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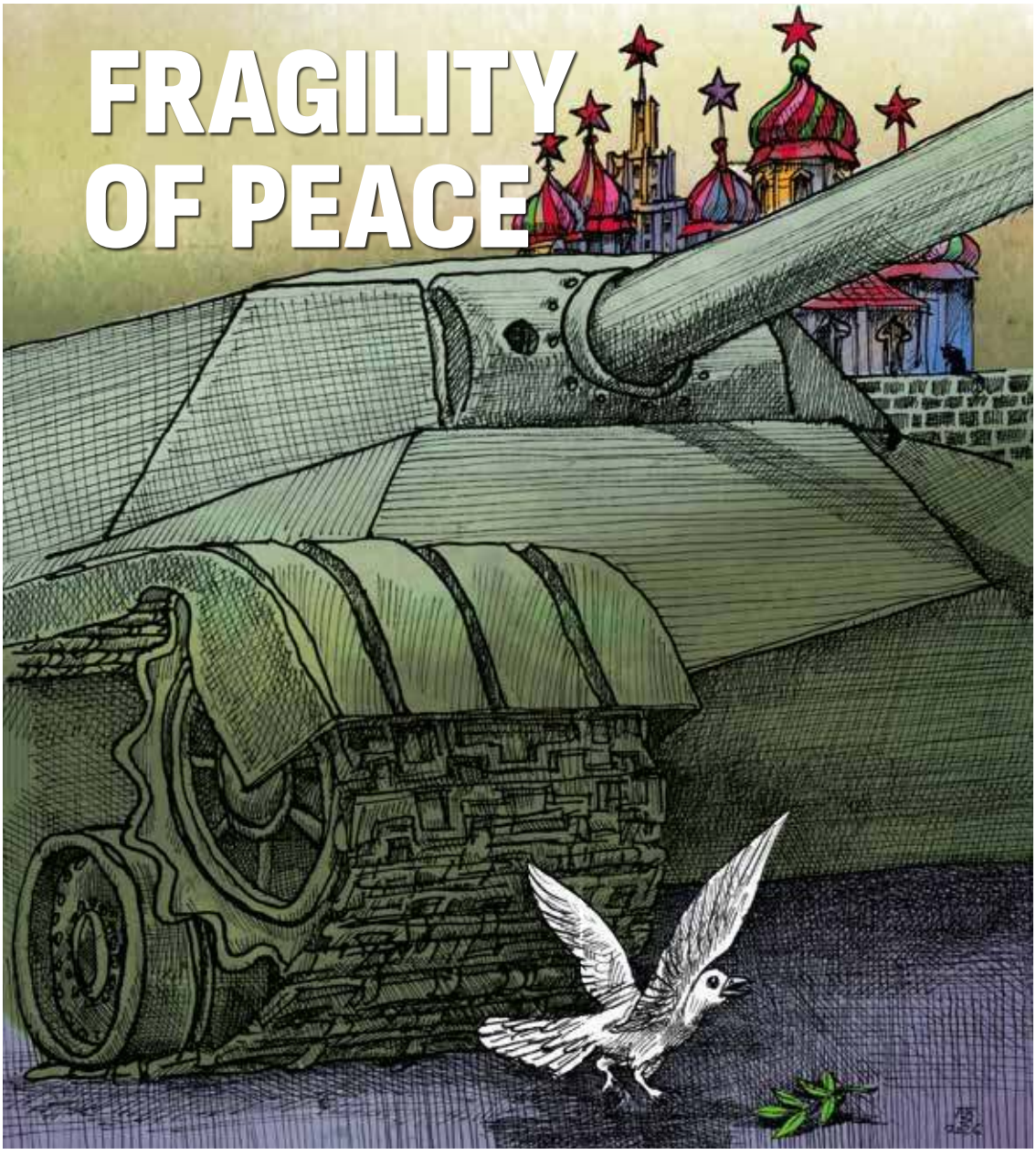

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Dear Reader,

As we are well into the fifth year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, old questions are beginning to stir from beneath the surface, particularly: how should the West engage with Russia, if at all? Yet beneath the daily headlines lies a deeper question, one that the West has faced before and may soon face again: what should its relationship with Russia look like when the guns eventually fall silent? This issue of *New Eastern Europe* explores that question. Not because peace is at hand, but because history suggests that the moment after a war can be consequential.

The temptation grows to treat peace as a destination rather than a process. After years of destruction, societies long for normality and governments seek predictability. Yet the path back to business as usual can sometimes become a road back to old illusions. Thus, in whatever form peace comes, Europe cannot be naïve in ignoring Russia's past behaviour and recognize how fragile any peace may prove to be, as depicted on the cover.

In this issue, our contributors examine this dilemma from different angles. **Alexandra Polivanova** argues that a durable peace cannot be built merely on signatures and ceasefires; it requires profound changes within Russia itself. **Callum Fraser** turns the lens towards Europe, suggesting that the central challenge is not designing the perfect Russia policy, but cultivating the civic resilience needed to sustain it. **Nina Rozhanovskaya** warns against allowing pragmatism to eclipse principle. **James C. Pearce**, meanwhile, questions expectations of imminent change from within Russia, urging readers to confront realities rather than hopes. A series of expert inputs further reflects on the dilemma Europe faces and offers guidance should a ceasefire ever be agreed.

Beyond our main theme, this issue examines another transition unfolding closer to home. With the end of the Viktor Orbán era in Hungary, many are looking towards Budapest with renewed optimism. Yet democratic renewal, like democratic decline, is rarely instantaneous. As the new prime minister and his Tisza party consolidate significant authority, hope must be accompanied by vigilance.

As always, thank you for reading and supporting *New Eastern Europe*. We also invite you to subscribe to our weekly newsletter, *Brief Eastern Europe*, and to follow our podcast, *Talk Eastern Europe*, now available on YouTube.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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For a sustainable peace, Russia must fundamentally change

An interview with Alexandra Polivanova, a human rights activist with Memorial. Interviewer: Clara Sandgren

CLARA SANDGREN: In April 2026, your organization, Memorial, was labelled an extremist organization. How has this impacted your work?

ALEXANDRA POLIVANOVA: The events surrounding Memorial that took place in April 2026 should be understood in the broader context of the escalating persecution of Memorial and the wider crackdown on civil society in Russia over the past two decades. The systematic campaign against independent civil society organizations intensified after Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. However, at that stage, while organizations were increasingly restricted in their activities, they were still allowed to exist. It was only after the Bolotnaya protests when the regime introduced the "foreign agents" law, which came into force in November 2012 that the repressions intensified. In many ways, the law appeared to have been written with Memorial specifically in mind. Between 2013 and 2015, several regional branches of Memorial were added to the "foreign agents" registry. In 2016, the International Memorial network was also designated as a "foreign agent". By 2020, nearly all the Memorial organizations operating in Russia had been blacklisted.

Starting in 2019, Memorial was subjected to a wave of court-imposed fines for allegedly violating the "foreign agents" law. This was primarily because our publications did not carry the mandatory disclaimer identifying us as a "foreign agent". Between 2019 and 2020, the fines totalled around 70,000 euros. For NGOs, this was an enormous sum, especially as most funding is tied to specific projects and cannot be used freely. As a result, we launched a crowdfunding campaign and managed to raise enough money to pay the fines. However, by December 2021,

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it became clear that even this would not save the organization. The Russian justice ministry filed lawsuits seeking the liquidation of Memorial's two largest legal entities. By 2022, both had been dissolved under Russian law. At the time, we still did not know what would happen on February 24th 2022, and therefore did not yet fully understand the reasons behind the intensifying repression against Memorial.

In 2021 and 2022, the Putin regime clearly feared that NGOs and civil society groups could mobilize opposition to the war against Ukraine. By that point, however, Russian civil society had already been so heavily stifled, marginalized and discriminated against that it was no longer capable of mounting meaningful resistance. At the same time, the regime's fear of anti-war opposition was evident in the speed with which wartime censorship laws were introduced. It was within a week of the full-scale invasion.

Despite the dissolution of Memorial's two largest legal entities in Russia at the start of 2022, Memorial's work inside the country continued even after the start of the full-scale invasion on February 24th 2022…

Yes, there were still separate legal entities operating in different cities, alongside independent groups of researchers, activists and human rights defenders who chose to remain in Russia. They stayed in their communities, continued their work and served as beacons for Memorial's values even during the darkest period of the Putin regime. There is another important context surrounding Memorial that must also be taken into account: the coexistence of different and often competing memories of Soviet terror in Russia. For many years, the state has promoted patriotic narratives that leave little room for critical reflection on the internal terror carried out by the Soviet state against its own citizens, or on the international crimes committed by the USSR – and even earlier by the Russian Empire. Naturally, the memory of the Gulag did not fit comfortably within this framework. At the same time, engagement with liberal audiences that shared Memorial's values prevented the memory of Soviet repressions from being entirely erased from the public sphere. The authorities could hardly leave this field entirely to Memorial. As a grassroots network of associations spread across the country and operating beyond state control, Memorial represented something inherently threatening to the regime.

For this reason, the state actively supported institutions such as the State Gulag Museum, whose role was, in part, to divert liberal audiences away from Memorial's work. The museum avoided topics such as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17th 1939, the occupation of the Baltic states, the Winter War, the Katyń massacre, the post-war deportations, or the persecution of Ukrainian "nationalists" whose main "crime" was opposition to Soviet rule. These topics were absent from the museum's narrative, unlike in Memorial's work.

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This more sanitized and carefully managed version of historical memory gained considerable acceptance within liberal circles. Beyond the Gulag Museum, regional history museums and commemorative initiatives were gradually brought under state control. For more than 30 years, the Russian state sought to construct parallel institutions and narratives that would divert public attention away from Memorial's work. By 2026, however, the authorities no longer considered this necessary. On the one hand, the regime believed it had largely succeeded in dismantling independent civil society. On the other, it remained deeply fearful of any autonomous civic activity and therefore abandoned even its limited effort to engage the liberal audiences that had traditionally supported Memorial.

Photo courtesy of Alexandra Polivanov

Can you explain what specifically happened in 2026?

In February 2026, two of Memorial's exile organizations were designated as "undesirable", effectively severing the remaining connections between activists inside Russia and those working in Europe. Then, in April, Memorial was declared an "extremist movement whose activities are prohibited in Russia". This was a devastating blow to our work. For four years, Memorial had managed – remarkably – to bridge the divide between the part of civil society that remained inside Russia and the exiled community working in Europe. Memorial operated on both sides of this new "Iron Curtain", with these interconnected networks supporting one another through shared expertise, resources and solidarity. Now that connection has been completely severed. Memorial can no longer operate in Russia in any form. The Putin regime has systematically targeted every chain of solidarity, whether real or merely perceived. What we are witnessing now is the deliberate destruction of ties between people associated with Memorial inside Russia and those living in free countries. This means that we now have even more reason to continue fighting for the day when Memorial can once again become whole.

What would you say is the most urgent task facing Memorial today?

As a part of Russian civil society, Memorial now faces the enormous challenge

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of shaping a new political culture – one capable of redefining Russia's relationship to war and answering the fundamental question of what Russia is. How can this country overcome the imperial and aggressive impulses within itself and become a democratic state – or perhaps several states – that are safe for both their citizens and their neighbours? We are confronted with the immense task of reckoning with an aggressive war, a reality from which Russian society will never be able to escape. We must find a language with which to speak about the war and, ultimately, about ourselves. What is Russian civil society? Who are "Russians" today? We must find a way to confront the fact that a vast number of our fellow citizens are participating in the daily killing of Ukrainian civilians.

To claim that "we" are not "them" is, in many ways, an attempt to evade responsibility. Unfortunately, we are them. There is no separate "us". That is why I see Memorial's task as taking an active role in helping society identify its blind spots, confront issues it has long ignored, and expose the forms of violence that remain invisible or normalized.

Memorial's perspective and expertise in the history of Soviet repression allow us to better understand the mechanisms behind today's war. At the same time, the dynamics of the current war – which we witness every day – can also help illuminate many aspects of the past. The full-scale war in Ukraine forces Russian society to confront questions far deeper than the war itself: How did this war become possible in the first place? Did the Soviet empire actually collapse, or did it simply morph into a new Russian empire? To what extent does internal violence follow external violence? To what extent are imperial notions ingrained not only in the Russian state but also in Russian society? Does the "Russian Federation" even exist, or is our federation merely an illusion? What is the Russian language? Is it always and unconditionally a language of violence, or can we still overcome violence and make it a language of respect for others? And what can we as a society do to fundamentally change and guarantee to our neighbours and citizens of Russia that the past will not be repeated, and that there will be a new social consensus in the country and security in the region? Identifying these questions, making society face them, and discovering a new language to articulate the answers is likely the main challenge facing Russian society.

Looking at the situation of human rights defenders in Russia, we can see that almost all legal pathways are now blocked. Given that, where would you say the work of civil rights defenders in Russia even begins today?

The main task of human rights defenders is to seek justice – not an abstract justice, but in specific cases, for each individual person and family. Documenting every single crime, all the details, and all those responsible serves the purpose of eventually achieving that justice. It will need to be sought at various levels: in

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Ukrainian jurisdiction, in international jurisdiction, and, I hope, in Russian jurisdiction. This is what Russian society needs the most. Every Russian citizen who has participated in war crimes must be held accountable in proportion to their responsibility. I think the most meaningful action people can take right now is to help Ukraine win. In this regard, the support from the EU and other countries is crucial and important, but it will be very difficult to defeat Putin's regime without support from Russian civil society. Human rights defenders are not politicians, but they can be agents of future change. By organizing and structuring the documentation of human rights violations, they can make sure society remembers them and how a just world ought to function. Even after Ukraine's victory, it will remain a neighbouring country to Russia. For a sustainable peace, Russia must fundamentally change. While external measures will have some effect, there is internal work within society that no one will do for us. This is where civil society organizations play a huge role, and this work must be done not later, but now, including at the legal level.

The war against Ukraine is now in its fifth year. As Russia's aggression continues, do you think achieving a just peace is possible?

As an activist with a human rights perspective, it is natural for me to defend ideals and, to some extent, utopian values. Full respect for human rights is a utopia; no country has achieved it perfectly, though some have made more progress than others. In this sense, I will undoubtedly always defend the idea of a just peace for Ukraine and do everything in my power to strive for it. However, I fully understand that defending the idea of a just peace comes at a very high cost, paid not by me personally but by the Ukrainians who are losing their lives. And I understand that for Ukraine and its allies, the most critical issue is not territory, but saving human lives, whereas for Putin's regime, the value of a human life is zero.

It is important to remember for everyone supporting Ukraine that the temporarily occupied territories are not a matter of geography – they are a matter of people. Not everyone can leave, and the people in those territories are currently hostages of Putin. Since 2014, Russian security forces have been arresting people in Crimea and in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. There are currently thousands of civilian prisoners from the occupied regions of Ukraine being held in Russia. We must remember these people when agreeing to temporary concessions in the name of saving lives. Peace with hostages is not true peace.

In your view, what specific conditions should the international community demand when dealing with Russia?

I believe it is crucial to closely monitor all of Russia's crimes. Every crime must be thoroughly examined and investigated at both the legal and political level – it must not be allowed to slip from our view. We cannot simply turn a

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blind eye to crimes as if it is something insignificant. We must strive for a complete regime change and refuse to make concessions or compromises. If compromises are made to save lives, they must always be recognized explicitly as temporary measures. Under no circumstances should we normalize concessions or accept crimes as the status quo.

It is often said that Russia cannot become a democracy as long as it keeps its self-image as an empire. What does Russia need to undergo to free itself from the authoritarian, even totalitarian, system it is being wrapped into now?

This is the most difficult question, and I think there are many answers here. But I believe that one of the more important aspects relates to the mythology surrounding the Second World War. The years 1943-45 marked a complex historical juncture that allowed two empires – the United States and the Soviet Union – to rise to immense power. Stalin's USSR became more powerful after the Second World War than it had been before it, and unfortunately, Europe and the US bear a great deal of responsibility for this. They simply handed over most of Central and Eastern Europe to Stalin's sphere of influence. During the Soviet years there were still people alive who remembered how catastrophic the war had been, but under the Russian Federation this memory solidified into a myth of "victory". To ensure that this victory would not have to be shared, the Kremlin systematically labelled all other nations that fought the totalitarian regime as "nationalists", "Nazis", or "collaborators". This applied both to large groups of deported peoples, such as the Kalmyks, Ingush, Chechens, Crimean Tatars, and others, but also to the Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians, who fought for their own sovereignty against the USSR.

Through this erasure, a victory achieved by tremendous inter-ethnic and international effort was appropriated by the Russians in Russia. This mystification allowed Russians to develop, whether consciously or subconsciously, a sense of dominance and an imperial self-image, which in turn helped construct the myth justifying the aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, we need Ukraine not only to win and survive, but we also need Ukraine, its allies, the colonized peoples of Russia, and its neighbouring nations, to liberate the memory of the Second World War from Russian occupation. For it is precisely on the shards of this "victory" that Russian imperial narratives and the justification for the war in Ukraine are built.

After the Second World War, Germany, under strong international pressure, underwent a process of denazification. It included, among other things, public apologies for the crimes committed. Do you see such a process ever taking place in Russia? Is Russia able to undergo "deputinization"?

The ultimate success of this process in Germany is still in doubt. For many years, it seemed that Germany was a

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model example of *Aufarbeitung* (the process of coming to terms with the crimes of the past), driven both by Allied pressure and German civil society, which asked many questions and initiated various practices of denazification. However, the rise of right-wing parties and extreme sentiments in recent years raises questions of how deep that critical reflection actually went. I think that while external pressure is extremely important – and in the Russian case, this would be pressure from Ukraine – internal pressure is even more effective. And this is precisely where the responsibility of civil society organizations and Russian activists lies: to bring these issues to light and articulate them.

So how can Russian civil society be empowered to lead the transition to a more democratic system from within?

That is a great question, and if anyone had the answer, we might already be living in a different reality! Unfortunately, it seems that no one really knows. Look at Alexey Navalny – he sacrificed his life to empower Russian civil society, and even that did not break the system. At least not yet. Since we do not know exactly what will spark success, I think it's important to support every effort and believe that at least one of them will work. Crimes are committed in the dark; we must constantly shine a light on the places where crimes are being committed against those who resist. And we must see even the most fragile attempts of the resistance. NE

Alexandra Polivanova has been a human rights activist with Memorial since 2012; she worked in Moscow until 2023 and has been living in Poland since 2023. Memorial is an international network of organizations dedicated to preserving the memory of and documenting the crimes of the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia.

