would each face four years.

The shock and despair felt within the arts community in response to these renewed charges were probably best expressed by Serebrennikov during his last speech in court on June 22nd: "The difference of 'contemporary art' from a state order or propaganda is that it reacts to contemporary life in a keen, critical and

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paradoxical way, it reacts by the means of contemporary media, honest and unambiguous conversation, by the means of free reflection, by the means of art. However, we receive prosecutions, trials and arrests as a reaction to our work. In this sense both the *Platforma* project and the three years of judicial proceedings against the people who made it illustrate in a very precise manner what is happening to all of us, and in this sense the project, of course, is still alive, it keeps track of current times and establishes how things really are."

On June 26th Moscow's Meshchansky District Court announced its decision. Serebrennikov, Malobrodsky and Itin were sentenced to probation, along with fines that amounted to 130 million roubles. Malobrodsky and Itin were banned from occupying positions within state institutions. Apfelbaum was found guilty of negligence and her fine was cancelled due to the statute of limitations. Whilst his fellow defendants filed an appeal, Serebrennikov decided not to join them. He stated that he now feels too tired and depressed to deal with more court proceedings.

Naturally, probation is better than a prison sentence. Of course, everything could have turned out worse. Many of the defendants' supporters who came to Moscow's Meshchansky District Court that June day even cheered following the court decision. Yet the fact remains: four talented and creative theatre workers were found guilty of false charges. As the cinema critic Lubov Arkus puts it, "think of what all of us have been put through to be able to feel joy about such a decision". Whilst it is possible to feel relief for the moment, a battle far bigger than the case itself continues.

Alina Aleshchenko is an artistic producer and theatre manager. Most recently she curated the transcultural festival POSTWEST \\ guess where in the Volksbühne Berlin. She is currently working as an artistic production manager at Dortmund Drama Theatre.

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Armenia's track record on criminalising domestic violence

VALENTINA GEVORGYAN

In Armenia, traditional values, along with a lack of information on human rights, still reign. Society has not achieved a level of consciousness to oppose fake and easily digestible narratives. The same is true about intentions to ratify conventions criminalising domestic violence. The ratification process-experience has been episodic with manipulation and drama, sparking public emotion and a less-informed discussion on the content.

Domestic violence, according to the United Nations, is recognised as a violation of the fundamental human rights of women. Armenia has subscribed to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979), became a party to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) for the advancement of women, and took commitments in the scope of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SCG), where gender equality and empowerment of all women stands as a separate goal. While the CEDAW provides general principles for upholding the rights of women, the primary international document and the main benchmarks allowing the evaluation of countries' performance when it comes to protections against domestic violence, are set by the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Armenia signed the Convention in 2018 and, due to ample obstacles, has so far failed in ratification.

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Barriers

Armenia's legacy regarding the protection of women's rights dates back largely to the Soviet-times' societal habit of secrecy. In the country's young history, since independence, the lack of state-level attention towards gender issues has had cultural underpinnings. The different social groups maintain patriarchal and traditional values. Before the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the culture encouraged conditions strengthening women's vulnerability, with governmental institutions', and the leading party's ideology, leaning towards patriarchal values. Data from a nationwide survey on domestic violence and the abuse of women in Armenia, conducted in 2007, show distorted perceptions about family relationships. For example, 61 per cent of respondents said that "a good wife always obeys her husband, even if she disagrees".

There are barriers which continue to drive injustices and violence against women in Armenia, including a lack of institutional and support services, a lack of surveillance and screening, poor media coverage, a lack of focus on the prevention of violence, and the cultural acceptance of gender-based violence. A quote from research on domestic violence in Armenia, conducted two decades ago, remains relevant to this day: "Police take insufficient steps to address the problem of domestic violence; they generally do not make arrests nor do they routinely attempt to remove the perpetrator of the assault from the home … The Armenian government has not created a criminal justice system that provides adequate security to women who are beaten by their husbands or intimate partners.".

Family values are a top priority in Armenia. The family is protected by the constitution as the natural and basic unit of society, the basis for the preservation and reproduction of the population, motherhood and childhood. With the highest legal protections for the family, Armenia still does not have a standalone law on domestic violence. Hence, domestic violence is not criminalised. The violence part is regulated under the criminal code, while domestic violence includes physical, psychological, social and economic types. According to data from the Investigative Committee of Armenia, a total of 131 criminal cases have been initiated in 2015, and 157 cases in 2016, based on code articles 138–142 on rape, sexual violence and engaging in sexual acts with a person under the age of sixteen. During the first half of 2019, a total of 331 criminal domestic violence cases have been investigated.

Advocates

In practice – the most concerned about the problem of domestic violence in Armenia have been civil society organisations, which is evidenced by their engage-

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ment from the provision of basic services (e.g. psychological and legal counselling, shelter and financial assistance, humanitarian aid) to education and awareness raising, and to victim representation in courts.

The Coalition to Stop Violence against Women was established in 2010, following the death of a 20-year old woman as a result of a severe beating. They target the education and formation of public opinion, in order to change the prevailing traditional views in society. Since 2010 extensive advocacy by civil society organisations began to also counter political manipulation. Attention towards the issue of domestic violence on a state level, with the establishment of the intergovernmental commission on combating gender-based violence by the prime minister, was almost invisible until a decade ago. In 2010 Armenia adopted the 2011–15 Gender Policy Strategic Programme, thus renewing the previously adopted National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing Their Role in Society (2004–2010).

The draft law on domestic violence, initiated by the civil society organisations, was rejected by the parliament in 2013.

It is important to understand the agenda of propagandists and pseudo-nationalist political forces which have become used to abusing the issue of domestic violence as a platform for manipulation and partisanship goals. This is why the draft law on domestic violence, initiated by the civil society organisations, was rejected by the parliament in 2013. In 2017, a new draft was presented, but again encountered intensive resistance. During that process, human rights defenders encountered hate speech and online attacks. The discussion on the importance for a standalone law on domestic violence evolved within the public discourse in the scope of the definition of family – in particular, the value of family in society vs. the state's interference in it. By placing the word violence next to the adjective "domestic" sparked pseudo-nationalist interpretations on the intention of the concepts. As a consequence, the framing of domestic violence shifted towards a narrative of domestic solidarity.

The strange part of this is that the state can interfere in family business when it comes to mediating or restoring harmony and peace – but not in cases relating to detecting violence, or preventing and protecting potential victims. Interference by the state into family life is dependent on one function: reconciliation, yes; protection, no. Pseudo-nationalist groups who support such nonsense are best explained as reactive actors. They only appear when there is a thoughtful agenda to oppose. These groups are inactive in advocacy, if visible at all. They seem like "puppets" of the patriarchy-advocate political forces, kept in their pockets for when the public discourse needs some noise. These questionable actors are trained to oppose pro-

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gress. In 2017 the law was adopted with a changed framing. The wording of the law ended up being: "Preventing Violence in Family, Protecting Persons Subjected to Violence in Family and Restoring Solidarity in Family" and was adopted in December 2017. In 2018 the prime minister established a council on the prevention of violence in family in order to coordinate activities complying with the law.