Clara Sandgren is a social scientist and linguist specialising in Russia and Eastern Europe. She is currently a student at the Central and Eastern European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies International Masters Erasmus Mundus programme (CEERES) and an editorial intern at *New Eastern Europe*.

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Britain, Russia, and Europe's awareness problem

CALLUM FRASER

> Europeans have not concluded that Russia is benign, but that the cost of confronting it is theirs to bear personally through economic pressure while the threat itself remains distant and abstract. This is not a failure of policy design. It is a failure of the domestic political architecture needed to support it.

Europe's Russia policy has strong potential but lacks the domestic political conditions to effectively implement it. Sanctions architecture, defence commitments, and support for Ukrainian sovereignty all reflect a correct strategic reading of Russian behaviour and intent. However, the societal foundation that makes those commitments politically durable when they become economically costly is fragile. The temptation to reset seen across European politics is not evidence of bad policy, but evidence that the domestic infrastructure to sustain it was never properly constructed.

Lacking foundations

The 2025 Alaska summit was a pivotal moment for Europe. It was also a clear example of US-Russia bilateral engagement being normalized over European heads and a signal of US hesitancy to commit to Europe's security. However, the meeting did not create the case for a softer stance on Russia. Instead, it legitimized a pre-existing trend within Europe's domestic politics. This highlights Europe's strategic complacency. People living in London, Paris or Rome have never had to feel the

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threat from Russia directly – it was absorbed by the US. This is no longer the case, but Europe has not managed to mitigate this issue.

The 2025 Alaska summit occurred within a broader political context that has been forming across Europe. Far-right populist parties have surged in support. Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) reached 28 per cent in polls in April 2026. The party's leaders have called for renewed engagement with Moscow.

With Russian offensive operations stalling in Ukraine, the conditions that make a ceasefire appear achievable are strengthening. Yet the structural conditions to make it durable remain absent. Russia's war aims in Ukraine have not shifted throughout negotiations and neither have the conditions that make collective security necessary. The only shift has been European political willingness to implement current policy towards Russia.

If support for resetting relations with Russia is growing, it is not because the threat is misunderstood. Europeans have not concluded that Russia is benign, but that the cost of confronting it is theirs to bear personally through economic pressure while the threat itself remains distant and abstract. This is not a failure of policy design. It is a failure of the domestic political architecture needed to support it. Europe built a correct policy response to Russia. However, it did not build the civic and institutional foundations that would allow populations to sustain that response when it became uncomfortable. The perception gap is where that failure is most visible.

Writing from London, this is not a lesson for Eastern Europe. Citizens of Finland, the Baltic states, or Poland do not need to be told that Russian hybrid warfare is real; they have weathered it for decades. This argument runs the other way. Britain's case is a clear example of this threat perception gap. A country that is one of Ukraine's strongest bilateral supporters lacks the strong domestic foundation to guarantee its defence commitments.

Perception gap

As many as 77 per cent of Europeans perceive Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a threat to Europe and 76 per cent agree with continued support for Ukraine. These are encouraging figures, but they measure awareness, not commitment. When the question over "guns versus butter" arises, whether it is through introducing trade-offs to an increased defence budget, or reductions to education, healthcare and welfare, public opinion shifts. This highlights increased concern over the economic impact. These findings suggest a disparity between abstract threat awareness and threat salience. Threat awareness, the understanding of a threat, is cognitive, whereas

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threat salience, feeling the consequences personally, is experiential. Information cannot close this gap without direct exposure or structured civic participation.

Polling on future security also reflects this issue. Forty-five to seventy-two per cent of Europeans believe that Russia would invade again within ten years of a peace deal. Despite awareness of the fragility of peace and the long-term threat that Russia poses to European security, we will not pay to prevent it. This is the perception gap in its starkest form.

An unwillingness to accept the cost of current defence commitments indicates a communication failure to translate an abstract Russian threat into a concrete threat. Public messaging concerning Russia's hybrid warfare in Europe is being promoted, but it is not filtering through into a public threat salience to give governments the mandate to act without having to water down commitments to survive the next election.

Europe faces a strategic paradox. European security requires spending commitments that generate real fiscal pressure. This pressure has coincided with rising support for parties whose instinct is to soften the local stance on Russia.

Russian behaviour and war aims have not changed. The strategic logic behind sanctions, defence investment, and Ukrainian support remains intact and remains the correct template for future policy. What these figures reveal is that correct policy and sustainable policy are not the same. Policy is only durable with political will behind it, and political will is only as durable as the domestic conditions that sustain it. Europe has spent years building the right policy architecture and neglected building the public foundation it depends on.

Political exhaustion

The erosion of support for Ukraine amongst Europeans is most apparent among two demographics: those who consume news primarily through social media at a greater risk of exposure to Russian disinformation; and those who are economically insecure. The rise of radical far-right parties, with many advocating renewed engagement or a reset in relations with Russia, has been in part fostered by increased public frustration over economic conditions and distrust of centrist establishments. These demographic vulnerabilities do not exist in isolation, as the conditions that produce them are worsening. Increased economic pressure from global instability is looming and European households will absorb a significant portion of the strain.

The external environment compounds this issue. Russia continues to export energy through third parties, limiting the economic pressure of sanctions. Meanwhile,

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Europe faces a strategic paradox. European security requires spending commitments that generate real fiscal pressure. This pressure has coincided with rising support for parties whose instinct is to soften the local stance on Russia.

much of the international community is not aligned behind Europe, which is visible in abstentions at the UN and continued diplomatic engagement with Moscow. Russia's continued access to export markets and diplomatic partners has preserved its strategic endurance. Beyond the battlefield, the target is European political will itself. Without this, Europe's containment of Russia collapses.

The drift towards accommodation reflects political exhaustion more than strategic confusion. Again, most Europeans know that Russia remains a threat. It is a structural response to domestic conditions that make sustained commitment politically costly. Closing the perception gap is the only durable answer to it.

Narva, Estonia's easternmost city, is separated from Russia by only a river. For its citizens, civil defence is not a policy preference, but a lived condition. Residents know which buildings serve as emergency shelters, communications are relayed in Estonian and Russian to avoid translation issues, and the question of how to respond to a national emergency is a topic that families have discussed.

The Russian threat has penetrated the social consciousness most deeply on Europe's Eastern Flank states: Finland, Poland, and the Baltics, where resilience to Russian pressure has proved far greater. This is not accidental, but the result of

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proximity, historical memory, and institutional frameworks that make the threat personal rather than geopolitical.

Meanwhile, ten years after Brexit, Britain sits in an awkward position, functioning within NATO and outside of EU coordination mechanisms, but rhetorically committed to the security architecture they underpin. The United Kingdom views itself as a bridge between the US and Europe but now this is coming under strain on both sides. Washington's strategic attention has been pulled away from Europe and Brussels holds less institutional leverage over British policy.

The United Kingdom views itself as a bridge between the US and Europe, but this is now coming under strain on both sides.

Britain is not an outside observer to a continental problem, as data points to the same perception gap within society. The British Foreign Policy Group's 2025 public opinion survey found 71 per cent of Britons support increased defence spending, yet the British public has little appetite to absorb the domestic impact of budget trade-offs.

This is acutely felt among younger generations, with 83 per cent of 18 to 25-year-olds not considering support to Ukraine a priority for foreign policy. This group often cites concern that Ukraine is overshadowing other global security issues. Britain is deeply interconnected with multiple global crises. News cycles move rapidly between Gaza, China and Washington. For a generation that has grown up with continuous global emergencies, the Russian threat is one crisis among many rather than the defining one. The answer to Britain's political fragility is not going to be found in London, but in its allies to the East. Europe has begun to draw on Eastern Flank experience but the pace of institutional learning has not matched the pace of the threat.

Conditions for successful Russia policy

The UK's Labour government has committed to spending 2.5 per cent GDP on defence by 2027 and 3.5 per cent by 2035. Cuts to overseas development, welfare and public services are being pursued in order to support this increase. The optics for this are challenging. The government is asking a financially strained public to accept domestic sacrifices in order to support a European security architecture. Increased nationalism has weakened the argument for "European solidarity" and this has been reflected in government messaging primarily justifying defence commitments as an obligation within NATO and a signal to Washington.

This is not a uniquely British condition, as governments across Europe are feeling the tension between domestic and foreign commitments. Europe's Russia

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policy does not need to be redesigned. The sanctions regime, defence spending commitments, support for Ukrainian territorial integrity – these remain the correct responses to Russia's strategic objectives. Whether European governments retain the political mandate to implement them to full effect relies on the relationship between governments and their populations. Civil resilience frameworks are the most credible mechanism for doing that, not because they solve the military problem, but because they solve the political one. In low-trust environments, threat messaging alone does not close the perception gap. Knowing a threat exists and feeling exposed to it are very different cognitive states.

Eastern European models stand in contrast to what exists in the UK, where societal resilience against Russian hybrid warfare has been dampened by distance, limiting public appetite for the resilience frameworks. Finland's 72-hour concept recommends Finns prepare to sustain themselves independently for three days during a crisis, with half of Finns meeting government recommendations. In comparison, the UK's "Prepare" campaign has not breached wider public consciousness, existing passively as an online advice portal.

Active participation can help to bridge this gap. Preparing a household kit, joining a reserve, or running a crisis exercise forces a person to visualize disruption as a personal possibility rather than an abstract geopolitical event. Civic preparedness works not primarily as operational readiness but as an update in beliefs.

This will not develop organically. Geographic and historic factors are not exportable, but the institutional framework is certainly in this case. Whole-of-society resilience models at the state level can provide the architecture for salience to develop through direct civic participation, naturally building support for existing European policy towards Russia. Europe's western states should be approaching Nordic, Baltic and Polish partners not merely as models to emulate but as the most experienced practitioners of the problem they are only beginning to confront. We need to consider making preparedness a routine part of how schools, local councils, energy companies and health services operate. It is also worth involving people within the resilience architecture, improving media literacy, and translating the threat into a tangible concept. After all, it cannot be something that happens to others on a map.

The window of opportunity to implement this is closing as domestic and external pressures compound. Economic pressure, far-right electoral gains across Europe, and US bilateral engagement with Russia will all shrink the space for building adequate foundations for a comprehensive resilience framework before it is needed.

Civil resilience frameworks are not a substitute for the policy commitments Europe has already made, but they are the most credible means of building the

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political foundation that everything else depends on. Europe cannot wait for Russian behaviour to make the threat feel concrete; the task is to build the domestic foundations before the pressure overwhelms. The answer is not to soften Europe's Russia policy, but to strengthen the foundations beneath it to implement it as effectively as possible. EE

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.

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The price of normalizing Russia

NINA ROZHANOVSKAYA

A ceasefire will not change the essence of the regime in Moscow. Only time will show if European leaders remain as resolute about not returning to business as usual as they are today. As economic uncertainty deepens globally, pragmatism may increasingly overshadow humanitarian concerns. Yet, if some form of post-war normalization in Europe's relations with Russia is on the cards – and if international companies begin to lobby for it – it would be fair to insist on certain preconditions.

Having read *Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez for my book club last month, I was struck, like probably many Russian readers, by how recognizable his fictional Latin American dictatorship looks to us today. I guess one could say, paraphrasing Leo Tolstoy, that all happy democracies are happy in their own way, but all unhappy autocracies are alike.

I will not go into detail about which paragraphs of the novel read like they have been written about Vladimir Putin's Russia, or how striking it is to see February 23rd on one of the pages – the date that Márquez may have picked at random, but that to us is the day before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. But one important resemblance is that in the book, the ageing dictator and the entire nation are trapped in a never-ending time loop, and so is Russia it seems. And I fear that, while a ceasefire would finally bring some much-needed respite and a chance to recover for Ukraine, it may push Moscow deeper into the authoritarian consolidation cycle, if it is accompanied by a return to "business as usual" between Russia and the West..

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What returns?

Speaking after this year's scaled-back Victory Day parade, Vladimir Putin said he felt that the war with Ukraine was "coming to a close", which many commentators took as a signal that Russia is ready to resume peace talks. Putin also suggested former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder as a possible European mediator, but both the German government and EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas have already dismissed this idea. Schröder, who is considered Putin's friend, used to work for Russian state-owned energy companies and never explicitly condemned Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Had his candidacy as a middleman been accepted, that would have indicated that returning to the pre-2022 status quo was an option. Kallas had forestalled this by stating back in April that "there can be no return to 'business as usual' with Russia, even after Moscow ends this war in Ukraine." Yet, given the state of the global economy, it is difficult not to anticipate the sliding back to at least some semblance of old foreign policy patterns, driven by financial considerations.

Following February 2022, the West did not break its economic ties with Russia as cleanly as some wanted. Yale's Chief Executive Leadership Institute has been

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The new wave of Russian emigration triggered first by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine coincided with the 100th anniversary of the expulsion of the prominent members of the Russian intelligentsia by the Bolsheviks.

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tracking which international companies have stayed in Russia in one form or another. There are dozens of corporations that did not withdraw but only postponed some plans or scaled back on some operations while keeping return options open. They will be able to hit the road running once the surrounding political context changes.

It is not my place to talk about the suffering of the Ukrainian people, speculate about post-war justice, or discuss what deal Ukraine or its European partners should consider acceptable. Thus, I will focus on Russians, and more specifically on the Russians who are against the war. These people will have no say in the matter but will also be impacted by the "deal", if it takes place, in more than one way. After four long years, a resolution of the conflict, however temporary or unfair, is tempting. And in practical terms, Russians now living on both sides of the border would benefit from the possible consequences of post-war normalization, such as being able to use their bank cards when travelling, facing less scrutiny when opening bank accounts overseas, or being able to see their loved ones more often and with fewer visa restrictions in place and direct flights restored.

However, if the business-as-usual logic does win in the process, there may also be pressure on Russian political emigrants to return. After all, we remember that when the civil war in Syria had ended, several EU member states suspended the processing of Syrian asylum applications, even though that decision seemed extremely hasty. As it is, Russian activists already struggle with having their asylum claims accepted, as some immigration officials in the EU refuse to believe that even "small-scale" activism may lead to a long prison sentence in Russia or that mobilization is not actually over.

Not everyone is determined to stay an emigrant though. For instance, there exists a "By the First Flight" project, whose stated mission is to unite members of the Russian emigrant community willing to return home and "build [a] democratic Russia after the collapse of Putin's regime". Setting projects and slogans aside, I personally know some very dedicated human rights defenders who remained in Russia as long as they could, and intend to return to their homeland as soon as it is relatively safe for them to do so, all in order to help people on the ground. The question is how will we know it is safe to return or even just visit?

The new wave of Russian emigration triggered first by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and then by mobilization coincided with the 100th anniversary of the so-called "Philosophy Steamer" and the expulsion of the prominent members of the Russian intelligentsia by the Bolsheviks. Expelled from the country, or driven out by the revolution and the civil war, many of the "white émigrés" later returned to Soviet Russia and were crushed by its repressive apparatus. Thus, if one is to learn a single lesson from that period of Russian history, it could be: if you are far away, do not come back, until you are absolutely sure you are in no

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danger. Unfortunately, in the post-2022 reality, Russian citizens who are detained immediately upon crossing the border learn this lesson the hard way.

In the meantime, according to a policy paper published by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, none of the visa-free countries in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, or the Western Balkans are fully safe for Russian political emigrants. With the danger of extradition in Turkey; tightening residency regulations in Georgia, Kazakhstan and Montenegro; the threat of Russian political interference looming in Armenia; and Serbia trapping citizenship applicants in a legal limbo; it is difficult not to consider the EU as the only truly safe harbour in the wider region.

A disturbing picture

Journalists in exile tend to worry about losing touch with reality on the ground. Yet, this is something that happens to any emigrant. It is difficult to reconcile peaceful Instagram stories posted by friends back in Russia with the news, where something seems to be on fire all the time. In fact, news about Russian domestic political developments increasingly resembles a particularly dark and unhinged version of *The Onion* – the American satirical newspaper famous for publishing absurd, fictional stories that parody politics and current affairs (or *The Onion*'s Russian "cousin" – the satirical news agency *Panorama*). Taken out of context, the headlines seem to escalate in absurdity: blocking the largest Russian-language fanfiction archive, marking children's books and Russian classics with drug harm labels, or opening 66 administrative cases for "Satanist propaganda". The problem is that these and other surreal and grotesque developments, which often look like satire at first glance, turn out to be actual events.

Even if we set aside the direct and indirect consequences of the war itself, such as Ukrainian drone attacks causing fires and airport closures, internet shutdowns meant to prevent those drone attacks, or veterans committing violent crimes far from the frontlines, and leave only what the Russian government is doing on its own, there remains a disturbing picture.

Books are published with blackened out lines and entire pages while teachers and parents report each other to the police for dissent. Colleges pressure their students to enlist in the army, and human interactions seem to have reverted to their Brezhnev-era settings. Hundreds of individuals and organizations are designated "foreign agents" and "undesirables". People are detained, beaten up, tortured, and put behind bars for things that should not even be illegal in the first place.

Memorial, Russia's oldest human rights organization (recently designated an "extremist organization"), currently recognizes 1,643 persons as political prisoners,

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and at least six political prisoners died in custody in the first four months of 2026. Every single one of those stories is heartbreaking in its own way.

In this bleak reality, it can be difficult not to lose hope. On May 12th 2026, the Russian ocean researcher and lifelong dissident Nina Litvinova killed herself at the age of 80. She blamed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and domestic political repression in her suicide note. The same feeling of helplessness in the face of evil prompted the 37-year-old programmer Alexander Okunev to set himself on fire next to a Second World War memorial in Kaliningrad. This happened on February 24th 2025, on the third anniversary of the full-scale invasion. However, local authorities managed to conceal the incident, until the information about it finally came out more than a year later.

Self-immolation is both an ultimate sacrifice and an act of true despair. As a form of political protest, it is very familiar to Europeans.

Self-immolation is both an ultimate sacrifice and an act of true despair. And as a form of political protest, it is very familiar to Europeans. In 1969, the philosophy student Jan Palach set himself on fire in Prague to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and in 1980, 75-year-old Walenty Badylak committed suicide by self-immolation in the Kraków market square protesting the suppression of truth about the Katyń massacre by the communist authorities. Their sacrifice, and the sacrifice of many others, did not immediately change the course of history, but was part of the wave that eventually toppled communism.

We know from history that political change, however swift it looks in the moment, takes years to brew. It has already been 14 years since the Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow. The peaceful protesters of those pre-2022 years have served their time in prison, and one of them, Ildar Dadin, has even died fighting for Ukraine – but the scale of political repression in Russia has only gotten worse, despite their best efforts.