Victim blaming

A primary concern is that domestic violence in Armenia remains largely unreported. Among the many reasons is the practice of victim blaming within society, rooted in an attitude which prevents victims from speaking out. The same attitude is also present among law enforcement bodies. Civil society organisations have invested in promoting behavioural shifts, namely victim-oriented treatment through the development of specialist skills of police, health workers and court staff.

Another major problem is the state's failure to ensure the prosecution of crimes, even in cases when violence is reported. There have been cases when victims of domestic violence have filed complaints, but the responsible bodies have failed to take adequate measures of protection, which has resulted in the victim's death. Another issue is recognising not only direct, but also indirect victims of violence, which remains legally unaddressed. For example, indirect victims are often children, as they can be affected by the witnessing of domestic violence.

Data from research I have conducted show that, prior to the 2018 revolution, none of the state bodies, including the Human Rights Defender, seemed to have a vested interest in moving the domestic violence agenda forward. Developments since the revolution point to the strategic involvement of the new leadership on the role of women in family and society, and it seems to have been positively received by the decision-making community.

> In Armenia, traditional values, along with a lack of information on human rights guarantees, still reign.

However traditional values, along with a lack of information on human rights guarantees, still reign. Society has not yet achieved a level of consciousness to oppose the fake and easily digestible narratives. The same is true about intentions to ratify the Istanbul Convention. Armenia's ratification process-experience has been episodic with manipulation and drama to spark public emotion. Armenia seems to be registering a tendency of signing international documents, but boosting problems locally, when it comes to ratification. The former government was an imitation of subscription to international standards. The new one seems

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to suggest a will to reverse this practice, but it remains to be seen how implementation is followed on the cultural, institutional and policy levels. Starting from March this year, as a result of COVID-19, the number of phone calls to domestic violence hotlines has increased when compared to February.

Armenia has a long history and a proud culture of elevated thinking and public education prioritising universal values, which came to be tainted by Soviet mass violations of human rights. If concerns over the protection of every individual prevail by manipulated beliefs, the country will hardly move far away from its Soviet past. In declarations throughout the nation, Armenian mothers, wives, grandmothers and daughters receive the highest of praise and respect. However none of it is needed or relevant if political leaders are unable to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence – the primary international document offering protection from domestic violence and measures to evaluate state's performance in upholding the rights of women. NEE

Valentina Gevorgyan is a public policy research fellowship coordinator at the Open Society Foundations-Armenia and a doctoral researcher in political science at the Department of Social Sciences with the University of Fribourg.

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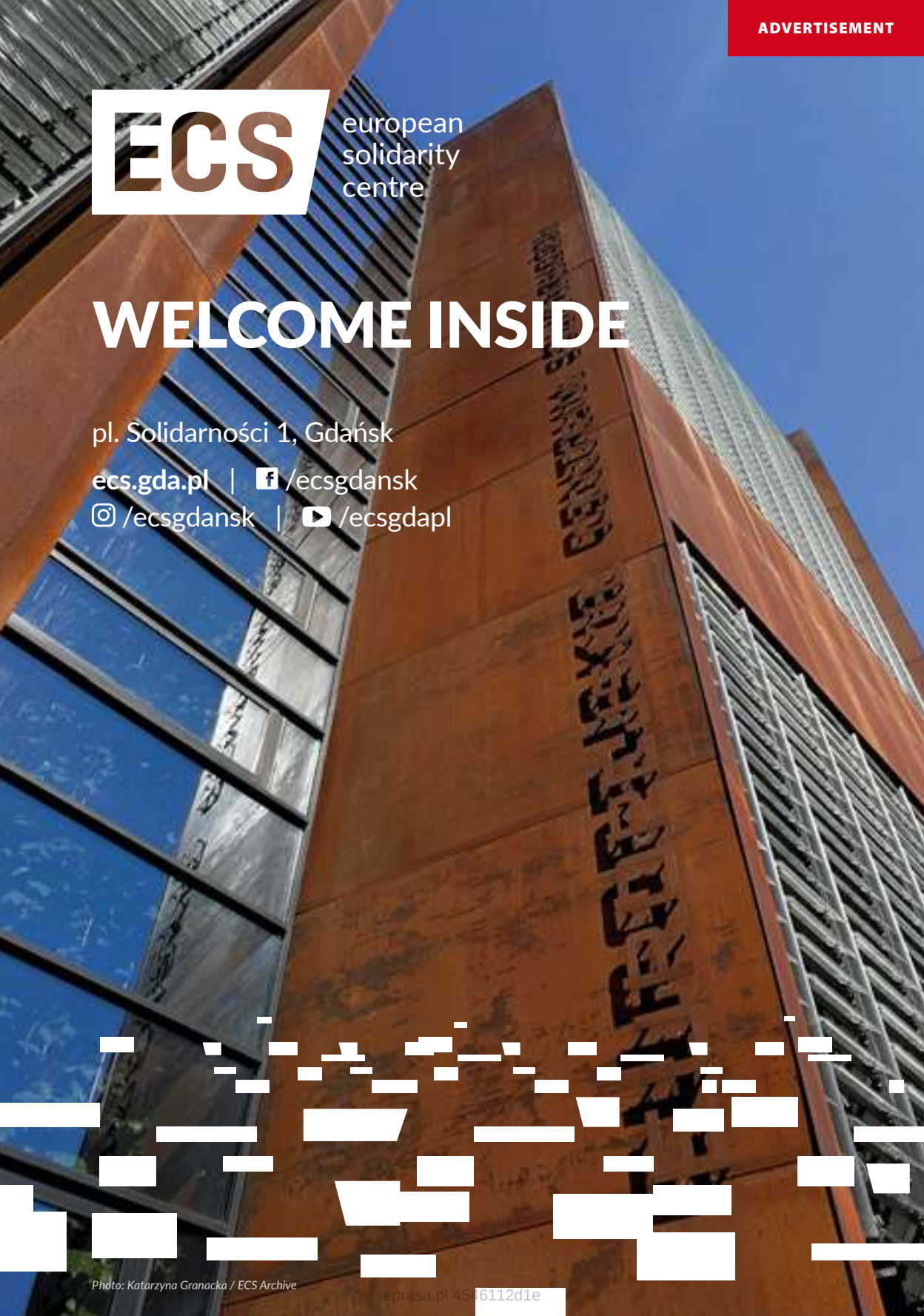

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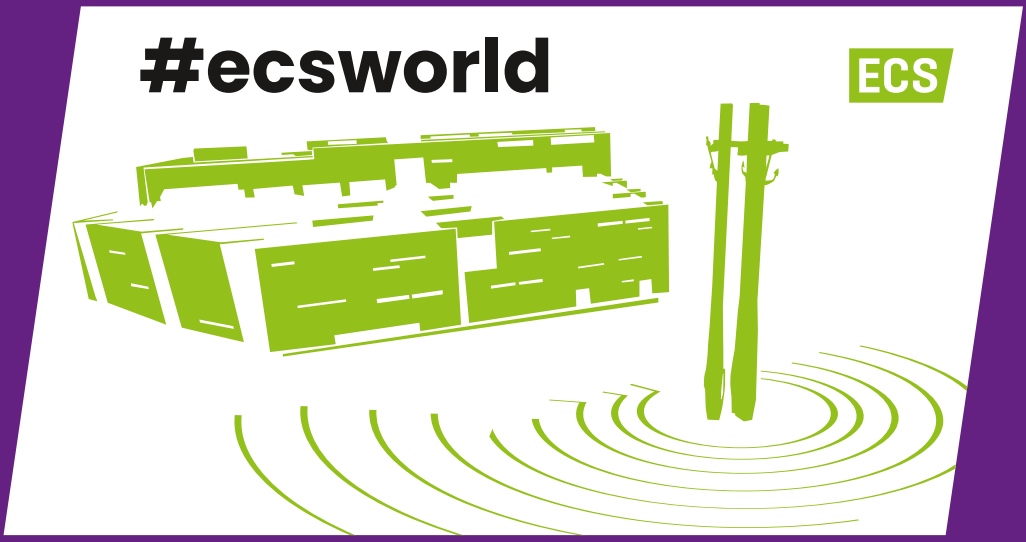

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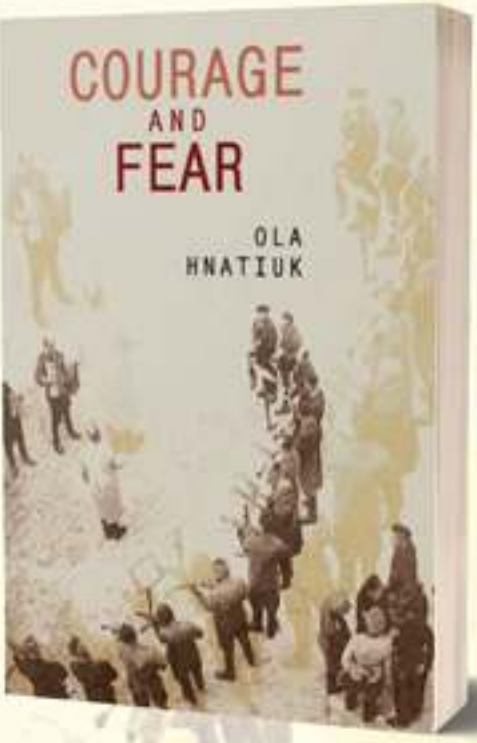

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The challenge of commemoration

Cases from Poland and Germany

KRISTINA SMOLIJANINOVAITĖ

The Second World War remains one of the most painful and conflicting episodes of the European nations' memories. Present conflicts are embedded in history and in the use of history as a political tool. The cases of Poland and Germany illustrate how challenging it can be to commemorate history, especially in a politicised environment.

In Poland during the communist period and until 1989, it was nearly impossible to openly talk about the Second World War. First, due to friendship with the Soviet Union and later, after the fall of communism, Poland was busy creating its own government, introducing the democratic culture and fighting with an economic crisis in order to transform the country it became between 1989 and 2000. After this period, history and commemoration events started to play a very important role for the national and political identity of the country. Like in other Central and Eastern European states, Poland is an example of how history is used as a political tool in the museum narratives and exhibition forms, which also trigger conflicts.

"The past was important because we did not have time to tell the full story until the end of the communism," says Jacek Kołtan, deputy director of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, responsible for scientific research. "It started with establishing the museum of the Warsaw Uprising in the middle of 2000, which was the very first modern exhibition dealing with the recent past," he continues.

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Narratives of heroism

The Warsaw Uprising for Poland is a crucial event that took place in the summer of 1944 by the Polish underground state and led by the Polish national army – Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*). Created by the young political and military elite of Poland, the underground state is a fascinating phenomenon – it was an independent, secret, institutionalised structure of the state working and being active through the entire war, fighting against the German occupation. The Warsaw Uprising was an extremely dramatic and traumatic moment in Polish history, and many Poles were killed or imprisoned as a result.

In 2004 Lech Kaczyński, the third president of post-communist Poland and a member of the Solidarity movement from the 1980s, decided to create a modern museum that would tell the Polish public, for the very first time, the history of the Warsaw Uprising. Up until that time the complete story about Uprising remain untold. "That's the moment of modernising Polish museums for the very first time. The similarities with the Terror museum in Budapest and the Warsaw Uprising in Warsaw are very deep. That's the tendency in Central and Eastern Europe, where a new kind of era in museology began, when the past is dealt with in a very political way," Kołtan summarises.

There was a huge debate in Poland in the second half of the 20th century as to whether the event of Warsaw Uprising in 1944 was worth organising. 150,000–180,000 people were killed and the youthful elite disappeared. "There is a right-wing tendency, which deals with the Second World War, by heroising the whole story. We are the heroes and the victims of two totalitarianisms," Kołtan says. "And there is a second part of the debate which says it was a lack of pragmatism to organise this kind of catastrophe for the entire generation."

The Polish government and the main political power in Poland since 2015 – the Law and Justice party – supports the Institute of the National Remembrance whose aim is, in part, to develop and popularise the social imagination and commemoration of heroism during the Second World War. One group of forgotten heroes became the "Cursed Soldiers" (*Żołnierze niezłomni/wyklęci*) who contained a broad and complex historic background. At the end of the war, when the Home Army was dissolved, some of its soldiers did not accept the situation and organised anti-Soviet and anti-communist Polish resistance. They later were named cursed soldiers. At the same time, they brutally fought against the civilians and, in some cases, were involved in war crimes against ethnic minorities.

"The new government decided to make the Cursed Soldiers national heroes and thus radicalised its own politics. They call it a counter-revolution against a liberal democratic state by introducing illiberal democracy. And as with every revolution,

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they need their own heroes in the social imagination," Kołtan adds. Radicalised politics, a black-and-white view of history and the present world, is quite common in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Russia. The heroic past is exalted, and history is used heavily as a political tool.*

Another example of using museums as a platform for the political radicalisation of history is the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. The initial idea of the museum provided a story of the war in a critical way by showing heroism of many people living in Poland, the country's multiethnicism during the war and a critical narrative examining antisemitic motives of local people. The exhibition provided a balanced and complex view on Poland's past, having both positive stories but also darker passages. The first director of the museum, Paweł Machcewicz, created the narrative to tell the history of the war from a social perspective, showing how tragic the war and military conflict is for all people. After 2015 it became clear that it was not the narrative that the new right-wing government wanted to express. Machcewicz was sacked and a new director was appointed who decided to put the Polish heroes who were fighting to save Jews and help the Jewish community during the war at the centre of the exhibit.** The critical aspects of the narrative were largely pushed to the background.***

* In Eastern Europe one observes a tendency to equate Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes. As a consequence, in September 2019, the EU issued a resolution *on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe* which states that the two totalitarian regimes with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 "paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War". See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0100_EN.html. Predictably, it enraged Russia. In June this year, the President of Russian Federation has published an article *Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II*, which sparked outrage in Poland and the Baltic states. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 and its secret protocols is regarded in Putin's essay as a necessary defensive measure, a moral equivalent to the 1938 Munich Agreement between France, Germany, Italy and the UK that ceded Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland to Hitler's Germany. See https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982.