Today, there are many dedicated Russians in exile who volunteer for anti-war causes. They keep independent media and NGOs afloat with their donations, write letters to political prisoners, and hope to contribute to the future rebuilding of Russian civil society. There are also immensely brave people remaining in Russia, who refuse to leave, but who also refuse to compromise. They have not given up, but desperation sometimes drives them to radical actions. If the war ends with no defeat and no reckoning, and matters of justice get postponed, I do hope that at least these people, both activists and those who were accidentally pulled into the repressive machinery, will not be abandoned and forgotten in a rush to sign new trade contracts. They will still need support and a safe place to go in a time of need.

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"Belarusization" of Russia

Thinking about the EU's future dealings with Russia, one can draw some interesting parallels with Belarus. It has been noted that Russia sometimes resorts to repressive mechanisms that the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka has already tried out and found efficient – a phenomenon labelled the "Belarusization" of Russia. But Putin is not the only who can learn from Lukashenka's experience.

The self-proclaimed "last dictator in Europe" has shown us how an ageing autocrat might gradually transform himself from being a complete *persona non grata* back to someone who is accepted at the negotiating table. His regime is still extremely repressive, elections are still a sham, and Belarusians living abroad are still denied voting rights and consular services. But there are prisoner swaps and even leaders of the opposition have been released in exchange for the United States lifting some sanctions.

The war in Iran has increased the global importance of Belarusian potash fertilizer exports, and the second Trump administration has proven ready to offer sanctions relief in exchange for specific concessions from Minsk, demonstrating that where the imposition of sanctions has not worked as a deterrent, their lifting can be used as an incentive. This does not indicate a transformation of the Lukashenka regime, and, as Amnesty International has put it, the much-awaited release of political hostages "must not be mistaken for justice". But the Belarusian example shows that there can be value in limited re-engagement with an authoritarian regime, if it saves lives.

The Belarusian example shows that there can be value in limited re-engagement with an authoritarian regime, if it saves lives.

The Russian leadership and state-owned media turned gaslighting into a form of art. A random current events programme on Russian television would baffle an impartial and informed observer, so detached it would be from reality. Talking heads contradict each other, contradict facts on the ground, and contradict themselves – and that does not seem to make any difference. But this lack of accountability comes in handy, when peace talks are underway. That simply means that Putin can "sell" any outcome of the war as victory to the domestic audience. However, this domestic framing should not shape how other international actors treat the situation.

The ceasing of military aggression will not change the essence of the regime in Moscow, and only time will show if EU leaders remain as resolute about not returning to business as usual, as they are today. With global economic uncertainty driving political decisions, it may be difficult not to let pragmatism overshadow humanitarian concerns, but if some form of post-war normalization in Europe's

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relations with Russia is on the cards and if international companies are going to lobby for it, it would be fair to insist on certain preconditions.

The easing of sanctions and the signing of trade deals could, at least in theory, be used as leverage to elicit concessions from the Kremlin – whether it is negotiating the release of political prisoners or putting an end to the persecution of certain social groups, such as, for instance, LGBTQ+ people or Jehovah's Witnesses. No one knows how long Russia's "autumn of the patriarch" is going to last, and Russians may be stuck in the same authoritarian cycle for a long time still, but hopefully the EU will not rush to press the "reset" button and will avoid getting dragged into the same time loop. EE

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There will not be another Russian revolution

JAMES C. PEARCE

Revolutions upset old institutions and tear societies apart. They do so in the name of the noblest goal: the ultimate happiness of humankind. They are led by dreamers, motivated by compassion and a desire for a better world. They never start out as power hungry monsters, but that is often how they end up. In that sense, we could argue that most revolutions fail.

Revolutions are a lot like geometry. Euclidean geometry tells us that the shortest distance between any two points is a straight line. In this sense, revolutions are the shortest route to political and social change. The Russian mathematician and geometer, Nikolai Lobachevsky, changed our understanding of this relationship. Time and space are far largerthan we initially thought – and history extremely multidimensional. Yes, revolutions quickly force change, but the path there is never perfectly linear. The line zigs and zags. The Russian revolutions of 1917 were both remarkably spontaneous and the product of deep historical forces. Poor working conditions and bread riots in Petrograd sparked the February Revolution, but years of strain from the First World War, autocratic rule, state repression, and an outdated socio-economic class system had already pushed Russian society to its breaking point.

Russia's exiled liberal opposition, whose entire personality is hating Vladimir Putin, feel giddy that Venezuela, Iran and Cuba are a sign of things to come. Putin, they hope, is losing allies, becoming isolated and desperate. The economy, they argue, is crumbling alongside the frontline. They believe society is desperately waiting, licking its lips, for the regime to be over. When that day comes, they reckon

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that the population, tired and weary, will whisk them to power, bringing Russia in from the darkness to create "a beautiful future". Yet an actual uprising in Russia is extremely unlikely. Three things show us why Russia is far from such an eventuality. First, we should explore the five conditions that are often needed for a revolution. The second is a theory devised by Russia's most famous sociologist, Natalia Zubarevich, known as the "Four Russias". This shows us where ordinary Russians actually are. The third has to do with the nature of revolutions themselves.

Five conditions

Karim Sadjadpour recently outlined five conditions that are often necessary for a revolution: a fiscal crisis, divisions among elites, a broad and diverse opposition, a compelling narrative of resistance, and a favourable international environment. Iran today appears to meet nearly all of these conditions. When such factors converge, the usual social and political mechanisms that restore order during crises tend to break down. The Iranian regime now seems to rely primarily on fear to maintain control, though how long that strategy can endure remains uncertain.

A fiscal crisis prompted Iran's mass protests late last year, resulting in thousands being killed. Its elites cannot just escape to the West as the Shah's family and old elites did. Their backgrounds are more provincial and their list of international friends is limited. The collapse of the regime is being openly willed outside of Iran. The alternative, democracy, is promoted by Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, the eldest son of the last Shah of Iran. Yet, revolutions require inspirational leaders and millions of Iranians look at him with a patriotic nostalgia for bygone days.

Belarus, meanwhile, met one of these conditions in 2020: a convincing narrative of resistance. The mass protests were the result of stolen elections. The opposition was not diverse enough, as they merely all came together under an anti-Lukashenka banner. The Belarusian elites and security services remained on side and the international community was extremely reluctant to promote a toppling of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. A civil war with Russian involvement was too risky an outcome. The economy showed no signs of danger, either, meaning enough of the population, potentially, had much to lose.

As for Russia, it indeed has a diverse opposition, but an extremely fragmented one often at odds with itself. Though not without very real problems, the economy is far from the basket case people have hoped for over the past few years. It is still growing, has overcome some serious challenges as a result of the sanctions, and only experiencing problems in the areas one might expect for a war economy. Although internet outages have caused major disruption, there are no signs of splits in the

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security services, business elites or technocrats – most of whom fell in line after the war broke out and whose survival is dependent on the regime. Palace coups in Russian history are rare and mostly unsuccessful and a foreign attempt to depose Putin is not a serious discussion being had among adults in national governments.

The international environment is not wholly unfavourable to the Kremlin. While Russia has become increasingly isolated from the West, it still retains powerful partners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Meanwhile, support for Ukraine appears to be gradually eroding among some allied governments and western populations. It is therefore more likely than not that many western companies will eventually return to Russia after the war. As data from the Kyiv School of Economics Institute's project "Leave Russia" indicate, most firms have suspended or frozen operations rather than exited completely. The Russian market remains too large and lucrative to abandon permanently. I will return to the absence of a convincing alternative narrative at the end. As we shall see below, extending such a narrative beyond Moscow's ring road is an immense challenge.

The Four Russias

Natalia Zubarevich's Four Russias theory explains the socio-economic position of the country's society. "Russia One" includes those in the big cities and white-collar middle-class urbanites. Russia One is around 35 per cent of the population, although just 20 per cent are in those with a population over one million. They have almost exclusively been driving the protest agenda. Here, there is a huge level of economic development, massive spending power, highly educated people and a diverse labour market. All of these cities are different. Yekaterinburg, where I live, is known for its high quality higher education, luxury goods and contemporary culture, whereas Krasnodar has great leisure facilities.

"Russia Two" is the Russia of smaller cities, big towns and semi-urban villages, totalling about 25 per cent of the population. They might be a one company town, or an industrial settlement with a lot of blue-collar workers. They have retained the Soviet ethos and way of life. Consumer spending is lower, but jobs are more stable and life predictable. Those close to the big population centres do well, and those further away have a precarious future, particularly if the populations drop below 250,000. The limited protests here tend to reflect local issues, like factory closures, poor public services and low wages.

Russias "Three" and "Four" are rural Russia – or semi-urban. These villages and small towns are home to 34 per cent of Russia's population. They are the kind of places you see between train stations or sitting in the far flung parts of the country.

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Three and Four are indifferent to and unaffected by what happens in Moscow. Many earn a living by gathering mushrooms, berries and pine cones, and by fishing. This shadow economy teaches people to be independent from the state. The chances of protests here are minimal. They are older and depopulating, ethnically diverse but often loyal to the state and more socially conservative.

A mass scale uprising would need to occur across Russias One and Two. Most of the protests since 2011 have occurred in Moscow. Russia Two is indifferent to the issues that rally the city-dwelling middle classes. For any protest to spread, it would have to revolve around a sharp decline in living standards. The Russian state, however, is always happy to pump money into these small towns, who regularly vote for Putin and United Russia.

One of the reasons westerners greatly misunderstand Russia (including renowned experts), is down to the fact that their entire conceptions are based on 30 per cent of it – the educated and modernized citizens in big cities (that they have never been to) demanding change. That image is more than balanced out by the 34 per cent of Russians living in rural areas and small towns. The smaller cities and medium-sized industrial towns of Russia Two were sometimes capable of

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protest if incited by losing their jobs and wages, but few in Russia One (or the liberal opposition) care about these regional struggles, let alone the plight of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples.

The unhappy event of revolution

Revolutions are the final act of desperation from a population. Revolution is, at best, an unhappy event. People do not rise up in anger and risk their well-being and lives until they have been pushed to their final limits of desperation. In countries like Russia and Iran, one does not protest unless they are willing to shed blood.

Revolutions upset old institutions and tear societies apart. They do so in the name of the noblest goal: the ultimate happiness of humankind. They are led by dreamers, motivated by compassion and a desire for a better world. They never start out as power hungry monsters, but that is often how they end up. In that sense, we could argue that most revolutions fail.

Russia's 1917 revolutions promised to go far further than those seen in France and America. This would be done by creating a society with no "have nots", where the ruled would rule, and where greed and wealth had no place. Of course, it did not quite work out that way. Those who led it ended up forcing their views down the throats of an entire empire. Russia's liberal opposition promotes their "beautiful Russia of the future". They see a nation where corruption is not endemic, but ends. Where people can live with dignity, have opportunity in an open world, and express their views without fearing prison. Laws will not be used to abuse people, but protect them. It is, as I wrote above, the noblest of goals.

Communists and nationalists dominated Russian elections when they were free, not liberals and social democrats.

Yet, it is also a goal with no obvious straight line, no road map for how to navigate that multidimensional space of history, and no inspirational leader. Russia today is not the country the liberal opposition wishes it was or sees it as. The Russian people are not in their final moments of desperation. Instead, those beyond Moscow are preoccupied with other things and do not want to be lectured to by the likes of Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara Murza and Garry Kasparov. Discussions at the Jean-Jacques pub in Moscow never had much to say about the wishes and dreams of the other three Russias. Is it really any wonder why they do not want to listen?

There is a naïve assumption that the advent of free elections would naturally end the current regime. That if given the choice, people would want self-professed democrats in charge. Boris Yeltsin learned this the hard way. Communists and

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nationalists dominated Russian elections when they were free, not liberals and social democrats. Lenin and the Bolsheviks lost elections before cancelling them. Even today, the ruling party is capable of losing elections. Elections mean nothing unless people have a viable alternative they want to vote for.

Just two Russian leaders in modern history have stepped down voluntarily – Mikhail Gorbachev and Dmitry Medvedev. Most died in office. Some became incapacitated due to ill health. Only two were forced out, and one by a revolution. Putin will almost certainly handpick his successor towards the end of his tenure. That person will have to be someone capable of holding the elites, state apparatus and polarized society together. They must be capable of talking to the world. True, regimes are often most vulnerable during moments of succession and transition. Alexis de Tocqueville famously wrote that dictatorships become fragile the moment they start reforming themselves. But history's record on revolutions occurring during a transition is weak.

Those who plough the sea

The Latin American independence fighter Simón Bolívar's final words are supposed to have been "Those who serve the revolution plough the sea." Is ploughing the sea really the noblest goal? Or is it an act of futility? Democracy does not just plan itself. It requires enormous organization, favourable circumstances (beyond our control) and enlightened leadership. It also requires nurturing, like a garden. Democracy can only survive if its ideals live in the hearts and minds of its citizens, who elect people to advance it. The Russian Federation is not there yet, and it arguably never was. Perhaps one day it will be. But we have to deal with countries the way they are, not how outsiders and the politically-motivated wish them to be.

Russia is not China – but neither is it Sweden. Though not always obvious, Russia has come a long way since the Soviet collapse. It has the political, cultural and economic maturity to be a successful country, a market-driven democracy, at peace with itself and the world. It has a growing civil society that is highly educated and desperate for normality. But they are not pining for revolution. That is a dream reserved for those who plough the sea. EE

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It is not the time to talk to Russia

MAREK MENKISZAK

Photo courtesy of Marek Menkiszak / OSW

Calls have been growing across European political and expert circles – including within the European Union – for high-level political engagement with Russia. Much of this momentum stems from the recent talks between senior officials from Russia and the United States, including discussions on a possible settlement of the war in Ukraine. Many Europeans fear that their own security interests could be sidelined in the process. Others argue that Russia has been showing signs of weakness and that Moscow may now be prepared not only to end the war, but also to negotiate a new *modus vivendi* capable of restoring long-term stability to Europe. Such hopes rest on several fundamental misjudgements.

The first is the belief that Russia's aggression against Ukraine is merely a local territorial conflict driven by historical grievances – and that ending the fighting could therefore restore lasting peace in Europe. In reality, Russia's war against Ukraine is far more than a dispute over borders. Moscow seeks not only to subjugate Ukraine, which the Kremlin considers central to its self-defined sphere of influence, but also to wage a broader systemic confrontation with the West. The strategic objective is to dismantle the existing European security order by reasserting Russian dominance over the former territories of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, establishing a de facto buffer zone along NATO's Eastern Flank, and pushing the United States out of Europe. Ultimately, this strategy aims at weakening the EU, destroying NATO, and reopening Europe to Russian penetration.

The second misconception is that the Russian regime is primarily motivated by security concerns, which – if properly addressed through western concessions – could produce long-term stability. In fact, the driving force behind Russia's ruling elite is not insecurity, but revanchism. The Kremlin leadership, composed largely of former Soviet security service officials who have been shaped by deep anti-western resentments, remains convinced that the West orchestrated both the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the USSR itself.

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Their reference point is the height of Soviet power, and their ambition is to restore as much of Russia's former geopolitical influence as possible. The only limits to these ambitions are Russia's material capabilities and the Kremlin's assessment of western weakness and institutional decay. For that reason, even a negotiated freeze of the war in Ukraine would not bring stability. On the contrary, it would likely intensify Russia's hybrid warfare against both Ukraine and Europe, enabling Moscow to destabilize its adversaries while rebuilding its own strength.

The third illusion is that reassuring Russia of Europe's desire for de-escalation and compromise would strengthen Europe's standing in Moscow as an independent geopolitical actor, distinct from the US. The opposite is true. The Kremlin would interpret such overtures as evidence of weakness, fear, and strategic desperation among European elites scrambling to adapt to shifts in Washington's policy under Donald Trump. Far from demonstrating independence, such moves would merely confirm – in Moscow's eyes – Europe's continued dependence on the US.

This comes at a time when Russia itself is displaying mounting signs of internal weakness. Despite staggering casualties – estimated at 1.3 million dead and wounded – and the enormous financial burden of war, with military expenditures consuming roughly half of the federal budget, Russian forces remain unable, even in the fifth year of full-scale war, to occupy the entirety of Ukraine's Donbas region. The Russian economy is stagnating, if not sliding into crisis, while discontent among both elites and society is becoming increasingly visible.

Under these circumstances, the Kremlin's priority is to reduce western pressure. Its strategy is clear: increase the human cost of the war for Ukraine, present the appearance of peace for the benefit of the Trump administration, and entice Washington into a broader normalization of relations and restoration of economic ties. Towards Europe, Moscow is pursuing a dual-track strategy. First, it seeks to intimidate European societies through escalating hybrid attacks, hoping to convince governments that continued support for Ukraine – especially in the field of military affairs – risks direct confrontation with Russia. It stems from the fact, that – in the Kremlin's assessment – European aid to Kyiv remains the principal obstacle to Russian victory.

Second, Moscow seeks to cultivate the illusion that dialogue with Russia, combined with restraint in applying further pressure, offers Europe the only path towards stability and potential economic gains through renewed cooperation. The ultimate goal is transparent: weaken European resolve, collapse the sanctions regime, and leave Ukraine exposed to renewed Russian domination.

In this situation, re-establishing high-level political dialogue with Russia would play directly into the Kremlin's hands. It would strengthen Vladimir Putin's standing within the Russian elite while

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diminishing the credibility of European states and institutions in Moscow's eyes. Worse still, European leaders, eager to pursue "peace initiatives", could easily find themselves manipulated and humiliated by the Kremlin. Europe would not merely be offering Russia political and economic breathing space. It would also encourage further Russian escalation, accelerating the deterioration of Europe's security environment.

A different course is required. Europe must demonstrate agency, strength, and strategic independence by refusing to endorse American initiatives towards Russia and Ukraine that undermine European security interests. Three lines of action are essential in this context. First, Europe should increase support for Ukraine, including strengthening Kyiv's capacity to conduct deep strikes against targets inside Russia, thereby raising the cost of war for Moscow. Second, Europe must intensify sanctions and economic pressure, particularly by targeting Russia's core source of revenue: energy exports. Third, Europe should respond to Russia's hybrid warfare with both symmetrical and asymmetrical measures of its own. A crucial element of this strategy should involve offensive operations in the cognitive sphere, including efforts to penetrate Russia's information space while exploiting the regime's growing internal vulnerabilities.