** Polish collaboration and antisemitism stay in the background and insufficiently presented in Polish debates. In 2000 a book of Jan Gross *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* appeared in Polish language (in 2001 in English edition). A short essay in this book about mass killing of Jewish by locals started to be a huge problem and tension in a public and political debate about Polish co-responsibilities. See also Plucinska, Joanna "Princeton Professor Faces Libel Probe for Saying Poles Killed More Jews than Nazis in WWII": https://time.com/4075998/jan-gross-poland-jews-wwii/.

*** The original end of the exhibition in the WWII museum contained a film showing that 1945 is not the end of the war, but there were conflicts in the world, on the West and the East side of the borders until 1989. The film has critically showed that the world did not liberate itself from the war,

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Germany. History as a point of interest

Since the end of the Second World War, history was important in Germany, with certain crises and waves, since the 1960s. "History of the Nazi past in Germany became important in the 1960s related to the students' movement, but they were rather interested in the role of their parents' generation during the Nazi times. There was even a crisis of acknowledgment of history in society at the beginning of the 1970s," says Ulrich Baumann, deputy director and curator of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

In the second half of the 1970s, there was a wave of interest in history in West Germany. There was the so-called "Hitler Wave"* and Nazi signs appeared again in the streets with Nazi stickers, biographies of, and right-wing publications, about Hitler began to multiply, as did other books, articles, plays, television programmes, films and documentaries. The peak of interest was around 1977/1978.

> In 1978 a growing interest among Germans in Jewish history and the history of the persecution of Jews started to emerge.

It was also in 1978 when a growing interest in Jewish history and the history of the persecution of Jews in Germany started to emerge. The film *Holocaust* was made in 1979 which was important for Germany. It portrays a Jewish family's struggle to survive the horrors of Nazi Germany's systematic marginalisation and the extermination of their community. These developments coincided with the 40th commemoration of the November Terror in 1938, a pogrom against Jews carried out by the Nazi party's paramilitary wing.

At the same time, there was a parallel process and an expanding interest in local and biographical history. In the 1980s many in Germany started to look at local history, which was also related to the development of *Geschichtswerkstätten,* or history workshops. The trend first emerged in Scandinavia during the 1970s with a focus on local history and the connections between historical dimensions with the present day life. Around this time, the history workshop movement rose in England as well. In Germany the first history workshops emerged as part of the New Social Movements, which focus first and foremost on cultural and social life, individual self-realisation and human rights rather than on materialistic qualities

the conflicts are still ongoing. A newly appointed director replaced this film with a computer animation showing Polish heroism during WWII. See the video animation currently displayed at the WWII museum IPNtv: *Unconquered*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7MSG4Q-4as.

* See Sandkühler, Thomas *NS-Propaganda und historisches Lernen* https://www.bpb.de/apuz/213523/ns-propaganda-und-historisches-lernen?p=0. Also see Lukacs, John, "The Hitler of History" https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/l/lukacs-hitler.html

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such as economic wellbeing as well as political and military security. "There was a rising interest in the history of the place where I am living during the Nazi period. A local approach was very important. We now have a rising number of studies about local history projects in a certain place," Baumann adds. All this strengthened the general interest of the Nazi time as well as the war.

Clashes of memory

In the 1990s there was a significant debate in Germany about the role of the German Army, the *Wehrmacht*. The discussion was triggered by two exhibitions produced by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research: one in 1995 and the other in 2001, focusing on the atrocities and crimes of the Wehrmacht during the war. The exhibition, despite its controversies, brought a critical view on the German *Wehrmacht's* involvement and participation in the extermination of Jews, their treatment of prisoners of war and the civilians.

"Many Germans tend to say that they themselves had been victims of the war, victims of a small group of criminals who captured power and persecuted the Germans. But I think in the last 20 years it became clear by a lot of books that there was a big affirmation among Germans and the participation in the atrocities of the war and the Holocaust," says Baumann.

In the last five years, the culture of remembrance in Germany has been facing challenges from the right-wing political spectrum. In 2017 Björn Höcke, a politician with AfD (Alternative for Germany), called for a "180-degree turnaround in memory politics" and described the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as a "memorial of shame". It is a clash of memories between those who are in favour of memory and commemoration, and those who are fighting against them. Currently, many memorials experience vandalism at the hands of far right groups. In November 2015, for instance, the Submarine Bunker Valentin/Bremen-Farge opened to the public as the memorial *Denkort Bunker Valentin*. Almost from its initiation, the bunker *Valentin* became a constant object of vandalism. In May 2016 commemoration wreaths at the monument *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* ("extermination by work"), in front of the main entrance, were burnt. In December 2017 "Stoppt den Schuldkult" ("Stop the cult of guilt") was sprayed on the walls near the bunker.

In the last several years, the culture of remembrance in Germany has been facing challenges from the right-wing political spectrum.

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How to present memory?

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (or the Holocaust Memorial) has been advocating for a documentation centre in Berlin that would deal with, and inform, the public about the German occupation of Europe, especially civilians of the occupied Soviet Union during the war. It appealed to offer a general comparison of today's 40 states. However, this initiative has ended, but "everything started again with the parallel project of the Memorial for the Poles (*Polen Denkmal*). We saw the next initiative and we wanted to suggest something which is encompassing more entities than only the Poles," explains Baumann.

The advocates of the *Polen Denkmal*, the German Institute of Polish Affairs in Darmstadt and the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, started a discussion about a commemoration space for victims of the war. Together in June this year they created a compromised document which could be the basis for the German federal parliamentary decision. Though this initiative still awaits the decision of the German federal parliament, at the time of writing it signifies the birth of the Documentation Centre for the Victims of German Occupation in Europe and the *Polen Denkmal* (which will complement it).

This documentation centre and the *Polen Denkmal* is planned to be a three-dimensional work of art – encompassing not only the documentation centre and the memorial for Poles, but also a space for debates, meetings and other educational initiatives. "The documentation centre is a lot about symbols. It should be placed in the centre of Berlin at a place or a square named symbolically "1st September 1939" – the start date of the war with the invasion of Poland. The documentation centre will be about all of occupied Europe," Baumann explains.

> The Holocaust Memorial has been advocating for a documentation centre in Berlin that would deal with, and inform, the public about the German occupation of Europe.

Advocates of *Polen Denkmal* want to have a non-permanent solution until a permanent one comes along. "I could imagine that even in the documentation centre Poles will say 'no, our role is so different and special to the role of Lithuanians or Ukrainians, that we do not want to appear together with Italian or French people in the documentation centre,'" Baumann says. He agrees that it is important to talk with representatives of other commemoration cultures, but in the end it is the decision of Germans and the German historians on what shape this centre will take. Baumann concludes on the importance and meaning of the documentation centre: "One thing we learn, for example, now from this debate about the *Polen Denkmal*, is that there is a certain ignorance and

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unwillingness to see the history of neighbouring nations by many Germans. I think it would be one step to be more interested especially in Eastern nations."

Even if the initiators of the centre succeed and invite others to the conversation, there still remain some challenges to overcome. Perhaps it is not the Polish part of the story that is the most challenging; it might be more difficult to talk about collaboration of France, where the Vichy regime and many French people supported Hitler; or the Italians, until 1943, being an ally of the Nazis. One thing is clear, however. We need history to work on prejudices. The government and politicians have enabled commemoration culture in Germany, but commemoration itself is designed by well-informed experts who know the content and can implement it creatively. Let's hope it will stay this way. NEE

Kristina Smolijaninovaitė is the deputy director of the *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum* in Berlin. She initiated the Forum's working group on Historical Memory and Education in 2013. She was one of the curators of the exhibition *Different Wars: National School Textbooks on World War II* and co-authored the accompanying catalogue. Within the *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum*, she builds the programme *Different Wars: Remembering the Past* which deals with conflicting history of the 20th century in the EU and Russia.

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EASTERN CAFÉ

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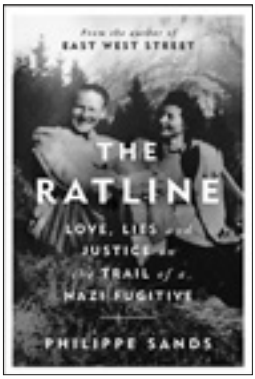
Husband, father, war criminal

Chasing the memory of a Nazi fugitive across Europe

MARIA SUCHCITZ

The Ratline: Love, Lies and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive. By: Philippe Sands. Publisher: Orion books, London, United Kingdom, 2020.

In 1945 the Polish government indicted SS Brigadeführer Otto von Wächter for mass murder. He was never brought to trial, instead he escaped justice, living in hiding, first in the Austrian Alps and then in Rome. His plan was simple – escape to South America via the Ratline (a post-war system of escape routes for Nazis and other fascists from Europe, primarily to South America). However, in 1949 he was suddenly taken ill and died a week later. Was this a result of foul play? And how exactly did the former SS Governor of the district of Kraków, and later of Galicia, manage to escape being brought before the Nuremburg Trials?



In his latest book, renowned international human rights lawyer, Phillipe Sands, delves into the biography of Otto von Wächter. The result is a tale of love, deception and mystery, found among the personal and affectionate letters and memories of the wife of a man who for most is a symbol of an evil, totalitarian regime.

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Committed Nazi

Born in Austria in 1901, Otto von Wächter quickly became a committed Nazi Party member, joining the SA storm troopers in 1923 and then becoming a fully registered member in 1930. As a lawyer, many of his clients included members of the Nazi Party and this led him to play a key role in the failed July Putsch of 1934 in Austria, and his first acquaintance of avoiding justice as he fled to Nazi Germany. At the beginning of 1932 he entered the SS, having proved himself to the highest ranks of the Nazi Party.

Otto von Wächter quickly became a committed Nazi Party member, joining the SA storm troopers in 1923 and then becoming a fully registered member in 1930.

The German occupation of Poland following the 1939 September campaign saw the creation of the General Government state which was governed by high ranking SS officer, Hans Frank. Von Wächter was appointed first as deputy and later the Governor of the District of Kraków. Under his governing, an execution warrant for 52 people from the town of Bochnia (east of Kraków) was signed, as well as a decree calling for the expulsion of the city's Jewish community and the organisation of the Kraków Ghetto.

Seeing von Wächter's potential and his effective methods of administration, Adolf Hitler selected him to be the General Governor of Galicia (an area which now largely lies within Ukraine), in January 1943, following Nazi Germany's invasion of areas which had previously been occupied by the Soviets. Directly answerable to Heinrich Himmler, von Wächter proposed the establishment of an SS Waffen group made up of local Ukrainians willing to collaborate with the Nazis. The SS Division Galicia was inaugurated on March 1943 and used to fight the Bolsheviks and locals of the occupied area who the Nazis greatly despised. All the while von Wächter was keeping correspondence with his wife, Charlotte, whom he married in 1932. At the close of the war they had six children, the youngest being Horst Wächter, who plays a prominent role in Sands' discovery of all the sides of Horst's Nazi father.

Criminal on the run

Otto von Wächter's story goes beyond the close of the Second World War and Sands leaves no stone unturned (or in this case, document). Here it is worth

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mentioning that Sands embarked on this project in part on the request of Horst, who wanted to show that his father was, in fact, a "good Nazi" and his sudden death in Rome in 1949, while aiming to escape to South America, was a targeted killing.

Von Wächter's years as a fugitive see that he spent three years in the Austrian Alps, all the while keeping contact with his wife and on occasions meeting in secret. The full documentation of these meetings and exchanges can be found in Charlotte's letters and diaries which make up a large body of the sources from which Sands writes his book. They reveal an intimate and personal side to an individual whose war time record reveals him to be a war criminal. Furthermore, the documents allow Sands to not only focus on the character of von Wächter, but on the person who arguably knew him best and despite her frustration at his womanising and lack of time for the family, supported and loved him dearly. The space given to Charlotte as an individual is also refreshing, as it provides an interesting female perspective on the rise and fall of the Nazi party. There is no doubt as to Charlotte's devotion and love for her husband, but Sands also presents her as a strong, independent and stubborn character, with her own experiences of the war.

In 1948, the letter exchanges move to between Austria, where Charlotte is with the children, and Italy – more specifically Rome. Here, Sands touches upon another infrequently remembered element of post-war Nazi history: the involvement of parts of the Vatican in aiding the escape of Nazis and fascists. The opening of the Vatican archives to documents from the Holocaust era, as well as from the papacy of Pope Pius XII in March 2020, may create a whole new avenue of academic publications on this topic. Sands succeeds in painting an astonishing picture of the life that von Wächter was living in the protection of Vatican bishop Alois Hudal, a fascist sympathiser. Despite having to live under an alias and be careful of his movements, his days are filled with swimming in lakes, meeting various individuals (some fellow Nazis) and even dabbling at being a film extra.

The space Sands gives to Charlotte as an individual is refreshing, as it provides an interesting female perspective on the rise and fall of the Nazi party.

Through careful research, *The Ratline*, unpicks the various personalities that von Wächter meets, many who appear under coded names with his letters to Charlotte. Rome becomes the setting of post-war espionage, secret services and double dealings. This gives the book

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the feeling of a detective novel, as the reader is taken on a journey with Sands and Horst to discover who von Wächter was communicating with, especially in the final days before his sudden illness and subsequent death. Even following his death, the investigation continues to discover the cause and possibility of foul play, as well as the explanation of multiple movements of his body.