Such policies, if pursued consistently over the longer term, would weaken Russia's capacity for aggression and erode the foundations of its neo-totalitarian system. The eventual collapse of that system remains a necessary precondition for a durable peace in Europe. The reason is straightforward: Putin and his inner circle have become, in effect, hostages of the conflict with Ukraine and the West. In their view, victory is inseparable from the regime's survival. Consequently, the Russian leadership is unlikely to abandon its aggressive objectives voluntarily. Only a tangible inability to pursue them further may, in the interim period, force the Kremlin to seek a temporary freeze of the conflict on terms considerably more favourable to Ukraine and Europe.

Only then should Europe discuss internally whether to respond to Moscow's calls for negotiations, while setting its own conditions and demands, including the de-occupation of Ukrainian territory. It may do this for the sake of saving the Ukrainian people from suffering and avoiding further economic destruction. At the same time, it must be understood that this would bring only a temporary pause that will not stop Russia's war by other, "hybrid", means and would allow Moscow to prepare for further conflict.

In essence, Europe's – and the wider West's – strategy towards Russia should consist of three stages. First, it must prevent Moscow from advancing further in Ukraine and escalating its "hybrid" warfare against the West. Second, it should seek to weaken Putin's Russia systematically and reduce its capacity to threaten European security. Third, it

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must aim to defeat Moscow in a broader systemic confrontation, thereby paving the way for regime change in Russia. If such a transformation were to produce a weaker and more pragmatic leadership in Moscow, Europe could then begin to consider the foundations of a long-term *modus vivendi* with Russia. The choice is ours. Wrong decisions will carry grave consequences. Delaying the right ones will only raise the price Europe must eventually pay. EE

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Deter, start small and monitor domestic policy

SUSAN STEWART

Photo: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

In order to discuss a European strategy towards Russia, some basic assumptions about the nature of the agreement to end hostilities between Russia and Ukraine must be made. Here we assume that each of the two parties has achieved a partial victory, but that neither has attained its maximum goals. This means that part of Ukraine remains de facto under Russian control. Given this starting point, those in power in Russia will continue to espouse imperialist attitudes and goals and to respect only force. For this reason, and because Europe has long neglected its security needs (or rather outsourced them to the United States), a sustained defence build-up of, and ongoing attention to, European security should occupy the highest priority.

Thus, the containment and deterrence of Russia need to become the main building block in Europe's relationship with Moscow. This applies not only to hard security, including the strength of the armed forces and the stockpiles of available relevant equipment and munitions, but also to so-called hybrid threats, such as cyberattacks, sabotage of physical infrastructure, and disinformation. While awareness of these threats has risen and the repertoire to deal with them is expanding, mechanisms must be developed to respond to them consistently and proportionally, thus conveying the message that they are unacceptable and will be countered in ways that damage Russia.

As a background condition for dealing with Russia, Europe (both on the level of individual states and as a continent) needs to work on preserving its economic strength, as well as its values in the legal sphere. This includes those established by international law and those implied by the application of the rule of law in domestic state contexts. This will not only make Europe attractive to potential partners, but also emphasize its difference from Russia and its capacity to develop a positive narrative for its population.

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Another precondition for a Russia strategy is the clear articulation of European interests with regards to Moscow. These should serve as a basis for action, and any eventual cooperation with Russia ought to stem from these interests and be in line with them. Given the performance of Ukraine in its war against Russian aggression, these interests should include the ever closer integration of Kyiv into European security and defence structures.

When devising and implementing a long-term approach to Russia, the assumptions made should be based on solid analysis about Russian behaviour and interests. Sufficient resources should be made available to keep this analysis ongoing. Voices of analysts from countries neighbouring Russia, as well as those of Russian exiles, need to be taken into account. The past mistake of dismissing pessimistic assessments because they are unpleasant or seen as exaggerated must be corrected. Analysis should cover not only Russian foreign and security policy, but also domestic developments. Above all, it is important to realistically evaluate whether Moscow is interested in stabilizing the situation in Europe, or rather in destabilizing it, as is currently the case. The level of ambition set for the relationship will largely depend on the response to this question. Since Moscow's preferences regarding this and other issues may change over time, continuous analysis is all the more important.

In addition to pursuing containment and deterrence, and to strengthening Europe as an actor, it will be necessary to establish channels of communication with Russia. Moscow is not inclined to take the EU seriously as a foreign and security policy actor, and indeed Brussels has struggled to come up with unified positions in these areas. It would therefore be better to go beyond the EU framework and rely on a mini-lateral grouping, such as the E5 (France, Germany, Poland, Italy and the United Kingdom), to agree on key European interests and on which line to take with Moscow at any given time. The group should also designate one country to take on the role of spokesperson, in order to avoid giving Russia the chance to play one state off another. It is essential for the other capitals to adhere to this agreement and to refer Moscow to the spokesperson when inevitable Russian attempts to offer attractive side deals to individual states occur. Here again, states neighbouring Russia (in addition to Poland) should periodically be consulted as they have the most experience in dealing with Moscow and are likely to be the most affected by Russian actions.

Communication should be used to transmit specific, concrete messages and to receive them from the other side. Regular dialogue formats can be postponed to a time when the relationship has stabilized and broader discussions make sense. To reach this point, small steps should be taken to begin to establish a minimum level of trust between the sides and to explore whether common interests can be found. Small steps

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proposed by the Russian side should be evaluated in terms of previously defined European interests. Those suggestions running counter to or failing to advance any of these interests should be refused, possibly by providing an alternative that would be acceptable to the European side. Russian demands for more radical steps as proof of European goodwill should be interpreted as a lack of serious interest in stabilizing the relationship by taking both parties' concerns into account. The lesson provided by Russia's membership in the Council of Europe should be learned: admitting Moscow into regional or international formats and organizations before it fulfils the necessary criteria allows Russia to hollow out such organizations from the inside and should be avoided.

When devising small steps, it is essential to take into account that the energy realm is fraught with tension and has been a source of serious division on the European side. On the other hand, it is a realm in which Moscow has great interest. It would be best to build up trust by engaging in small cooperative steps in other areas first, in order to avoid European discord. If cooperation on energy is to be contemplated, it should be paired with steps in another area that is more challenging for Russia and important to Europe, such as the treatment of neighbouring states (e.g. Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia). Positive changes by Moscow in this sphere can serve as initial indications that Russia is potentially amenable to altering aspects of its imperialist approach, but this must be carefully monitored.

Major improvements in relations should not be expected. Even after a ceasefire or more long-term agreement the window of opportunity with Russia will be much more limited than in the early 1990s due to the developments of past decades and the current geopolitical environment. There should be a consistent focus on Russia's actions rather than its words. It is not unlikely that proposals for small steps palatable to Europe will be either rejected by Moscow or accepted and then not acted upon. Deadlines for pursuing a certain course of action should therefore be set. If an attempt to take a small joint step fails to yield results within a reasonable timeframe, Europe should abandon it and move on, drawing the conclusion that Russia is not interested in cooperation in this field – or possibly in general, if the pattern manifests itself in multiple areas. Europe should not become a supplicant; the point is to locate areas of mutual interest, not to get Moscow to pretend to cooperate.

In the field of economic cooperation, much will depend on the agreements reached about sanctions in the context of the ceasefire. In the new environment, European companies may decide to initiate, reactivate or intensify ties with Russia. It would be preferable to allow them to take their own risks. The sort of significant political flanking that often took place in the past is not advisable. Furthermore, there is no reason to

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believe that Europe has to engage with Russia economically simply because the US does (assuming that it does). The serious negative consequences of previous involvement ought to be kept in mind, as they could easily repeat themselves. The attempts at diversification and reorientation away from Russia undertaken by European businesses due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine should thus be supported and expanded.

Finally, and crucially, domestic developments in Russia must not be ignored. A genuine willingness by the Russian elite to alter their attitudes and policies will necessarily be reflected in their domestic approaches. It will be important to follow internal messaging, the treatment of the media, possibilities for bottom-up initiatives to emerge and function, and how history is addressed. In particular, the discourse on Ukraine should be monitored. Allowing Memorial to resume its activities without constraints would be a positive step. The preparation of the population for a different relationship with Europe will be necessary for sustainable change to occur.

Here again, quick results are not to be expected, even less so than on the elite level. Decades, even centuries, of repression and paternalism have taken their toll on Russian society. Significant change is thus likely to be a question of generations. Exchange programmes on various levels (students, teachers, professors, administrators, sister city frameworks, etc.) could form part of the small steps mentioned above. Russian permission for these to take place would be a positive indicator.

Overall, it is highly likely that the relationship will remain fraught and confrontational for the foreseeable future. It will be important for Europe to learn to live with this fact and to embed its other foreign and security policy actions in this reality. The general steps proposed above (strengthening security and defence, defining interests, fighting hybrid threats) will help Europe to hold its own against other actors as well. EE

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Europe cannot build a Russia policy on a ceasefire alone

STEFAN INGVARSSON

Photo: Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies

Russia's aggression extends far beyond the war in Ukraine, and Europe must therefore maintain whatever restrictive measures and strategic bottlenecks are necessary to limit Russia's capacity to threaten and destabilize European societies. Europe needs to define and effectively use its leverage vis-à-vis Russia in order to pressure, or persuade, decision makers in Moscow to change their hostile policies and end the country's shadow war.

A credible shift in Europe's Moscow policy would likely require the end of Putin's rule or a fundamental change in the Kremlin's strategic outlook. Attempts at a de-escalation have so far only encouraged further escalation on the Russian side. Europe must therefore preserve its leverage in order to shape the conditions for a future Russian leadership to pursue a more predictable and peaceful relationship with its European neighbours, including countries outside the European Union.

The current US dialogue with Belarus may offer one possible model for how a partial and reversible easing of sanctions could be structured. In that case, limited US sanctions relief has been linked to the release of political prisoners. At the same time, Europe has maintained a principled position regarding the crimes of the regime in Minsk and the conditions required for lifting European sanctions. Although this approach may appear contradictory, it has proven workable as long as the United States continues to coordinate closely with its European allies and the Belarusian democratic movement.

Similarly, the United States may be willing to provide carefully calibrated incentives aimed at moving Moscow towards a ceasefire and meaningful peace negotiations. Europe maintains a principled and united position, together with the bulk of its sanctions and restrictive measures.

Europe should remain committed to the core principles underpinning its

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response to Russia's war of aggression. Russia should not be allowed to reap the benefits of territorial conquest achieved through force. It is expected to cooperate with international investigations into war crimes and to engage in negotiations on accountability, reparations, and restitution for the destruction caused by the war. If this position is maintained, Europe will retain leverage vis-à-vis a future leadership in Moscow and strengthen the prospects for a more sustainable European security order.

A ceasefire alone would not constitute a sufficient foundation for a new European security order. If Russia's maximalist objectives and hostile policies towards Ukraine and Europe remain unchanged, a ceasefire risks becoming merely a temporary pause in the fighting. Such a pause could provide Ukraine with an opportunity to recover, reorganize, and redirect resources towards reconstruction and long-term defence planning. At the same time, however, it would also allow Russia to reallocate military, economic, and political resources towards other arenas.

Moscow could seek to restore parts of its international influence and strategic position in regions such as Africa, the South Caucasus, and elsewhere in Europe, all while intensifying efforts to shape political developments beyond Ukraine. In this sense, a ceasefire could reduce the intensity of the war in Ukraine while simultaneously increasing the broader strategic challenge facing Europe.

The requirement to deter and contain Russia's hostile policies would therefore remain in these circumstances. Europe's security concerns would not disappear with a cessation of hostilities but rather evolve into a different and potentially more complex phase. Any discussion regarding the easing or lifting of sanctions should consequently be assessed against the wider and longer-term security interests of Europe, not solely against developments on the battlefield in Ukraine.

It is also important to note that Europe should respond more effectively to Russia's de-colonial narrative by highlighting the continued imperial and coercive characteristics of Russian policy, both domestically and towards neighbouring states. At the same time, European policymakers must recognize that for countries such as India, Indonesia, and other states across the so-called Global South, engagement with Russia may still be viewed as a pragmatic means of diversifying strategic, economic, or political dependencies, particularly where such engagement is not perceived to generate immediate security risks.

European diplomacy should therefore address not only Russia's war against Ukraine, but also Russia's broader role in undermining international cooperation and obstructing collective responses to global challenges. This includes Russian behaviour in areas such as climate diplomacy, global health governance, human rights, democratic norms, and respect for the sovereignty of smaller states.

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It is also crucial that Europe challenges attempts by Moscow to derive legitimacy from anti-imperial or anti-western narratives rooted in Soviet history. This requires articulating more clearly the nature of the contemporary Russian state and the implications of Russian foreign policy for international stability, sovereignty, and multilateral cooperation.

At the same time, Europe's credibility in defending a rules based international order has been weakened by perceptions of inconsistency in the application of international law and normative standards, including in relation to conflicts involving western partners and allies. If Europe seeks to maintain broader international support for its positions, it must demonstrate greater consistency in the defence of international law, sovereignty, and civilian protection across regions and conflicts.

This underlines the need for renewed efforts to strengthen a more inclusive and internationally legitimate order, grounded not primarily in western leadership, but in widely shared principles. Such an approach should reaffirm the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. This should be done while drawing on the principles of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act linking security, human rights, and political freedoms.

In the longer term, resilient societies, institutional checks and balances, and constraints on executive power remain among the most important safeguards against revisionist and aggressive state behaviour. The European Union should therefore work together with democratic and constructive international partners to strengthen international institutions and develop a renewed framework for security and cooperation capable of addressing both geopolitical competition and the defence of fundamental rights and norms. EE

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Europe's *clavo ardiendo* non-strategy

NICOLÁS DE PEDRO

Photo courtesy of Nicolás de Pedro

The Spanish expression, *agarrarse a un clavo ardiendo* – literally, "to cling to a burning nail," something like "clutching at straws" in English – describes the instinct to seize on the thinnest hope in a desperate situation, no matter how implausible or even absurd that hope may be. And this seems to be a recurring European habit when dealing with Russia.

In the early summer of 2026, that *clavo ardiendo* appears as follows: Russia is not winning the war in any meaningful strategic sense. Its military performance appears to be losing momentum, perhaps even approaching culmination, and it remains far from achieving its declared objectives in Ukraine. Meanwhile, economic strains are mounting at home, signs of social discontent are becoming harder to ignore, and cracks within the Kremlin's elites are increasingly visible. Remarkably timely, a Russian media outlet has leaked what some believe to be an internal plan prepared by the team of Sergei Kiriyenko, deputy head of the presidential administration, outlining how Moscow might present a defeat in Ukraine as a victory to the Russian public. In what some read as an early step in that direction, Vladimir Putin recently said that, given "Russia's advances on the battlefield," the war is "coming to an end".

Those remarks came soon after Putin's meeting with Xi Jinping and alongside reports, later denied by Chinese officials, that Xi had told US President Donald Trump that Putin "might end up regretting having started this war". On top of this, Volodymyr Zelenskyy recently suggested that "there is a window for negotiations," and the picture becomes even more tempting for those inclined to believe diplomacy is just around the corner.

For many in Europe, these signs – combined with Russia's domestic troubles and the limits of its battlefield performance – can "rationally" lead to a new round of negotiations that will put an end to more than four years of war and will lay the foundations for a new European security architecture. Beneath that hope lies the implicit assumption

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that Russia will eventually have to compromise. Perhaps it will, but for now, that expectation looks very much like another *clavo ardiendo* – and clinging to it could leave Europe in an even weaker strategic position than it occupies today.

So far, Russia has shown no serious willingness to negotiate and no meaningful retreat from its maximalist position. Its demands still amount, in practice, to the political submission of Kyiv and its European backers. This may sound obvious to readers from Central Europe and the Nordic-Baltic region, but it is less widely understood in parts of Western and Southern Europe. It is therefore worth recalling a basic point: since the start of its military aggression in 2014, Moscow's ultimate objective has never been limited to Donbas. What Russia has sought is Ukraine's acceptance of its strategic and cultural tutelage. In other words, Moscow disputes Ukraine's right to exist as a fully sovereign state and as a national identity split from an imperial Russian identity. Putin lays out this logic plainly in his July 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians".

Nor does the problem stop at Ukraine. As the two draft treaties, the Kremlin issued as ultimatums to the United States and NATO in December 2021 made unmistakably clear, Russia's appetite and strategic ambitions go further beyond Ukraine. Moscow is contesting both the idea that NATO and the EU organize the continent's strategic space, and the right of European states to choose their alliances and foreign-policy orientation. Put bluntly, Russia is asking for a modern version of the Brezhnev Doctrine of limited sovereignty – for Ukraine and for a large part of Europe.

It is possible, of course, to argue that this maximalism does not rule out negotiations. Perhaps it simply reflects Moscow's desire to begin talks from a position of apparent strength. But even then, it is hard to see why the Kremlin would conclude that the benefits of compromise outweigh the costs of abandoning its wider agenda; or the domestic risks of ending the war without something it can plausibly call victory. Putin has bound both his legacy and his political future to achieving a strategic success against Ukraine and the "collective West". The more likely outcome, therefore, is not a real opening to peace but another round of meetings, and diplomatic theatre in which Russia would try to gain political and strategic ground against Europe (and, indirectly, against Ukraine).

One way Moscow will try to do that is by widening the gap between the US and Europe. This remains the central weakness of a Europe that still cannot deter Russia without the US. As long as that is true, the Russian threat will endure and could intensify. It is worth remembering that the full-scale invasion of February 2022 was, at its core, the product of a deterrence crisis in Europe. Russia wrongly believed that Ukraine would collapse quickly, which

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helps explain both the extraordinary overconfidence of its war plan and the scale of its subsequent military and political misjudgements. But Moscow had also been told, explicitly, by the US and Europe's major powers, that there would be no direct military response: no allied boots on the ground under any circumstances. In effect, nothing deterred a Russia that believed it could take Kyiv in three days.

More than four years later, Russia has not broken Ukraine's will and capacity to fight, and Kyiv has emerged as a more capable military actor with greater strategic autonomy than many expected. Yet Europe's deterrence crisis has not been solved. It has become more acute. Mainly due to the growing uncertainty about US commitment to Europe's defence and Europe's continuing failure to build a credible defence posture of its own. That leaves the continent drifting towards the worst of both worlds: still dependent on Washington, but no longer confident in Washington. Under those conditions, the Kremlin has little reason to enter serious negotiations, except perhaps to pursue a temporary ceasefire that would interrupt Ukraine's remarkably effective deep-strike campaign inside Russia. As long as Europe cannot deter Russia conventionally, talk of gradual reengagement or selective détente with Moscow is not merely premature. It is dangerous, because it raises the risk of Russian coercion – or worse, an attack against an EU or NATO member. Europe's priority should be clear: it must strengthen deterrence across every domain, urgently and consistently.