Personal memory vs. factual evidence

What makes *The Ratline* a gripping read is the way in which the author cleverly interlinks the present and the past. Biographical chapters stand alongside genealogy chapters, as well as Sands' own memories of his meetings with various international experts from various speciality areas. In the background is the elephant in the room in the form of Horst's approach to his father – a man who to him was morally good but forced to do bad things by a system which exploited his administrative and organisational talents. This is not always easy to read, and indeed Sands relays his own feelings to the difficulty of getting Horst to accept his father's crimes. Despite this, Sands has a lot of respect for Horst, and sees him as an open individual, willing to discuss his father's actions, more so than the rest of his family members.

The topic of memory, and how we choose to remember the past, and those who were a part of it, is never far from Sands' mind when he writes about von Wächter. In his previous book, *East West Street*, Sands touches on this topic even more, following his own family history to the city of Lviv (now in Ukraine, but in the interwar years it was part of Poland and known as Lwów). Here the figures of his grandfather and of Rafael Lemkin, Hersch Lauchterpact, Hans Frank (Governor of General Government), Otto von Wächter, are weaved together in a narrative which brings together the city of Lviv/Lwów/Lemberg, crimes against humanity, genocide, and the Nuremburg trials.

Throughout *East West Street*, Sands refers to the sons of both Hans Frank and Otto von Wächter – with whom he has close contact and who both hold different views of their fathers' wartime record. Frank's son sees his father as an evil individual, Horst, on the other hand, defends his father's actions. With a greater focus on Horst Wächter in *The Ratline*, Sands gives space for the exploration of how one may choose to remembered their loved ones, those who one looks up to, even in the face of the globally recognised cruel deeds they have committed.

In his recollection of the various meetings with historians and those who in some way knew Otto Wächter's story, Sands does not shy away from sharing Horst's interpretation. This exercise serves as a testament to how different people will interpret the same informa-

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tion and facts differently, depending on what narrative they may be seeking to support or alternatively disprove. Horst, for all his defending of his father's actions, does not deny that he was a Nazi and admits that the wider organisation of which his father was a part of was evil – but it is when it comes to the individual, the personal individual, that Horst is adamant to hold onto the positive image of his father.

Sands has a definite gift for writing and weaving together an engrossing narrative – this may reflect his profession as a barrister. But for anyone looking for something other than a traditional historical account, *The Ratline* is not just a biography. It is an investigation, a love story, a questioning of morality and the extent we are prepared to go to prove the innocence of those we refuse to see in a negative light. Packed with primary sources – snippets of diary entries, letters, photographs, and maps carefully selected and ordered to pull in the reader, *The Ratline* falls within a plethora of genres. Sands makes the reader consider individuals' actions within the collective, and how many individual stories can weave together and become more interconnected than one could ever expect. With several plot twists and unexpected revelations, *The Ratline* will inform, horrify but also enthral.

Maria Suchcitz has a Master's degree in Central and Eastern European Studies from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. She currently works in Warsaw, and in her free time writes on topics including Polish history, culture and the politics of memory.

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Save us all from the liberty, Emperor!

GRZEGORZ SZYMBORSKI

The Union of Salvation. A film directed by Andrei Kravchuk, Moscow, Russia, 2019.

When I saw the trailer for Andrei Kravchuk's *The Union of Salvation* (*Союз Спасения*) for the first time, I was not only impressed by the film's visuals, but I was also genuinely surprised that a Russian director decided to bring the most well-known plot against the tsar's power to the big screen. I was truly waiting for the premiere and was curious to see how the liberal tendencies of dissidents would be depicted. *The Union of Salvation*, tells the story of the Decembrist Uprising in 1825 and it appeared to be a glorification of an undisputable power, highlighting the importance of the tsar through Russia's existence. And it is also great cinema. The picture itself is high-budgeted and offers beautiful varied landscapes of the Russian Empire's provinces and magnificent scenes depicting St Petersburg, epic combat sequences, and, most importantly, an atmosphere similar to adaptations of *War and Peace*.

Political intrigue

Yet the music does not match the 19th century scenery, and the main plot itself is quite jagged. The film tries to cover and connect some events that occurred between 1814 and 1825. In the first part, the story moves forward swiftly. The

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timeline, locations and characters constantly change. During the introduction leading to the dramatic climax, Kravchuk overwhelms the viewers with many unconvincing facts. Similar to his *The Admiral* (*Адмиралъ*, 2008), Kravchuk includes descriptions of the locations on the screen which refer to both geographical spots and characters. But there are many different, yet similar looking, protagonists who do not have enough screen time to let audiences become familiar with them naturally through action and dialogue. As a consequence, the film, to a certain degree, looks like a documentary.

Nevertheless, the cast is talented and consists of a number of popular Russian actors, including the unmatched Leonid Bichevin, Maksim Matveyev as well as Anton Shagin. The cast helps make the production more entertaining, especially for those who are interested in exalted, state-oriented, philosophical and historical Russian films. However, when compared to other films of that genre, this one lacks a developed romance plot. The picture mostly focuses on the political intrigue and limits the scope of the love story angle which usually is a central element of expressive Russian cinema.

Like many other Moscow-produced films, *The Union of Salvation* appears to be an instrument of propaganda. This, however, does not mean it is not worth watching. On the contrary, it offers the opportunity to search for hidden messages, which I enjoyed doing while watching the piece. I may be mistaken, but two contemporary motives seem easy to decode: the source of power legitimacy in Russia and the question of Ukraine. The appreciation for *samoderzhaviye*, tsarist autocracy, may be underlined, for instance, with the striking quotation of Emperor Nicholas I, endangered by conspirators: "They will forgive my cruelty, but not my weakness." Before his father's death, and having concerns about the legality of succession to the throne, he hears the elderly Alexander's message for him as the new ruler of all-Russia – it is the tsar's will that constitutes the law.

The clash of ideologies may be understood as the struggle of the two orders, where only one is truly Russian and the other is inspired from abroad. Maybe this also explains the flashbacks to Paris in 1814: young conspirators wish to enact change in the empire, despite the fact Russia has already reached its zenith of greatness while occupying the French capital. One of the plotters openly says: "Napoleon wanted the whole world. I want much more."

The conspirators seem to be presented not only as a reckless bunch of dreamers trying to shake the foundations of the great empire, but also as defiant and overconfident, because they think they know better than the regime that made Russia "the first Empire of the world", according to the opening credits. And this empire, with its normative rather than legal order, appears to be superior to any foreign concept or idea.

Another impressive quote from the film praises Russia's Muscovy's great-

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ness through the Ukrainian question: "History is written in Petersburg and here it dies", says a high-ranked officer suspecting the assassination attempt that was supposed to take place during the imperial army manoeuvres near Kyiv. It is a very powerful message indeed. Approximately one-third of the screen time is spent in Ukraine. It is to some extent justified because of the historical facts.

Easter(n) eggs

The conspiracy organisation known as the Union of Salvation was established in 1816 by approximately 30 young officers. In 1821, due to political differences among the plotters, two separate groups were created: the Northern Society in St Petersburg and the Southern Society in Tulchyn (present day Ukraine). The Decembrist Uprising on the Senate Square in the Russian capital city was organised by the leaders of the Northern Society, Prince Sergei Trubetskoy and Nikita Muravyov. According to historian Ludwik Bazylow, a Polish specialist in Russia, the Ukrainian plot was marginal in the story of the insurrection. Any rebel attempts in the southern parts of the empire were just a desperate reaction to what happened in St Petersburg on December 14th 1825. The actions were not coordinated, leading to the depletion of the rebelled regiment on January 3rd 1826.

> The story constantly shifts from St Petersburg to Ukraine. The latter is described in three different ways: "Kyiv Governorate", "Malorossiya" and "Ukraine".

This short historical introduction is important considering that the story constantly shifts from St Petersburg to Ukraine. The location is described in three different ways: "Kyiv Governorate", "Malorossiya" and "Ukraine". Personally, I got the impression that everything that was happening in the capital affected the situation elsewhere: this is how I interpreted the director's intention. Nevertheless, taking into account that both societies were very different, that must be the reason why Kravchuk decided to combine the topics in one production. The answer potentially lies in the film's title: it is not simply "the Decembrist Uprising". The director used the historical name of one of the earliest conspiracy organisations established in order to reform Russia. Kravchuk chose the group set up before the break away from the original association, perhaps in order to justify the parallel focus on the Ukrainian plot.

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What we call the Decembrist Uprising only occurred in St Petersburg. It is also worth mentioning – since it was not clarified in the film – that some of the conspirators, including one of the main characters, Sergei Muravev-Apostol (played by Leonid Bichevin) was of Ukrainian descent. According to the *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* of 1993, a majority of the Union of Salvation members had close ties with the Land around Kyiv. It's another factor merging/tying up the Ukrainian plot and the general concept of the turning point in the history of the Tsardom.

Just like popular culture is full of so-called Easter eggs, Russian cinema has many hidden references to its specific history, where both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union are equally treated and surprisingly, commemorated. Despite the fact that the film deals with conservatives and liberals, there were winks to Red Russia enthusiasts, as the young poet Kondraty Ryleev (Anton Shagin) tried to persuade uprising leader, Sergei Trubetskoy (Maksim Matveyev), that "there will be no more such an opportunity to reform Russia for the next… 100 years…"

The film first highlights the greatness of the empire that defeated Napoleon. At the end, Russia still remains strong with the memory of its earlier achievements. The narrator concludes with the fate of the conspirators and the further reign of Nicholas I, who never had to punish the rebels. The narrator adds that the reforms, so desired by the Decembrists, were not implemented by Alexander I, but introduced by Alexander II. Surprisingly, the narrator adds that this tsar was later killed by terrorists. Apparently, it is therefore pointless to follow peoples' wishes in Russia. NEE

Grzegorz Szymborski is a graduate at the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland), a graduate from the Faculty of Law and Administration at the University of Warsaw and author of the books: *Wolność niejedno ma imię* (2013) and *Wyprawa Fryderyka Augusta I do Inflant w latach 1700–1701 w świetle wojny domowej na Litwie* (2015).

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Addressing politics and stereotypes through theatre (during a pandemic)

KAMIL JAROŃCZYK AND NATALIYA PARSHCHYK

POSTWEST // guess where. An online cultural festival organised by the Volksbühne theatre. Berlin, Germany, 2020.

The Volksbühne theatre in Berlin has recently gathered 12 theatres from ten, mostly eastern, European countries to perform their plays which they had created specifically for this event. As with many artistic events, the COVID-19 pandemic not only changed the date of the POSTWEST festival but also moved it online.

It was a tough decision, as we learnt from the organisers and participants in a video performance called *Something Digital*, which was prepared by Teatrul Tineretului from the north-eastern Romanian city Piatra Neamț. As the viewers of all performances, we would nonetheless like to express our appreciation to the organisers' efforts that the festival still took place this summer, which is proof of their recognition that art in general and theatre in particular is the first to reflect and react to social processes. Clearly, in one year's time the festival would have been a totally different experience.

The spirit remained

During three days in June, from the 24th to 26th, the artists gathered at the POSTWEST festival which presented to the worldwide audience live online

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performances, videos, audio recordings and discussions. It was thanks to these that "the spirit of the festival remained, despite the hybrid version of performances," as Adam Reichardt, editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe* and one of the official commentators of the event, said in a discussion with the artists and viewers.

The online format was also not that much of a weakness as indeed the artists managed to express as many emotions in their online performances as they would on a traditional stage. In addition, as a virtual event the festival became available to an even larger audience who could watch it free of charge at the time of the actual performance and after. As Alina Aleshchenko, the curator of this cultural event, assured, all performances, which altogether lasted for more than 72 hours, will be available for free in an archive.

Launching the festival was *ZoomTime* [*Smuta*], by the Kyiv DAKH Center of Contemporary Art. From the first performance, POSTWEST showed how spectacular and gripping live online performances can be. Each theatre had its own way of depicting their productions. *Smuta*, for example, was created through more traditional approaches, where the accent was put on dramaturgy aligned with bright heroes' characters. This play depicts such figures from Russian history as Boris Godunov, Ivan the Terrible, False Dmitry, Marina Mniszech and others, as they were implemented into current times. Namely, the actors wore modern clothes and – because of the COVID-19 reality – were performing separately, each from their own homes. "The state never helps our theatre, therefore we do not wait and always try to find solutions, we have to be flexible," said Vlad Troitsky, DAKH's director. Troitsky said he chose the time of *Smuta* as the main theme for his play because it shows some semblance to today's situation, namely a change from what was known before and a reconsideration of previous values.

Theatre and film

Regardless of the year they were established, every theatre that took part in POSTWEST excels with innovative methods and contemporary production. For example, the Volksbühne Berlin theatre, the oldest at the festival, used a mutual platform for their performance. With well-suited background music, post production and switching locations of scenes, *Hammer&Spiegel* (Mirror) adopted mixed features of both theatre and film. The play *Cannon Fodder* by KatlZ from Riga had a playground for actresses with scenography elements and unusual visual looks on the audience's screens. Other performances like *The Return of Karl May* (*Entertaining play for the German people*) by Qendra Mul-

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timedia & National Theatre of Kosovo, *Date an Eastern European* by STEREO AKT, and *A Different Kind of White* by Vaba Lava ironically displayed the relations between West and East Europeans. This subtle and latent combination of theatre and cinematography is only possible in a digital format. The Romanian production *POSTWEST – something digital* has the attributes of a documentary, with a video collage and so-called "Google translator voice" (which gives the information a more global form), and reveals the poignant facts about the ongoing European crisis.