That means military capability – conventional and nuclear – along with political will, strategic communication, and credible signalling. On every one of those fronts, Europe remains weaker than it should be. The nuclear question is especially consequential, since it sits at the core of deterrence and strategic stability. Yet Europeans have no satisfactory short- or medium-term answer that does not depend on the US. Washington still extends its nuclear umbrella over Europe, at least in formal terms, which is also why it opposes the so-called "friendly proliferation" – the acquisition of nuclear weapons by allies ranging from Poland or Sweden to South Korea or Japan.

Yet that umbrella cannot indefinitely be separated from the broader strains in the transatlantic relationship or from the uncertainty created by an American strategy that appears to simultaneously pair nuclear guarantees with a sharp reduction in conventional military presence in Europe. If US forces are no longer meaningfully present on the continent, then faith in the enduring credibility of the American nuclear guarantee may become just one more *clavo ardiendo* for Europeans to cling to.

Even if some countries – notably Poland, Finland and a few others – are taking their defence responsibilities seriously, Europe as a whole remains far from ready to assume primary

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responsibility for the continent's conventional defence. Nor has it given a robust and effective response to Russian hybrid aggression. At the political level, cohesion remains weak and resolve uncertain. Whatever happens next in Ukraine, Europe will have to confront a menacing Russia from a position of dangerous strategic fragility. EE

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Engagement without illusions

TIZIANO MARINO

Photo courtesy of Tiziano Marino

The strategic approach that the EU should adopt towards Russia depends, first and foremost, on how the conflict in Ukraine comes to an end. In the case of a simple ceasefire, for example, relations should remain cool and Ukraine's operational readiness must be ensured. This is due to the fact that tensions would remain high. In this case, a suspension of hostilities would allow Russia to regroup and launch a new offensive in the near future. At the same time, sanctions and related economic and financial measures should remain in force until a genuine peace agreement is reached. This is because only such an agreement can create the conditions for a broader form of engagement.

As the long Middle Eastern experience teaches us, a credible agreement cannot exclude any of the parties involved and must bring Ukraine, Russia, the United States and the European Union to the negotiating table. Such an agreement should then guarantee Ukraine two essential elements: continued military support from NATO and a clear pathway towards EU membership.

These two elements are crucial and, in their absence, Russia should not receive any assurances regarding Kyiv's non-accession to NATO. The frontline – except for minimal technical adjustments – should be frozen, and a broad demilitarization of the area should follow. In this context, it is possible to envisage a role for the United Nations, whose involvement would help restore its international standing after a period of diminished credibility and influence.

Alternatively, the deployment of European troops, although difficult to envisage at present and not without risks, would represent an historic step towards the EU's strategic autonomy and common defence. At the same time, such a move would strengthen the Union's ability to negotiate with Russia on overall continental security architecture and prevent the opening of additional fronts in the short and medium term. Finally, negotiations should avoid the voluntary cession of territory by Ukraine, as it would amount to rewarding the aggressor. In turn, sanctions against Russia

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could be suspended with an automatic annulment clause in the event of renewed hostilities.

Once hostilities have ended, the EU should focus on adopting a balanced approach that combines containment with calibrated engagement. This primarily implies avoiding any return to business as usual. Instead, it would help establish a targeted and conditional framework for interaction between the EU and Russia. Dialogue should focus on technical aspects and specific dossiers, such as energy and nuclear security, and be tied to strict conditions covering the full spectrum of threats, including those that are hybrid in nature. Diplomatic channels should be reopened gradually with significant political investment, while cooperation in the short and medium term should concentrate exclusively on areas where the EU holds a strategic advantage.

This approach responds to two fundamental dynamics. First, the ongoing conflict and the wider global geopolitical realignment demonstrate that a significant degree of structural rivalry between the EU and Russia is unavoidable. This rules out, at least in the short term, a full reopening and the restoration of genuinely friendly relations. Such structural rivalry can be managed, but it requires a solid degree of containment across all dimensions, namely political, economic, and military. Second, an appropriate level of engagement is necessary to pursue a medium to long-term political solution to the protracted conflict and to reduce tensions along the many "cold fronts" currently open between the EU and Russia.

Thus, the EU should avoid both a posture of total containment and isolation, and a broad, unconditional re-engagement. The first approach would prolong tensions along the entire shared border and beyond, hinder Ukraine's political and economic recovery (as no one invests in high-tension environments), and could create the conditions for renewed escalation. The second, by contrast, would signal weakness, undermine the coherence of the Union's global narrative, and expose the Union to external pressure, all while internally strengthening the propaganda of Europe's far right.

In this context, a European security architecture explicitly built in an anti-Russian key would require a level of US commitment that the current administration does not appear willing to provide. Although the EU has prioritized ambitious defence plans, it will take years before Europe can develop an autonomous military structure – in terms of industry, equipment, and personnel – that is capable of effectively deterring Russia. Moreover, even in the presence of a common European army, the 27 member states do not share the same level of threat perception vis-à-vis Russia, and do not agree on a security system built entirely around the priorities of the eastern frontline states. All this makes the option of excluding cooperation in the design of a European security system appear unworkable.

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Finally, the strategy the EU adopts towards Russia will inevitably influence its relations with the United States and will, in turn, be shaped by the stance of the administration in Washington. The stark contrast between Joe Biden and Donald Trump on Russia illustrates how the US itself holds two different visions of how to deal with Moscow.

Regarding the so-called Global South – often neutral or even sympathetic to Russia on the Ukraine dossier – the EU also faces a challenge of coherence between its narrative and its concrete actions. Therefore, the EU's strategic approach towards Russia must also reflect the image the Union seeks to project in the Global South, and cannot be driven solely by economic or commercial interests. Instead, it must be anchored in the EU's core values and in the need to respond to the blatant violation of international law committed by Russia since 2022. EE

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The other Russia that is not

BEKA IROMASHVILI

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europecreated its Platform for Dialogue with Russian democratic forces in exile to give voice to "the other Russia" – those who reject the war and represent a democratic alternative to Vladimir Putin's regime. Two sessions in, the platform's record raises serious questions about whether that "other Russia" exists in the form European institutions have assumed.

Since its establishment in October 2025, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) Platform for Dialogue with Russian democratic forces in exile has now completed both its winter and spring sessions. The PACE President Petra Bayr delivered the opening address in classical European institutional rhetoric. She declared that Europe has not forgotten Russians who oppose the war and the regime, that it "supports those Russians who oppose the war of aggression, who respect Ukraine's territorial integrity, and – let me underline that – who accept responsibility for the harm inflicted by their state." The last clause, on collective responsibility, is the most revealing. It names precisely the condition the Russian opposition in exile has not genuinely met and the one western institutions continue to treat as self-evidently satisfied.

After those sessions, the gap between the platform's stated ambitions and its actual composition is difficult to ignore, raising serious questions about whether it risks becoming a vehicle for an agenda misaligned with, or at worst directed against, European priorities. To understand how this came about, it is necessary to start with what the platform was originally designed to be.

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Dialogue by design

The platform's institutional origins lie in the shock of February 2022. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Council of Europe faced an immediate question: what to do with the democratic, civil society, and human rights infrastructure it had spent decades cultivating inside Russia, but which was now being systematically dismantled? The answer was engagement at a distance. This rationale was later echoed by PACE's then president, Theodoros Rousopoulos: "We will not turn our backs on Russians who defend democracy, human rights and freedom – and who reject this war. This platform will be a place for this other Russia to speak – clearly, openly and without fear."

The platform's stated purpose is dialogue. It carries no official representational authority and creates no alternative governing structure. This distinction matters: the opposition has consistently treated the platform as something other than what PACE designed it to be. The final composition of the platform, representing what PACE describes as "the other Russia", is divided into two groups totalling 15 figures: opposition politicians and civic figures including Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Kara-Murza, and Garry Kasparov, and a second group of representatives of indigenous peoples and national minorities. This is what PACE treats as the credible, democratic voice of Russia in exile. Following the PACE winter and spring sessions, the participants outlined their priorities for the platform: freeing political prisoners, defending the rights of anti-war Russians abroad, supporting Ukraine, and tightening sanctions against Kremlin officials. Presented this way, the agenda sounds uncontroversial. Examined more closely, it raises a different set of questions.

The platform's members have consistently interpreted their mandate in ways that go beyond what PACE intended – treating a consultative body as a vehicle for political representation. Kara-Murza and Dmitry Gudkov have labelled the platform as "alternative political representation" and an "international recognition" of Russian democratic forces as a legitimate partner for the West. They list "preparing a roadmap for democratic transition" as a key priority, not dialogue with European parliamentarians, but planning to guide or assume the administration of a post-Putin Russia. Kasparov has gone further, calling for the creation of a voter base to formalize the platform's composition, thereby effectively turning the dialogue mechanism into an elected political body.

This framing reflects a significant misreading of what the platform is and what authority its members hold. Among the participants, only Gudkov has ever held elected office. There is no indication that the opposition figures could rally significant support inside Russia. Those who remain inside Russia, working under genuine

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risk, largely view their exiled counterparts as having lost touch with domestic reality. Yet, the question of legitimacy does not exist in isolation; it connects directly to the platform's most substantive policy territory of sanctions.

A fundamental caveat

The platform members are vocal about the need to strengthen sanctions, pointing to the continued presence of western components in Russian weapons systems and the shadow fleet as the primary mechanism for financing the war against Ukraine. Some of their technical analysis can be useful. The Free Russia Foundation has briefed EU Sanctions Envoy David O'Sullivan on specific Kremlin workarounds. Gudkov plans to supply European ministries with economic analysis, while Natalia Arno has promoted the opposition as uniquely equipped to advise on hybrid warfare and transnational repression – having experienced them directly.

This offer of expertise is real. But it comes with a fundamental caveat: these are political figures engaged in a long-term struggle for power and legitimacy, which makes treating them as neutral analytical sources a category error. The question is whether European institutions have the tools to distinguish genuine expertise from self-serving analysis, and the record suggests they do not. A senior figure in the Anti-Corruption Foundation, founded by Alexei Navalny in 2011, conducted undisclosed communication with oligarch Mikhail Fridman seeking sanctions relief, demonstrating that even the most credible actors in this ecosystem are not immune to compromising entanglements. The Russian intelligence services have a well-documented record of infiltrating opposition circles in exile.

A related pattern emerges: virtually every platform member is vocal about what they describe as the discriminatory and counterproductive nature of sanctions on ordinary Russians. Kara-Murza argues that penalizing people for holding a Russian passport relies on the unacceptable concept of "collective guilt". Gudkov has announced his intention to lobby for a "new design of sanctions" that does not affect ordinary citizens. The result is a consistent dual message: tighten sanctions where they hurt the regime, loosen them where they inconvenience Russians, including those abroad.

On the specific question of prisoner exchanges, the position is clearer: Kasparov and Khodorkovsky both firmly oppose easing economic sanctions to secure political prisoners, with Khodorkovsky warning that Putin, unlike Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus, would take twice as many hostages in response. The same self-protective logic that shapes the platform's approach to sanctions is also at

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Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Council of Europe faced an immediate question: what to do with the democratic, civil society, and human rights infrastructure it had spent decades cultivating inside Russia.

work in its members' most prominent domestic policy priority: the rights of Russian emigrants. Nearly every platform participant identified the legal situation of anti-war Russian emigrants as a top priority – visas, residency status, and protection mechanisms. This is a legitimate humanitarian concern, but several members push it further. Kasparov proposed a "Russian Taiwan" concept: a formal political status for Russians who have broken with the regime, while Mark Feygin, a human rights lawyer, proposed that frozen Russian state assets be used not only for Ukraine's reconstruction but also for the Russian diaspora. He also called for the reintroduction of Nansen passports for stateless Russians.

The cumulative effect of these positions is a sustained lobbying effort, conducted from inside a European institution, primarily on behalf of Russian interests. The "Russian Taiwan" concept, redirecting frozen assets toward the diaspora, and fighting "discriminatory" sanctions all serve the same function – constructing the architecture of a government in exile while accumulating institutional weight. These figures need to preserve the idea of the "Good Russian": if the West decides all Russians bear collective responsibility, opposition leaders lose the special status that is their only source of political capital.

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Government in exile?

These dynamics become more apparent when set against the minority and indigenous bloc, whose agenda – such as war tribunals tracing Russian aggression back to Chechnya, decolonization, and documenting the forced mobilization of minority soldiers – sits in direct tension with the dominant bloc. Khodorkovsky has stated that decolonization advocates should have no role in discussions about Russia's future. While Kara-Murza praises the indigenous delegates, and any joint platform decision requires the support of at least three of the five indigenous representatives, his vision for a post-Putin Russia centres on maximum regional autonomy within a preserved Russian state. In doing so, the platform's dominant bloc has turned a dialogue mechanism into a forum for debating Russia's future statehood, asserting, in the process, a role as government in exile that the platform was never designed to confer and has no authority to grant.

> If the West decides all Russians bear collective responsibility, exiled oppositionists lose their special status, which is their only source of political capital.

This dynamic has not gone unnoticed outside the platform. Belarusian delegates to the Council of Europe have described the same pattern firsthand: at a PACE event focused on the harm caused by the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), Russian opposition representatives objected that the discussion was taking place without them. Margarita Vorikhova, a participant in the Council of Europe's Contact Group on Belarus, described the reflex directly: rather than engaging with how Russian imperial culture affects neighbouring states, the Russian delegates insisted on positioning themselves as primary regional experts, speaking for Belarusians and Ukrainians.

Western media reinforces this habit, routinely inviting Russian oppositionists to analyse Belarus or Ukraine while regional voices go unheard. When the question of cultural imperialism arises – why Pushkin monuments are being removed, why the Russian language is increasingly experienced as a language of aggression – the opposition responds with puzzlement, framing the problem exclusively as Putin's propaganda rather than confronting the broader imperial culture within their own ranks. The funding dimension compounds this: Belarusian delegates note that Russian opposition figures frequently use these platforms to channel European attention and resources towards Russian independent media, at the expense of the more immediate struggles of Ukraine and Belarus.

This assumed authority over Russia's future makes the conduct and accountability of these figures a matter of direct relevance. Critical Russian-language media

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have raised consistent questions about funding and spending transparency, and the past affiliations of certain members. Whatever their sourcing, these reports deserve a serious response and some platform members have engaged with them directly, which is precisely the standard expected. Others have not. What they have received instead is silence, or contempt towards the journalists raising them.

Notably, media access to the spring assembly was also restricted. An opposition that dismisses scrutiny rather than engaging with it does not make the case that it represents something genuinely different, and the unresolved questions have not stayed external. They have become a source of open conflict between the platform members themselves.

The scrutiny these figures face is not only external. Recently, Ruslan Kutayev was suspended from the platform, reducing its membership to 14, after describing LGBTQ+ people as "outcasts and perverts" and dismissing honour killings in the North Caucasus as an exclusively family matter. Separately, Lyubov Sobol accused Mark Feygin of systematically bullying women within the platform, alleging that he targets women because he considers them easier to pressure, and that he and others deliberately cultivated a toxic atmosphere to force her and other members out. These are not isolated episodes. Instead, they are the latest in a pattern of controversial statements on ethnic minorities, gender, and internal conduct that has run through the platform since its inception, and which sits in measurable tension with the European values it is nominally convened to represent.

Excluded by design?

The internal conflicts and unanswered questions surrounding individual members do not exist in isolation. They are symptoms of a deeper problem with how the platform was assembled, and more specifically, with whom PACE chose to exclude entirely. The platform was built on a stated commitment to engage with Russians "who oppose the war of aggression" and "respect Ukraine's territorial integrity". That commitment, however, does not extend to one key grouping: the armed Russian volunteer units fighting on Ukraine's side – the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion.

These are Russians fighting against Putin's war at the cost of their lives, not opposing it from European capitals. European bureaucrats were reportedly unwilling to include active military personnel, citing what they considered rigid and radical positions. Several platform members were visibly relieved by the outcome. Kasparov offered the compensatory argument that figures like Mark Feygin and Andrey Volna, who visit the front lines and publicly support armed

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resistance, provide adequate proxy representation for that constituency. Yet, a dialogue platform which excludes the Russians most unambiguously committed to Ukrainian survival, on the grounds of institutional discomfort, while retaining figures who question collective responsibility and lobby against sanctions on ordinary Russians, has made a set of choices whose implications deserve scrutiny. Even the Anti-Corruption Foundation, Navalny's organization, which formally declined to participate, is effectively present through its former lawyer Lyubov Sobol, who sits on the platform and advocates for the same priorities: the rights of Russian emigrants abroad.

The "political prisoner" credential that runs through so much of the platform's public discourse merits scrutiny. Western institutions have long conflated the status of political prisoner with democratic legitimacy, as if imprisonment by a repressive regime automatically confers the moral authority to represent a society and guide its future. This romanticization has deep roots, reaching back to figures like Andrei Sakharov, and it shapes how western audiences receive the platform's members. The problem is not that time spent in Putin's prisons is meaningless, but that it does not constitute a political mandate. After the 1917 revolution, White Russian émigrés spent decades in Paris and Berlin issuing declarations and holding congresses. Western elites received them with respect, but they had no impact on what happened inside the Soviet Union. The movements that have successfully operated from exile share one characteristic the current Russian opposition apparently lacks: a dense, organized network inside the country capable of acting on their direction, and there is no evidence such a network exists.

The window that may never open

At the platform's opening session, the PACE President Petra Bayr offered a vision that encapsulates the platform's central tension: "One day, a different Russia can return to Europe – not by rhetoric, but by transformation ... It will be for the citizens of Russia to lead this transformation. But it is our responsibility to be ready to support it when the window of opportunity opens. And it will open."

What PACE has constructed, however, is not a dialogue with Russian democratic forces but a dialogue between a European institution and a political vacuum. By anchoring its engagement around the idea of a "different Russia" embodied in these figures, PACE sidesteps confronting the actual Russia: a state whose war is supported, or at minimum tolerated, by the majority of its population. Hope is not a political strategy – it is a poor substitute for a realistic assessment of the regime's stability and the opposition's limited domestic leverage.

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The contradiction at the heart of the platform is nevertheless worth examining directly. Bayr called on participants to "accept responsibility for the harm inflicted by their state". Instead, the platform risks becoming a venue from which those same participants lobby against collective guilt and pursue interests that have more to do with their own positioning than with Ukrainian survival. And when the window Bayr hopes will open, the people on the ground in Russia may be reluctant to hand the keys to a group who spent years in European capitals competing over committee seats and institutional positioning.

The limits of this approach are perhaps most directly illustrated by the speech of Oleksandr Merezhko, a Ukrainian MP who questioned the very basis of the platform's legitimacy: "there are no objective criteria" for who qualifies as a representative of Russian democratic forces, and "the best kind of legitimacy when it comes to representation is the struggle with arms against the oppressive Russian imperialist regime." This active struggle is precisely what PACE chose to exclude.

On non-violent methods he was unsparing: "non-violence doesn't work ... non-violence plays into the hands of the aggressor." On the thesis that Putin is somehow distinct from the Russian people, he was equally direct: "Vladimir Putin is indistinguishable from the Russian state and Russian people in general, because all the crimes against Ukraine have been committed and supported by Russians ... to absolve Russian people of all those crimes is against reality, against facts."

Most critically, he named what many platform members visibly resist acknowledging: "sometimes it looks as if the Russian opposition wants to retain the empire while taking the place of Vladimir Putin's regime ... The problem is not only Vladimir Putin – the problem is Russia itself."

These are not comfortable observations for a European parliamentary institution. They are, however, more honest than the alternative, which is what PACE has currently built: a platform that mistakes proximity for representation, advocacy for expertise, and hope for strategy. NE

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Moscow's latest propaganda myth

TOMASZ KAMUSELLA

Without much notice from western commentators, during the past half a decade, the Kremlin's propagandists have begun pushing a new myth about Russia's greatness. They claim that Russian is Europe's most widely spoken native language. On the other hand, Moscow decries the supposedly endangered status of Russian across the continent.

In this age of Russia's full-scale military onslaught on Ukraine and parallel hybrid assaults on the rest of Europe, propaganda is like yet another missile, drone or ballistic rocket. It does not raze Ukrainian cities or perpetrate arson attacks. Instead, misinformation sows confusion and devastates critical thinking, thus, playing into the aggressive Kremlin's hands. Lies, big lies, statistics and propaganda are the Kremlin's *Pravda,* which used to be the mendacious title of the Soviet Union's main daily mouthpiece.

Russia "justifies" its war on Ukraine, claiming that neither the Ukrainian language, nation nor state exist. On the other hand, the Kremlin decries Russophobia allegedly spreading in Ukraine and elsewhere in Europe. This is done as though growing anti-Russian sentiment had nothing to do with a restive Russia and its programme of neo-imperial *Reconquista*. The slogan is "Like our grandfathers in the Second World War, we will win in Ukraine" and then in Europe.

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New myth

The politics of language is at the core of Russia's present-day imperial ideology and propaganda. Any falsehood or half-truth that Kremlin propagandists make the western public opinion accept as a fact is a win for Russia. It is easy and effective because apart from Central Europe, the rest of the West pays little attention to language as an instrument of politics and a weapon of propaganda. Western societies do not know how to defend themselves against mind-deforming campaigns of this type. In their quest for even-handed objectivity, the West already parrots Moscow's beloved refrain about "great Russian culture" that is too big and humanistic to ever be cancelled.

Russian propaganda's new myth, which is patiently spread across cyberspace and through online references, claims that "Russian is the most spoken native language in Europe." Estimates of the continent's such native Russian communities vary widely from 106 million to even 140 million. Other websites on Europe's languages, without specifying the difference between speakers in the continent and worldwide, cite the number of 260 million Russian speakers. At a quick glance, this piece of statistical information looks like the number of Europe's Russophones. However, digging deeper, one can see that more cleared-eyed estimates of competent native and second-language speakers of Russian across the globe amount to a much lower number of 160 million.

The Kremlin's propaganda seems to be inflating the numbers of Russophones in Europe and around the globe by a whole third. Useful idiots running western universities' Russian degrees tune in, proposing more staggering numbers of 300 and even 350 million Russian speakers. This posturing stands in sharp contrast to oft-repeated domestic laments that the number of speakers of Russian is dramatically plummeting in Russia itself, in other former Soviet countries, and across the world. Russian demographers propose that, between 2004 and 2025, the overall number of Russian speakers diminished from 278 to 152 million. The second number is composed of 110 million Russophones in Russia, 30 million in the other post-Soviet countries, five million in Central Europe, three million in Western Europe, and four million on the other continents.

The well-calibrated discrepancy of this propaganda messaging on the current state and future of Russin language and culture allows the Kremlin to speak in a forked language. For the audience abroad, it is the propaganda of success. Russian language and culture are so great that no efforts would ever manage to cancel them. Meanwhile, back at home in Russia itself, the government makes the population believe that they barely survive in the beleaguered fortress of goodness and morality. Barbarian and ruthless Russophobes from the decadent West, who continue to lay siege to "Holy Mother Russia", are hell-bent on eradicating the Russians, their language and Orthodox faith.

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Success

The myth works very well. Russians fear that their identity may vanish soon under western pressure and all that Russophobic scheming from "Gayropa". On the other hand, the Kremlin is good at convincing westerners, especially Europeans, of their impotence. That whatever they do, they will never manage to stand up to the unstoppable expansion of the Russian language and empire. At the same time, Europeans are cowed and demotivated, whilst Moscow mobilizes Russians to fight back, irrespective of the monumental casualties on the Ukrainian front.

The efficacy of this new myth only encourages useful idiots, who are mostly concerned Russophones of some social and political influence. They pretend to be loyal to their European countries of citizenship or residence. Yet, three and a half decades after the partial decolonization of the Soviet Union, their unwavering loyalty remains anchored to the red star on the Kremlin's tower.

In June 2025, in the Saeima (Latvian parliament), the MP Aleksejs Rosļikovs (Aleksey Roslikov in Russian) from the pro-Russian and anti-European Stability party, delivered an angry speech in Russian and concluded it with a rude gesture. The object of his wrath was the bill with a draft declaration on redressing the linguistic consequences of the illegal Russification of Latvia during the Soviet occupation (1941-1991). In a nutshell, the legislators believe that the decolonization of their country at the level of politics now should be followed by the long overdue decolonization in the sphere of culture and language. Latvia is no longer a colony of Russia. Hence, Russian has no place in Latvia's public life, schools, let alone as a quotidian language of communication for entire towns or regions.

Prior to the Second World War, 168,300 Russophones constituted 8.8 per cent of the Latvian population. Due to the post-war deportations of Latvians to Siberia, and the planned settlement of the country by populations from all over the Soviet Union, by 1989, the number of Russophones had grown almost fivefold to 905,500, or 34 per cent of the Latvian population. After this country regained independence in 1991, many Russophones returned to their now post-Soviet countries (republics) of origin, while others adopted Latvian language and identity as their own. As a result, the number of Russophones decreased by half and, in 2021, stabilized at 480,900 or 25.4 per cent. Hence, the remaining raw effect of the half-a-century-long Soviet occupation is the 16.6 per cent surplus of Russophones in today's Latvia. Going by the interwar statistic alone, they should not number more than 160,600 (8.8 per cent). Yet, assuming Latvia had preserved its independence after the Second World War, today, such Russophones would not have amounted to more than three to four per cent of the country's inhabitants.

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Citizens or agents?

For Rosļikovs, any attempt at rolling back the effects of the Soviet occupation is unacceptable. To him, ethnic relations as they existed in Latvia prior to the 1940 Soviet invasion are an abomination. In the Saeima, he yelled in Russian, "There are more of us! [more Russians than you, Latvians]. Russian is our language!" That is the creed of Moscow's old and new imperialism. The apple did not fall far from the tree of the Russian empire and its ambitions of conquering the world. In 1962, the Soviet strongman Nikita Khrushchev threatened the West by proclaiming, "We will bury you." That is the origin and crux of the Kremlin's ideology of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World). The effects of its implementation can be observed live in Ukraine under relentless Russian attack, which has continued for over four years.

None other than the Russian president's spokesman came to Rosļikovs's aid. The Kremlin official condemned the proposed declaration as a blatant example of "Russophobia that defies common sense and reason". In Moscow's view, decolonization is fine when it happens to the West's former colonies, but plainly wrong when applied in the countries that Moscow once conquered and colonized.

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The Kremlin regrets that it has no instruments to assist Rosļikovs, who is now under investigation for inciting ethnic hatred in Latvia. But the aforementioned spokesman proposed that this deputy may choose to flee to Russia, where he would receive a warm welcome. Indeed, it is now an established tradition that when pro-Russian operatives face the music in Latvia, they choose to sneak out, be it to the Russian Federation or Belarus, which is a staunch ally (some say: vassal) of the Kremlin. That was the case for the Riga City Council member Ruslans Pankratovs (Ruslan Pankratov) in 2023, or the Latvian European Parliament elections candidate Olga Čerņavska (Olga Cherniavskia) the following year. The erstwhile COVID misinformation activist Romāns Samuļs (Roman Samul) also followed the same route after he had failed to win a mandate to the Saeima in the 2022 elections.

The best example of this is offered by Latvia's longest serving (2004-2024) Member of the European Parliament, Tatjana Ždanoka (Tatiana Zhdanok). Earlier, for her alleged involvement in the 1991 coup attempt against the Latvian government, she was banned from running for any elected positions in the country. Paradoxically, Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004 enabled Ždanoka to better spread Russian influence and disinformation at the European level. Latvia warned the European Parliament about her. But Western European countries have a long and disgraceful tradition of not paying heed to Central and Eastern European cautionary tales about Russian imperialism and influence. As a result, the European Parliament is swarming with Russian spies, Russia *verstehers* and useful idiots.

Tatjana Ždanoka had been a Russian FSB agent for the full 20 years she served as a Latvian deputy in the European Parliament.

Significantly, in 2014, in her capacity as an MEP, Ždanoka supported the Russian annexation of Ukraine's peninsula of Crimea. Eight years later, in 2022, she acted as an "international observer" for the fake elections that the Kremlin organized in eastern Ukraine under Russian occupation in breach of the UN Charter. Eventually, in 2024, it was discovered that Ždanoka had been a Russian FSB agent for the full two decades when she served as a Latvian deputy in the European Parliament. Now Ždanoka is to stand trial in Latvia and hopes to escape responsibility by threatening news outlets that report about her case.

Unsurprisingly, in 2012, Ždanoka used her political influence to back the eventually unsuccessful referendum to make Russian into another official language in Latvia. Hence, in light of the pro-Russian politician's anti-Latvian and anti-European achievements, the Kremlin sees the investigation against her as a clear

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sign of Latvia's virulent Russophobia. In the eyes of Ždanoka and her handlers in Moscow, the steps taken to do away in Latvia with the continuing nefarious effects of the Russian occupation amount to the propagation of Nazism. On top of that, it is no secret that the Kremlin is preparing to test NATO's Article 5, most probably by attacking Latvia.

Reality check

How many people speak Russian in Europe? In reply, one may ask what is Europe? At first, let us consider a narrow definition that equates this concept with the European Union alone. In 2024, 2.25 million L1 (native) Russian speakers lived in the EU. At 27.5 and 24.5 per cent, respectively, they constitute large proportions of the populations in Latvia and Estonia. Yet, in absolute numbers, at 0.83 million, the plurality of Europe's L1 Russian speakers reside in Germany. Interestingly, they are not ethnic Russians, but rather former Soviet citizens of ethnic German and Jewish origin.

Looking further afield, in Belarus a quarter of the inhabitants, or 2.3 million, declare Russian as their native language, though in the country's sociopolitical reality practically all the population of nine million habitually speak and write this language. After 1995, the national language of Belarusian was made into an endangered minority language in Belarus. This is despite the fact that more than half of the population see it as their native language. Ždanoka hoped for a similar outcome in Latvia had the 2012 referendum decided in favour of Russian.

Another country where many people speak Russian as their first language is Moldova. Such Russian speakers amount to 250,000. From the statistical point of view, it is hard to estimate how many Russian native speakers remain in today's Ukraine, where all the population have suffered so tragically and cruelly at the Russians' hands for over four years. Due to Russia's annexations and occupations, alongside the entailed waves of refugees, the number of inhabitants in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government plummeted to 30 million. Not more than 20 per cent (or six million people) consider Russian to be their native language. Yet at least half of the number switched to speaking Ukrainian at home. Hence, uniquely, in today's Ukraine, fewer people speak Russian than declare it as their native language.

Across a Europe defined as all the continent's countries outside the Russian Federation, in total, all speakers of Russian as their first language number 10.8 million. However, for all practical reasons, Belarus is now part of Russia. Meanwhile, half of Ukraine's Russian speakers are doing their best to abandon this post-imperial

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burden of the enemy language. Bearing these changes in mind, Europe's speakers of Russian add up to a mere 5.5 million.

Is Russia a part of Europe? Prior to the 2022 full-scale attack on Ukraine, barely a third of Russians believed so. Nowadays the number must have dropped even lower. After all, the neo-imperial ideology of the Russian world portrays Russia as a civilization unto itself, neither part of Europe nor Asia. Moscow also sees its war on Ukraine as a war against the "collective West", which is mostly equated with Europe outside Russia's control.

Hence, following the Russians' opinions and wishes, native speakers of Russian living even within the geographically European part of Russia should not count as part of the tally of the continent's Russophones. In the long run, Europeans are not remaining blind to the Kremlin's Europhobia, which translates into the diminishing utility of Russian as a language of international communication. Between 2012 and 2024, the number of Europeans with a command of Russian as a foreign language (L2) dropped spectacularly from 2.7 to 1.5 per cent. The fall is even more visible among the youngest cohort (ages 15-34), that is, from 2.1 to 0.8 per cent. It is the youth who will decide on Europe's future, including the continent's language politics.

Changes

Thanks to Russia's aggressive imperialism, in the near future, hardly anyone will speak Russian in Europe (that is, outside Belarus and Russia itself). Since the end of the Cold War, English has become the continent's lingua franca (including for youth in Russia's urban areas). Angry at this trend, the Kremlin lashes out by doing what it knows best. In 2025, the Duma (Russian parliament) banned the use of foreign (mostly English) words in Russian. At the same time, the British Council was expelled from Russia as an "undesirable organization", whereas teaching for and taking internationally recognized English language tests was criminalized.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian is replacing Russian as a foreign language taught in schools, especially across the Baltic states. As a scholar, when recently attending international conferences in Lithuania or Czechia that gathered mainly researchers from Slavic countries, I noticed that Russian was dropped as the previously default lingua franca. Nowadays, at such gatherings, academics speak in their own national tongues and try hard to comprehend what their colleagues say in their own tongues. When they are stuck for words, switching to English helps. Increasingly aware of the ravages of Russian imperialism, émigré Russian scholars demure and strive to speak either Ukrainian, Polish or Czech.

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As a result, the public use of Russian has become delegitimized in Europe. One can only hope that European leaders and politicians will take note of this momentous development. For example, why continue offering passport services in Russian in the EU member states' consulates located within the Russian Federation? Instead, a given state's official language should become the medium of communication in such a situation, or even better, the Ukrainian language. When Russian citizens want to visit this "accursed Gayropa" of the Kremlin's paranoid dreams, let them learn how to read and write Ukrainian, which Russian propaganda never tires to denigrate. EE

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Russia's imprisoned mothers

EILISH HART

As Russia's prison population shrinks due to wartime military recruitment, another trend is becoming increasingly visible: the growing number of women behind bars. Among them are mothers imprisoned for anti-war activism, political dissent or alleged "extremism", many now isolated from their children and cut off from the outside world.

In December 2025, the Russian Presidential Human Rights Council member Eva Merkacheva asked Vladimir Putin to perform a "holiday miracle". Appealing on behalf of people with disabilities and mothers in the Russian prison system, Merkacheva suggested pardoning first-time offenders convicted of "minor, non-violent" crimes. "The New Year and Christmas holidays are coming up. Let mothers be with their children," she urged. Putin seemed open to the idea, and two weeks later, Merkacheva sent the Russian president a list outlining groups of prisoners who could be released. But the holidays came and went, and no one was pardoned.

A few months later, on International Women's Day (March 8th), exiled activists from Political Prisoners Memorial launched a campaign with a similar humanitarian appeal. "We recognize that it may be unrealistic to expect the immediate release of all political prisoners. There are, however, at least 20 individuals whose freedom calls particularly for humanity and compassion," the group wrote in an online petition. "They are mothers who have been separated from their underage children."

The following week, on March 17th, Putin granted pardons to 23 women. The Kremlin did not disclose their names or the crimes for which they had been convicted, revealing only that the pardoned women either had children or had relatives

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who "participated in the special military operation", the official euphemism for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. None of the mothers named in the petition were pardoned. As of writing, they remain scattered in prisons across Russia, alongside tens of thousands of other women. How many exactly is unknown; the federal penitentiary service stopped publishing detailed statistics in 2022. Yet Russian officials claim that the prison population has reached a historic low, due in part to the recruitment of inmates to fight in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the proportion of women in the system is rising, and they are increasingly cut off from the outside world.

Collateral damage

Political Prisoners Memorial became an independent initiative in April 2022, after a Moscow court upheld the dissolution of the Memorial Human Rights Center, a branch of Russia's oldest and most respected humanrights group. Later that year, Memorial was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Four years after that, in April 2026, Russia outlawed Memorial as an "extremist" organization. Today, Political Prisoners Memorial recognizes more than 1,600 political and religious prisoners in Russia, based on the Council of Europe's definition of the term. The group also maintains another database of people "deprived of liberty" on politically motivated grounds in the Russian Federation and the occupied territories of Ukraine. It currently contains 5,359 names, with the caveat that the real number is likely at least twice as many.

The overwhelming majority of these political prisoners are men. For activists, however, drawing attention to a smaller demographic is a strategic move. "When we speak about political prisoners who are mothers of underage children, we think it's the most morally and emotionally grounded demand," says Sergei Davidis, who heads the Political Prisoners Memorial project. "They are not the only victims of their imprisonment. Their underage children are victims who are innocent, even from the state's point of view. They are collateral damage."

At one time, mothers weighing the risks of political protest in Putin's Russia considered their children a mitigating factor. But the Kremlin's wartime crackdown on domestic dissent has proven indiscriminate.

"Before 2022, it was less likely for a woman who had a small child or who was pregnant to be handed a prison sentence," says the political sociologist Olga Zeveleva, an assistant professor in conflict studies at Utrecht University. "You'd hear people say, "I've got a small child, it's safe for me to go to this protest. But it's better for my husband to stay home because they won't throw me in prison." This kind of chatter among activists is far less likely now."

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Article 82 of the Russian Criminal Code provides for the deferral of prison sentences for women who are pregnant or raising children under 14, in certain cases. However, those on trial for speaking out against the war or the regime are rarely granted such postponements.

"It is not an obligation of the court, but it is a right. And the courts are less inclined to be especially human in cases of politically motivated prosecution," Davidis says.