The use of language occupied an important role at this festival as it has a political and cultural connotation.

POSTWEST also had plays without visualisation. They focused exclusively on sound effects that bring complementary sensual perception. *Man from Fish: Voices* by Jaunimo Teatras in Vilnius represented a plexus of Lithuanian and German languages which embody the curious game of women's voices creating a clamour and chaos full of anxiety, loneliness, but meanwhile love and freedom. The quality of recording amazes with its clarity and reality. Overall, the use of language occupied an important role at this festival as it has a political and cultural connotation. Another play, *Looks Like You're Going To Die*, by the New Theatre Institute of Latvia is an audio walk. It consists of various natural sounds, such as the wind or relaxing sea which are accompanied with actors' whispers, steps and interesting reflections. Fantasising, the listeners wander among memories and diverse European cities.

We are here for you. Discussion on The Heroes of Capitalist Labor by Saša Uhlová strikes with its transparency in the way of receiving information. The Czech play is represented as an interview of three people – a theatre director, a political scientist and a writer on whose book the whole discussion is based. The POSTWEST festival also had in the programme a collective of live performances like *Maria Klassenberg. Home choreographies* by TR Warszawa. Together with the creators through the neat instructions and corresponding cyclic monotone tune, the audience could experience their boundaries and get a fresh perspective on their bodies, which have been staying in isolation already for a while.

The idea of *Tanya's Birthday. Berlin*, a production by Ģertrūdes ielas teātris, consists of the unpredictable plot direction since not only did the audience observe the performance but also actively participated in it sharing their thoughts on certain issues related to identity of the region and memories of the fall of

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the Berlin Wall. Each performance of *Tanya's Birthday* was different, depending on the people who took part in it.

Consequently, in spite of all fears and disappointments which theatre makers were expecting, they have nonetheless come out with beneficial collaborations that generally is the main reason for conducting international festivals in the first place. POSTWEST definitely did its best given the current situation and created opportunities for future transborder projects. "I would really love to visit the other theatres and see what they are doing," concludes Florian Hein, a director of *Hammer&Spiegel (Mirror)*.

East in focus

Why is POSTWEST primarily about the East? We see this through their choice of groups, 10 eastern theatrical teams and only one German. The inclusion of a German group may seem strange at first but arguably, since the incorporation of East Germany, it's a mixture of East and West. There really was no theme that was imposed on the creators and the performances varied widely in presentation and topic. But one could see a certain pattern that was visible throughout many of the plays exposing the nature of Eastern Europe. For example there was the topic of privatisation and its consequences in Romania and how even during the pandemic Bucharest was enveloped by unbearable fumes and no one was certain where it came from. It turned out it was the smell of burning trash near the capital that people were smelling. They touched upon the issue of illegal exports of trash to Romania to be burned there since the environmental regulations are less strict. All the facts and the presentation of it implied that the East, because of its poverty and less developed system, is forced to suffocate on the fumes coming from western trash. The West has the illusion that it is clean while in reality their actions lead to the poisoning of the East.

A play titled *Date an Eastern European* produced by the Hungarian STEREO AKT theatre puts the viewer in the seat of one half of a date. There is a Hungarian narrator who tells us our thoughts but also about the date. One question the narrator asks is if the woman in front of you has ever killed an animal, or what would she be capable of doing for money. In another blind date we have an older German woman telling us about how musical the East is and how clean Eastern Europeans keep their home. This applies to the positive stereotype but shows how the romanticisation of the East by the West still is prevalent throughout society. And when we are on a blind date with a man with dense black hair, our date asks if he looks Hungarian. This question sparks the inner monologue in our head about how Hungary was once a melting pot of

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cultures but after the First World War and the Treaty of Trianon Hungary was carved up and reduced to the status of a small country. It turned out the man was of Jewish ancestry and told us how part of his family died in Auschwitz. He then asked what our grandparents did during the war, which can be an uncomfortable question for Hungarians.

The most blatantly political play was the interactive one done by the Riga-based Ģertrūdes ielas teātris in which the topic of Baltic independence, a common Europe and migration is discussed by the actors. The play also involves the active participation of the audience, which is also unsure as to what opinion is real and where the act stops and personal political statements begin. One of the most flagrant confrontations in the act was between a "Wessy" (a western German) and a (supposed) Latvian nationalist. The German asked about the problems of racism and the excesses of capitalism in the East after the end of the Soviet Union and the Latvian nationalist exploded with indignation for these accusations that the East is racist and then went on a tirade about the migrants coming into Europe, a typical hypocritical position that one can find in Eastern Europe. But there were also Latvians who lived in Germany and were much more progressive that argued against the nationalist showing the schism between the more nationalistic elements in Eastern Europe and the more "Europeanised" Eastern Europeans.

Shared feeling of inferiority

Even the abstract play *A different kind of White* brings into question white privilege of Eastern Europeans, but also a sort of identity crisis. The East is by vast majority white – but they also "returned to the West". However in this return they can only try to imitate the West, which can be interpreted as a sort of "bastardisation of Europe". The play is performed with this imitation of western whiteness in Eastern Europe even touching on the hard bass playing, tracksuit wearing stereotype in one part of the act. The message was abstract but through its shocking and exaggerated imagery of aspects of post-communist "Eastern European culture" you can see the predicament that the East finds itself in, as never creating anything new, but just being a cheaper knock off of the West.

Something which was not a play but an interview with an undercover Czech reporter revealed the extent of the problem with the capitalist mode of production in the East. Eastern Europeans are heavily exploited by these companies for very little pay but due to the abhorrence with the word socialism rather endure this exploitation than unionise or fight for workers' rights, even such basic ones as the eight hour work day which is routinely violated in Eastern Europe. The

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interview ends with a very provocative discussion on how the EU single market is built to perpetuate this exploitation, liberalising the markets but not unifying workers' rights and protections which leaves Eastern European labourers at a huge disadvantage.

It is quite impressive that even without any truly central theme all these groups seemed to have performances that resonate with one another in their political and cultural dimensions. Artists through their sensitivity to culture are able to hint and see problems that others might not be so aware of and through their work make them evident to the layman's eyes. Throughout the plays one can see that there is a shared feeling of inferiority when compared to the West, as most clearly can be seen with the West always being the standard to which one compares him or herself. And there is also a kind of orientalist attitude felt from Western Europeans towards the East which is most prominently put on display in *How to date an Eastern European* with the German woman telling us about how she loves easterners for being clean. As we see in *Something digital* there is also political scepticism of the West in the East as even though "European values" and "unity" sound nice, when there is crisis, borders are closed, leaving migrants stranded like "human garbage", while Western Europeans continue to export their rubbish so that Romanians can burn it for them and suffocate on the pollution.

That is the main take away from most of these performances, a wish to be western but also highly sceptical of the West, with very good reason. The EU's "East" is not really eastern anymore but in fact has not fully become western, either. It truly is post-West. And the ambiguity of the term matches the equivocality felt in the East about every aspect of their lives.

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