Among those Political Prisoners Memorial has recognized as political prisoners, only two mothers have received deferred sentences. Olga Chepeleva, a 35-year-old Belgorod resident, spent more than six months in pre-trial detention on charges of spreading "fake news" about the Russian military. Then, in February 2026, she was handed a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence, with a deferment until her child turns 14. Ilona Nargornova, a 59-year-old mother of six, was found guilty in 2024 of belonging to the Revival Christian Church – a Ukrainian religious organization Russia has banned. Nargornova, who was under house arrest while awaiting trial, received a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence, deferred until 2027.

Elena Abramova, a translator from St Petersburg, was convicted of "discrediting" the Russian military for protesting alone, with signs saying "No war!"

Of the 20 women featured in the "Free Political Prisoner Mothers" campaign, three are citizens of Ukraine serving prison sentences of 12 years or more for allegedly committing "high treason" against the Russian Federation. Two of them, Oksana Hladkykh and Yuliya Stanika, were forced to take Russian passports while living under occupation. Another six were found guilty of involvement in organizations and groups Russia has outlawed as "extremist" or "terrorist" – such as the political movement founded by the late Kremlin critic Alexey Navalny. The journalist and activist Olga Komleva, for example, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for volunteering at Navalny's Ufa headquarters before the movement was designated as "extremist". In a cruel twist of fate, she reportedly lost her ability to speak while in prison.

Ten others were convicted of speech crimes. The journalist and mother of two Maria Ponomarenko, for example, was given six years for allegedly spreading "fake news" about the March 2022 bombing of the Mariupol theatre, where hundreds of civilians were sheltering while Russia laid siege to the city. Elena Abramova, a translator from St Petersburg, was convicted of "discrediting" the Russian military for protesting alone, with signs saying "No war!" and "A world without war. Russia without Putin". She received a two-year prison sentence.

"Going out and holding your single picket sign saying 'No to war' is definitely not what the state wants women to do," says Jennifer Mathers, a senior lecturer

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at Aberystwyth University in Wales, focused on Russian politics and security and gender in war. "It doesn't want anybody to do it, but it especially doesn't want women to do it."

Historic highs and lows

Against this backdrop of intensifying wartime repressions, the Russian authorities have reported a dramatic decline in the prison population. In May, Arkady Gostev, director of the federal penitentiary service, claimed that there are now 282,000 people in the system, including 85,000 in pre-trial detention centres. On paper, this figure marks a new historic low for modern Russia. Just a few months ago, in March, the Supreme Court's newly appointed First Deputy Chief Justice, Vladimir Davydov, reported that the prison population had dropped to a record 308,000, down from about one million in 2001 (when Putin first took office). Both officials attributed the recent decline to a "humanization" of criminal justice policies, but only Gostev acknowledged that military recruitment has had an impact. As Zeveleva put it, "Men have a way out now, and that's to go to the front line."

The Russian defence ministry began enlisting convicts to fight in Ukraine in early 2023, following an initial prison recruitment drive by the Wagner mercenary group. While tens of thousands of prisoners and criminal suspects have reportedly joined up, the defence ministry does not publish any such statistics. External estimates also vary wildly, often interpreting any decline in Russia's prison population as indicative of another recruitment wave. In 2025, Ukraine's foreign intelligence service claimed that between 140,000 and 180,000 prisoners had enlisted so far.

As Russia's prison demographics continue to shift, the precise number of women currently in the system is unclear. The penitentiary service last published detailed statistics in early 2022. At that time, women made up 8.9 per cent of the prison population, which stood at 465,896 people.

According to experts, this percentage has very likely grown. "[There are] more and more female prisoners generally, and political prisoners in particular," says Natalia Arno, the president of the Free Russia Foundation, a pro-democracy organization headquartered in Washington, DC.

Like the rest of the Russian army, the vast majority of prison recruits are men. Although there have been intermittent reports about recruitment from women's prisons, this appears to be marginal at most. "If there were a large number of women being recruited from the prisons, the word would get out because it's so unusual," Mathers points out. "There isn't a narrative which would support recruiting large

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numbers of women from anywhere," she adds. "The way they frame the recruitment of men – "be a man, join the military" – runs counter to any sense that they would want a significant number of women to join."

In addition to this outflow of men to the front line, the number of convictions handed down to women has risen steadily for the past five years. In 2025, these accounted for one-fifth (87,000) of all convictions – a record high for modern Russia, according to data from the judicial department at the Russian supreme court published by the independent media outlet Verstka. *New Eastern Europe* could not double-check these numbers; in late April, the judicial department removed all conviction statistics from its website.

According to Zeveleva, this speaks to two simultaneous developments in wartime Russia: the feminization of political persecution and poverty. "Even though in Russia there are many political prisoners, still prisons are basically warehouses for the poor, and prison is a way to control poverty," she explains. "There are a lot of convictions that look like they're poverty related," she continues, listing theft and petty crime as examples. "These types of crimes often go up when the economic situation becomes more challenging."

Cut off

While official statistics on the Russian prison system are either unreliable, incomplete, or restricted, this is not the only reason so little is known about the women on the inside. "Some of that actually has to do with how cut off we are from female prisoners," Zeveleva explains.

Russia's women's prisons have a reputation for being more strictly controlled than those for men, which are sometimes effectively run by prison gangs or criminal networks. With the prison administration fully in charge, women live under intense surveillance and unbending regulations. "A lot of former prisoners say that an average women's prison in Russia is as strict as the strictest regimes of the men's prisons," Zeveleva says.

Human rights activists, meanwhile, have found it increasingly difficult to access and monitor Russian prisons, not least because the country's main prisoners' rights watchdog, the Public Monitoring Commission (known by the acronym *ONK*, in Russian), has been packed with regime loyalists and can no longer be considered independent. Other rights groups have fallen victim to wartime repressions, forcing them to shut down or relocate abroad.

Two of the political prisoner mothers, for example, Kseniya Garina from Irkutsk Krai and Elvira Saifullina from Norilsk, were found guilty of "extremism" for their

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alleged involvement in the "Anti Pytki" project – an initiative that reported on cases of torture in the Russian prison system.

Activists often provide vital support for prisoners, especially those who cannot rely on family or friends. "Support mechanisms for men are better," Arno says. "Women don't give up on their men, they don't give up on their husbands, sons, and brothers. But as soon as a woman is behind bars, her partner, husband, or boyfriend doesn't care about her any longer."

Amnesty International has documented a range of tactics Russian authorities use to arbitrarily deprive political prisoners of contact with their loved ones and even their lawyers, in breach of international human rights standards. "This is a deliberate strategy of the Russian government to isolate and silence dissenters and inflict further suffering on them and their families. All forms of contact – visits, phone calls, letters – are being curtailed," said Natalia Prilutskaya, Amnesty International's Russia researcher, in a 2024 press release.

In the first half of 2025 alone, Russian courts convicted 467 pregnant women and 1,707 mothers of children under the age of three.

Under Russian law, prisoners' visiting rights can be severely restricted depending on where and under which conditions they serve their term. Their correspondence and phone calls are also tightly controlled. And those facing disciplinary sanctions are often subjected to solitary confinement in a punishment isolation cell (*shtrafnoy izolyator*, in Russian, or *SHIZO* for short). Placement in a *SHIZO*, which can last up to 15 days (and does not preclude back-to-back stints), means being prohibited from making phone calls, having visits, and receiving parcels. "This has become a punishment practice for political prisoners, in particular, and they're sent to *SHIZO* quite often," Zeveleva says.

SHIZO conditions are also worse for female prisoners; unlike men, they are forced to wear minimal clothing in the punishment cell. "They're stripped down to the bare minimum of clothes, and the *SHIZO* is notorious for being very, very cold, especially in the winter. So this is just a very torturous physical experience for women," Zeveleva explains. Moreover, even when visits are permitted, not all women's prisons are set up to accommodate mothers with young children. "For women with young children or women who are pregnant and then give birth while in the prison system, this isolation from their children is a really big issue," Zeveleva says.

According to judicial department statistics cited by Verstka, Russian courts convicted 467 pregnant women and 1,707 mothers of children under the age of three in the first half of 2025. One political prisoner, Olga Petrova, even gave birth in prison in 2025 while serving a seven-year sentence for allegedly financing terrorism.

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Solidarity is the best weapon

Sergei Davidis acknowledges that the Kremlin is unlikely to release the women featured in the "Free Political Prisoner Mothers" campaign or any other political prisoners for that matter. "Both pardons and amnesties happen very rarely in Russia under Putin," he says. Still, in his view, appealing to official rhetoric about "family values" along with the fact that there are only 20 mothers on the list may offer some hope.

"We cannot be sure that this demand will be heard, but it has the highest probability to be heard," Davidis says. "Even if we fail in our attempt to release them, we will provide them with a high level of support," he adds.

According to Arno, a participant in the PACE Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces, advocating on behalf of less well-known political prisoners is more difficult. Several prominent figures were freed in August 2024 as part of the largest prisoner exchange between Russia and western countries since the Cold War. Negotiated under the Biden administration, the swap secured the release of 16 high-profile prisoners, including the *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich, Free Russia Foundation Vice President Vladimir Kara-Murza, and Memorial co-founder Oleg Orlov.

Putin signed presidential pardons for 13 of the released, including four women: the Russian-American journalist Alsu Kurmasheva (a mother of two), former Navalny activists Lilia Chanysheva and Ksenia Fadeyeva, and the anti-war artist Sasha Skochilenko. "It was a historic swap," Arno recalls. "For the first time in 38 years, it wasn't only US citizens who were released but also Russian dissidents. Right now, there is no political will for that."

After coming into office in January 2025, US President Donald Trump seemed intent on negotiating an end to Russia's war against Ukraine. More than a year on, peace talks have effectively stalled. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has succeeded in striking deals with Alyksandr Lukashenka of Belarus, securing the release of hundreds of political prisoners in exchange for easing some sanctions.

"It's a different situation with Putin because he doesn't need anything. Lukashenka needs things, Putin doesn't. He doesn't care," Arno explains. At the same time, she warns against taking a similar approach in negotiations with the Kremlin. "Continue pressure; don't lift sanctions for motivational reasons. All sanctions should be tied to fundamental changes," Arno advises. "And if they are not interested now, that doesn't mean that the situation won't change tomorrow."

Arno is adamant that both peace talks and policy towards Russia "should be about people". She expressed fears alongside Davidis that a potential ceasefire agreement would fail to include the release of Russian political prisoners. While

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Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilian hostages have officials in Kyiv to advocate for them, Russians behind bars must rely on activists and the international community, Davidis says.

Asked what advice she would give to western leaders, Arno was quick to respond. "First, help Ukraine; it's important that Putin fails there. Second, don't make the regime stronger," she says, adding that keeping political prisoners on the agenda should be a key component of this strategy.

"The cost for such repression should be very high for the regime," Arno says. "Solidarity is the best weapon against dictators." EE

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Navigating the narrowing space for lawful dissent in Russia

VERONICA SNOJ

When the Russian government moved to block Telegram this year, activists across the country attempted to organize protests against what many saw as the latest step in the Kremlin's tightening grip on freedom of expression. Their efforts, and the authorities' response, reveal how even limited forms of public dissent in Russia are increasingly treated as a threat while the shrinking digital space leaves civil society with fewer and fewer ways to organize.

When the Russian government decided to block Telegram in February 2026 amid strengthening censorship and all-out mobile internet shutdowns, activists in cities throughout Russia decided to ask permission to host rallies against the ban on the most popular messaging app in the country. Among the forces trying to organize a rally was the unlisted Russian Communist Party of Internationalists in Novosibirsk, the largest city in Siberia. After the authorities rejected their request, saying the rally's purpose violated the "principle of legality" by opposing the actions of Roskomnadzor, the Russian telecommunications watchdog that implemented the ban on Telegram, the party turned to an alternative approach. They submitted a notification through the online portal of the city's mayor's office, a simplified procedure that, for a designated location in the Russian legislation known as the "Hyde Parks", requires no prior approval for smaller gatherings.

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Protest crackdown

The event, scheduled for March 1st 2026, did not go as planned, recalls Roman Malozemov, a local activist and a law graduate. "An hour before the event, the Hyde Park area was cordoned off with warning tape; police officers and security forces with batons came in. The city landscaping service arrived and started clearing snow and trimming trees," he says. "The organizers arrived at the appointed hour, along with the participants of the public event. They were all rounded up without warning and thrown into a police van," he adds. Malozemov himself, who arrived about 15 minutes later to film how the trees were being treated, also ended up being restrained and bundled into a police van.

They were all taken to the police station and detained illegally for several hours. Legally speaking, however, their detention was never officially acknowledged, Malozemov notes. "They didn't issue any reports against us, no charges for failure to identify ourselves, no record of the detention, no violations noted. They let us all go," he recalls.

Yet, since then, the local authorities have been tightening their grip on public events, Malozemov observes. "I got the feeling that some order came from above to all city administrations to ban any public events because of the campaign against Telegram," he says.

The case from Novosibirsk is only one of many across Russia. In Irkutsk, the rally against the Telegram ban, scheduled for the same day, was cancelled at the last minute, allegedly because too many people wanted to participate, with authorities arguing that the social media post announcing the rally had been seen by more people than estimated in the original application. In Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the rally was denied on the grounds that it could pose a "safety threat" to road users, while in Moscow, it was cancelled due to reported ongoing restrictions on mass gatherings to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Moreover, the authorities also started targeting the organizers of these protests. Sergei Krupenko, the organizer of the protest in Novosibirsk, was detained later the same month and fined for organizing an "unauthorized rally", which in his case means that he may face prison time if he organizes any further protests. Meanwhile, Grigory Gribenko, one of the organizers of the protests in Irkutsk, was detained in April after he refused a medical examination following a blood test requested by law enforcement and conducted at a city clinic that detected traces of marijuana in his system. This is despite the fact that an independent blood test returned a negative result.

Local authorities across Russia would likely not have pushed back so harshly against the Telegram protests had the ministry of internal affairs not declared them

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intolerable, suggests Radzhana Buyantueva, a researcher focusing on civil society and social movements in Russia. The messaging app was popular not only among the general population, but also among governmental bodies and political parties, some of which were planning to incorporate it into their campaigns ahead of the September 2026 parliamentary elections.

"If not for that decision, probably some regional authorities would have been allowing it, as they might personally side with them," Buyantueva argues. She positions these attempts to organize protests in the middle of the spectrum of publicly expressing discontent in Russia. Protesting against the invasion of Ukraine remains an absolute no-go, carrying the risk of criminal charges and lengthy prison sentences under Russia's war censorship laws. At the same time, some local initiatives, such as demonstrations against rising utility bills, can still take place in designated locations with official permission.

Such issues, however, only get approved for rallies by the "right" applicants and should be framed accordingly, explains Alexei, an activist from Siberia whose name has been changed here to respect his request to remain anonymous. "Applicants should indicate in their notice that the rally is organized to appeal directly to [Vladimir] Putin to look into the matter," he explains, based on the situation in his city.

Moreover, the line for when protesting in this form becomes concerning for the authorities is never clear, Buyantueva highlights. "Every kind of protest is inherently dangerous nowadays because of how it's going to be perceived by the authorities," she says. "They can be considered political at any point." The initiative to shut down dissent does not need to be clearly expressed from above, as was the case with Telegram. "It could be perceived by the local authority that there is some sort of expectation for Moscow to do so," she notes.

Not always that way

Right now, Vyacheslav Ivanets, a human rights lawyer, considers that the opposition, or simply active citizens, no longer have any opportunities to exercise the right to hold mass events. However, he explains that was not always the case. After the 1993 constitution came into force, for about a decade, the right to peaceful, unarmed assembly, demonstrations, marches, and individual pickets alike, were truly in effect. "It was sufficient to notify the administration. The authorities simply took note of this information. Interference with the exercise of this right was extremely rare," Ivanets recalls.

However, things started to change in 2004, when Vladimir Putin was re-elected for his second term as Russian president and the law on assemblies, rallies,

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Photo: Tomasz Bidermann / Shutterstock

"Every kind of protest is inherently dangerous nowadays because of how it is going to be perceived by the authorities," says Radzhana Buyantueva, a researcher focusing on civil society and social movements.

demonstrations, marches, and picketing was adopted. The law introduced the concept of "approving" rather than simply "notifying" of an event.

"The authorities were given the right not to ban an assembly outright, but to propose a reasoned change of location or time. And thus, they had a mechanism for pushing protests to the outskirts," Ivanets explains.

Under this law, the available space to express public dissent has been tightening, step by step, Ivanets explains. This has been done through amendments such as increasing fines or barring those fined for previous protests from organizing in the future. The law also now criminalizes protests by introducing the so-called Dadin article in 2014, which established criminal liability for repeated violations of protest rules.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities imposed a ban on public gatherings under the pretext of protecting public health, and eventually banned single pickets taking place near one another, considering them a mass event.

"Even after other restrictions were lifted, like the opening of stores, shopping malls, theatres, and concerts, the penalties for holding a rally were retained," Ivanets adds. In some regions, they remain in effect to this day. All this was introduced even before the imposition of military censorship in 2022, as a

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result of which more than 1,370 people have so far faced criminal proceedings for expressing opposition to the war in Ukraine, and more than 380 citizens are imprisoned in pre-trial detention centres, penal colonies, or undergoing compulsory treatment, according to data compiled by the human rights media outlet OVD-Info.

Become a lawyer to understand your rights

Despite all this tightening against dissent, when the government announced the blocking of Telegram, it was "simply impossible" to remain silent, recalls Alexei. "The internet is the last island of freedom in our country. Where else can we get information from independent sources and communicate privately? Almost all official media outlets convey only the government's propagandist point of view," he adds. However, he argues that simply ignoring the refusal from the authorities and taking to the streets without authorization is out of the question.

You almost have to be a lawyer to abide by all the regulations while trying to express your opinions.

"You're unlikely to even make it to the event: you'll be detained beforehand, and at best, you'll spend a day in a police station where you're unlikely to be allowed access to a lawyer. At worst, you'll be charged with multiple offences and sent to a detention centre," Alexei says. The consequences are also severe for would-be participants. "You'll likely be harshly detained. At best, you'll face a fine and problems with your employer, who will inevitably be pressured by the authorities. At worst, you'll face trial and arrest, and the outcome will be a matter of luck," he warns. However, when trying to take into account all the laws, it almost feels like you have to be a lawyer to be able to abide by all the regulations while trying to express your opinions.

"Now in Russia, laws are written in such a way that you don't know how to comply with them," Malozemov explains. "You don't know what you'll be jailed for. They're written so broadly that any disagreement you express can be used against you, and without knowing how to defend yourself, you're easily prosecuted," he adds.

As someone with a legal background, he tries to navigate the legislation. "I generally understand these risks, and to what extent I can go out legally without getting jailed for it," he says. "People who, unlike me, don't have a legal education and experience in activism, don't understand how to enforce their rights, because the fundamental principle of any legislation should be that it's understandable without a legal education," he notes.

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Finding like-minded citizens

The blocking of Telegram itself further limits civil society's ability to gather around a common cause, Buyantueva points out. "Civil society actors and activists also learn from each other how to apply for permission to protest, and how to legally conduct the protest," she says. "Telegram was also considered dangerous by the authorities because of all the communication among activists happening through the app. They started pushing to shut down everything and to allow only (the Russian state-promoted messenger) Max and (Russia's Facebook alternative) VKontakte, everything that could be easily monitored and controlled, in order to eliminate even the slightest possibility for activists to find each other, to communicate with each other," Buyantueva adds.

When an activist applies to organize a protest, they also have to state how many people will attend. "They need to know whether it's going to be ten people participating in this event or maybe 100 or 200," she adds. "This was often coordinated over Telegram; now it's blocked."

Moreover, with the blocking, a segment of the population is already being cut off because not everyone can afford a good VPN (virtual private network) service through which they could access the app, she notes. "That's how the possibility for mobilization decreases significantly," she adds.

Yet people keep trying to express their opinions despite all the hurdles. In Novosibirsk, the Russian Communist Party of Internationalists continues to voice its opposition to the Telegram shutdown policy by contesting the disruption of the March 1st rally in court. Malozemov is also asserting his right to organize rallies: he is currently challenging the Novosibirsk mayor's office, which argues that his "affiliation" with a foreign agent, that is a person or organization considered by the authorities to be under foreign influence, disqualifies him from organizing them. This is despite the fact that the law stipulates that as someone who is not a foreign agent, he should have the right to do so. He hopes to bring his case to the UN Human Rights Committee, but for now, he continues to express his stance through what he is still allowed to do: solo pickets. EE

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A two-way road to Ukraine's EU integration

VALERII PEKAR AND YULIYA SHTALTOVNA

What happens when long-held myths about Ukraine and the European Union are shattered by war, propaganda, and shared vulnerability? In a world drifting toward new bipolar rivalries, Ukraine's EU integration is no longer only a question of enlargement, but a test of whether Europe can remain sovereign, secure, and strategically relevant.

Ukraine's European integration is shrouded in numerous myths, both in the European Union and Ukraine. For many years, Ukrainians saw the EU as a space of comfort, rule of law, social protection, but also excessive regulation and bureaucratic rigidity. At the same time, for many Europeans, Ukraine seemed distant, poor, wild, and unpredictable – a kind of "Wild East", sometimes attractive, occasionally exotic and fascinating, associated with Chornobyl, football stars, and Eurovision winners.

The full-scale war changed everything. Ukraine demonstrated exceptional resilience, innovation, and heroism, successfully holding back the second-largest army in the world while remaining a democracy. Europe, despite Vladimir Putin's expectations, turned out to be a powerful, united continent, a reliable and responsible ally for Ukraine. Mutual trust grew through a brotherhood in arms. Practical steps towards European integration also started to take shape as an irreversible political process. The central question now is when the status quo will be restored so that the EU integration processes can be fully completed. The unpleasant truth is that the old status quo will never be restored.

The changing world order, the American-European cooling, the emergence of new centres of power and the decline of old ones, force us to recognize that a return

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to the old point of equilibrium is impossible. This is further reinforced by profound changes in military and civilian technologies, the growth of numerous global challenges, and the systemic crisis of ageing international organizations. Moreover, that old equilibrium did not prevent the multi-crisis that we are experiencing today – in many ways, it produced it. This raises a more demanding question: what do the prospects of the European Union, Ukraine, and their mutual rapprochement, up to complete integration, look like in a world where Europe can no longer rely on yesterday's assumptions? It is a strategic test of whether the European Union can renew itself as a geopolitical, democratic, and civilizational project.

A new brave bipolar world without a strong Europe?

The US-China summit that took place in May 2026 once again confirmed that Washington and Beijing are moving towards a bipolar international order based on the rule of force and designated spheres of strategic influence. Europe seems to be left out of this equation. Many European politicians still hesitate to recognize this new reality, although key tendencies in American foreign policy, Chinese strategic ambition, and Russian revisionism all point in the same direction.

The EU, the second largest economy with the third largest population in world politics, can remain outside the global game in this bipolar world if it remains politically fragmented and security dependent. That is why the United States and Russia (with Moscow acting as a Chinese proxy) support all Eurosceptics (whether radically left or right) in all countries of the European continent to weaken its cohesion. Whether through disinformation, political influence, energy dependence, or security blackmail, cybersecurity attacks and propaganda, the goal is the same: to prevent Europe from remaining a fully sovereign geopolitical actor.

Europe's direct interest lies in thwarting these plans for a bipolar world and a disunited and therefore marginalized group of smaller economies. Moreover, its deeper interest is to return the world to the rule of law in international relations, as a condition to its own security. To do so, it is necessary to strengthen European political unity and security self-sufficiency, as well as close gaps in innovation, productivity, and technological independence. These issues were clearly analysed in Mario Draghi's report on European Competitiveness.

For Ukraine, a bipolar world without a strong Europe is totally unacceptable. In such a world, Ukraine would not be recognized as a sovereign democracy and would be thrown into the hands of Russia. We have already lived under such conditions, and we will not return to them. Ukrainians are the strongest "Euro-optimists" not only because of shared values. During the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-14, blood

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After Ukraine's accession to the European Union it not only will gain access to the single market, but will gain something even more fundamental: geopolitical certainty.

was shed for these values for the first time in Europe, not only under the national flag, but also the European flag. For society, European integration has long been a point of reference. Ukraine's national interest is a united, strong, and self-confident Europe with Ukraine as a full member.

What can the EU and Ukraine gain through integration?

Ukraine already benefits from European integration, including institutional reforms, stronger rule of law, and the modernization of its public administration. After accession, it will gain access to the EU single market, including capital markets, which will provide long-term growth for a chronically underinvested country. Yet Ukraine will gain something even more fundamental: geopolitical certainty. The Revolution of Dignity broke with the long and ultimately false tradition of Ukrainian "multi-vectorism", which in practice meant remaining in a geopolitical grey zone between European order and Russian coercion.

Europe, however, is not merely absorbing a beneficiary. It is gaining a strategic partner with the most experienced armed forces on the continent, tested in the most advanced forms of multi-domain warfare. Ukraine is a society that has demonstrated

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extraordinary democratic resilience and unity under existential pressure. Ukraine gives Europe strategic depth on its Eastern Flank, without which the European economy, culture, and way of life will remain dangerously fragile. Moreover, Ukraine, as one of the architects of the new European security framework, will significantly reduce the gap between challenges and capabilities and accelerate Europe's strategic defence capacity. We do not yet know what threats will define the mid-21st century, but a wealthy yet defenceless Europe will undoubtedly attract predators.

Ukraine's accession procedures will also oblige the EU to adapt. While remaining faithful to the EU fundamentals, this means rethinking certain regulatory practices, administrative procedures, and economic assumptions in line with Europe's need for greater competitiveness and strategic agility. The single market, once imagined as the most competitive economic space in the world, has been too often burdened by duplicative, outdated, and lobby-driven rules. At the same time, European funds are often spent on outdated, inefficient business models rather than on innovative development. The EU must review what is undermining its own competitiveness and open up space for Schumpeterian "creative destruction". Ukraine's accession could accelerate this overdue reckoning. Without it, Europe risks missing a rare chance to recover its competitive and innovative edge and re-establish itself as the key player.

Foresight research on Ukraine's integration scenarios identified mass private initiative as a key success factor, alongside capable state institutions, and fair justice. In practical terms, this means preserving and multiplying small and medium-sized businesses in Ukraine through smarter, more proportionate, and more enabling regulation. Transitional periods or suspensive conditions may be necessary in some cases. Obviously, compliance with European requirements opens up new opportunities for Ukrainian business. But first, there needs to be a focus on European fundamentals and quality of bureaucracy, and only then European regulatory norms. Otherwise, there is a clear risk of falling into an institutional trap.

Win-win scenario

Ukraine also brings a rare and proven capacity for technological acceleration, not only in military technology but also in the civilian sector (for example, in digital public services). Under unprecedented existential pressure, Ukraine leapfrogged intermediate stages and implemented the most innovative solutions now tested and adapted in real combat conditions. These successes are now recognized on a global scale.

Ukraine's integration into the EU would create a range of tangible and positive opportunities across several key sectors. In energy, Ukraine is already physically connected to the European grid, contributing not only additional production capacity

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that can strengthen Europe's energy independence, but also invaluable experience in rapid repair, decentralized adaptation, and resilience under sustained attacks. These lessons could serve as an important model for building genuine European energy sovereignty.

In agriculture, Ukraine already helps the EU address its structural food production deficit while progressively implementing European standards. Contrary to common fears, Ukrainian agriculture is unlikely to compete directly with European farmers for support. Instead, Ukraine's accession would expand the EU's arable land by roughly one-third, including access to some of the world's most fertile soils.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's defence sector offers not only battlefield experience, but also a highly adaptive system of rapid innovation, scaling, and continuous adjustment. Its shortened feedback cycles; diversified supply chains; close integration of research, development and production within the armed forces; and high level of interoperability together form a unique defence ecosystem. The real value Ukraine brings is therefore not simply military products but participation in this ecosystem itself – a capability Europe cannot simply purchase on the market but must actively become a part of in this overall process.

Ukraine's defence sector offers not only battlefield experience, but also a highly adaptive system of rapid innovation.

Ukrainian civil society offers Europeans a powerful model of resilience, self-organization, and public responsibility in today's unstable world. It shows how democratic agency can survive under pressure; how communities can mobilize without an overreliance on institutions when statehood itself is under attack; and how freedom can be defended not only by governments, but by society itself.

In a more predictable world, some Ukrainian peculiarities would be seen as a weakness that complicates European integration. However, in the new geopolitical, technological, and social reality, they increasingly look like strategic and unique assets. A society accustomed to uncertainty, improvisation, resource scarcity, and permanent security pressure has developed forms of adaptability that Europe could learn from.

Not a grey zone

The decisive question is whether Europe perceives Ukraine as a problem to solve or as an opportunity to seize. Ukraine's path to the EU is therefore a two-way street. The EU should recognize and articulate the value that Ukraine's accession creates for Europe itself. It should not behave like a mentor waiting for Ukraine to

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complete its "homework". Rather, the EU and Ukraine should move in step towards a new political and institutional reality shaped by mutual learning, shared security, and strategic renewal. This is ambitious, but necessary to remain a subject of history rather than an object of geopolitical bargaining.

Avoiding the pitfalls on this common path becomes critical. The first is to confuse a staged accession pathway with a second-tier destination. Any permanent "special status", "membership minus", or surrogate formula for keeping Ukraine close but not inside would become a ticking time bomb. It would preserve the grey zone, weaken reform incentives, and signal to Russia that Europe still hesitates to recognize Ukraine's agency. A clearly staged road is acceptable; a second-class destination is not.

Nor should membership be framed as a symbolic reward for suffering or a prize for victory: full adherence to membership criteria has to be demanded, no "easier procedures" should apply. Yet the reverse is also true: the EU cannot hide behind procedure, enlargement fatigue, or national vetoes to postpone a strategic decision.

A realistic horizon for accession is obviously not immediate, but neither should it be pushed into an indefinite future. The year 2031 is not a utopian slogan, but a serious working guideline. As the analysis of the accession roadmap proves, this is technically realistic, provided that political will is maintained on all sides. Ukraine has already covered a significant part of the path that other candidates took years to complete: candidate status was obtained in 2022; accession negotiations were formally opened in June 2024; and the screening of all legislation was completed in September 2025. As of spring 2026, Ukraine is technically ready to open all six negotiation clusters (as of June 15th the EU and Ukraine opened the first cluster – editor's note). The slowest preparatory phase is effectively behind us. If Ukraine reforms quickly, the negotiations can be completed by the end of 2028. This is not rhetorical optimism: the European Commission noted in November 2025 that Ukraine is among the countries making the fastest progress in reforms. It will take about a year from the end of negotiations to the accession treaty. Ratification by all EU countries will take about another one to two years.

No excuses

By the time EU accession reaches its decisive phase, the war will have undoubtedly ended. But the war should neither halt Ukraine's reforms, nor become an excuse for the EU to delay Ukrainian membership. The war makes this process more urgent, not less. The longer Ukraine's membership is postponed, the more lives are lost, cities ruined, and potential depleted. Europe simply cannot afford to

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let Ukraine become occupied by Russia and then be deployed as a weapon against Europe. Also, the current political scandals in Ukraine cannot be a reason to stop integration. After all, these are part of a normal process of cleansing from corruption and transforming political culture.

Hence, the question is not only whether Ukraine can be made ready for the EU. Instead, it is whether Europe can be made ready for the bipolar century now emerging. The old enlargement logic, in which the Union teaches, evaluates, and finally absorbs a candidate, is outdated, insufficient, and patronizing. Ukraine's accession calls for another logic: political honesty, institutional co-adaptation, and a realistic and clearly protected horizon of full membership.

The formula is demanding but clear: strict criteria, no shortcuts, no undeserved rewards, no surrogate membership, no patronizing tone, no indefinite postponement, and no more grey zones. The endpoint is a stronger, more innovative, more independent, and united Europe that can act as a leading global player. EE

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How Ukraine is reshaping NATO

KSENIYA SOTNIKOVA

Ukraine is no longer just a recipient of NATO support, it is increasingly reshaping the Alliance itself. From battlefield-tested drone warfare tactics to unprecedented institutional integration, Russia's full-scale invasion has accelerated a transformation in which Ukraine has become both NATO's partner and one of its most important sources of military innovation.

In May 2025, during NATO's "Hedgehog" exercise in Estonia, a team of ten Ukrainian drone operators successfully simulated the destruction of 17 armoured vehicles, and by conducting about 30 strikes effectively "neutralized" two NATO battalions in about half a day. This simulation exposed critical gaps in the Alliance's preparedness for modern warfare: the Ukrainian operators, applying their most recent experience directly from active combat, had brought to the table the expertise that NATO had spent years rather theorizing about but had never experienced at this intensity.

This scene is an illustration of the fundamental shift in NATO's relationship with Ukraine. Kyiv has a long track record of being a committed partner, the only non-member state that has participated in all major NATO-led operations and missions. Since the Russian full-scale invasion of 2022, Ukraine has received unprecedented assistance from the Alliance and its member states. Now, in the fifth year since the full-scale invasion, we can state that Ukraine has become a transformative factor for NATO itself: what began as an emergency response to the full-fledged war at NATO's borders has now evolved into a set of unprecedent changes to the Alliance's institutional architecture, operational practices, and conceptual frameworks.

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Institutional innovations

Largely thanks to the structures in place to closely cooperate with Ukraine, allied forces receive military experience from the ongoing modern high-intensity warfare. Ukrainian innovations in drone warfare, electronic combat, and integrated defence are rewriting NATO approaches faster than the Alliance's traditional planning cycles allow. It remains to be seen whether the Ukrainian factor is systemically incorporating adaptability into NATO, or whether these structures and approaches will prove to be case specific.

Nevertheless, the structures NATO has built since 2022 constitute institutional innovation with little to no precedent in the Alliance's history. They grant a non-member state (Ukraine) a strong political standing and operational integration. Notably, most of this was achieved while keeping NATO away from being a party to the ongoing war – a concern that blocked progress in cooperation more than once.

The biggest visible shift in Ukraine's relationship with NATO came with the Vilnius summit in July 2023, when NATO replaced the NATO-Ukraine Commission with the NATO-Ukraine Council, or NUC. In this new joint body, Ukraine now sits alongside all member states as an equal participant, with the right to convene crisis consultations. This represents the first time NATO has granted an aspiring member such status. While the NATO-Russia Council, established in 2002, was also built on equal participation, Russia was treated as a peer requiring strategic accommodation (practical cooperation was suspended following Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014, and there were no meetings following Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022). The NUC is openly presented as part of a "package of support bringing Ukraine closer to NATO".

A year later, at the Washington summit in July 2024, allies established the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU). This represents NATO's first operational command coordinating assistance to a non-member at war. It has a very particular architecture, with headquarters in Wiesbaden (Germany) and logistics hubs in Poland and Romania, thus operating exclusively on allied territory. Streamlining is key as the initiative has absorbed the responsibilities from multiple ad hoc bilateral and multilateral initiatives and programmes that had limited coordination. Now, NSATU creates a single mechanism for overseeing the training of Ukrainian armed forces at allied facilities, providing long-term force development support, and coordinating equipment donations, transfers and repair.

The Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) identifies and supports the applications of lessons learned from Russia's war against Ukraine. It was inaugurated in Bydgoszcz, Poland in February 2025. This is a one-of-a-kind civilian-military institution between NATO and a partner state, with Ukrainian

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and allied personnel working together. JATEC provides systematic real-time analysis of the battlefield experience of the Ukrainian defence forces, bringing Kyiv's expertise into NATO's training, education and analysis ecosystems. This has created compressed feedback loops from battlefield to doctrine. The first year has brought practical results that are already deployed: JATEC's counter-drone work produced the Tytan interceptor and AI-enhanced Alta Ares guidance system, which are now integrated into Ukrainian interceptor platforms with confirmed combat engagements. Ukrainian representatives also participated for the first time in "Loyal Dolos" 2025, a NATO Article 5 exercise integrating combat experience directly into Alliance preparedness.

Finally, The Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) was formalized in July 2025. It represents the first mechanism in which NATO allies systematically finance US-manufactured weapons for transfer to a non-member at war. Rather than fragmented bilateral donations from national inventories, PURL creates a standing, repeatable procurement cycle: Ukraine identifies priority packages of approximately 500 million US dollars each. European allies and Canada fund them and the United States delivers from its stockpiles. This is also a rather unique format as it reflects and resolves the internal challenges that NATO was facing. By

Photo courtesy of NATO

A Ukrainian drone pilot demonstrates the technology's use during a recent NATO training in the United Kingdom.

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embedding procurement decisions within a multilateral institutional framework, PURL provides a degree of insulation from the volatility of political cycles: commitments are made collectively, announced publicly, and tied to NATO's coordination architecture rather than to the discretion of an individual government. Notably, PURL did not replace the Ramstein format but rather up-scaled its work, systematizing more predictable, high-volume procurement matched to battlefield requirements. Since its launch, PURL has supplied around 75 per cent of all missiles for Ukraine's Patriot batteries and 90 per cent of the missiles used in other air defence systems. NATO allies and partners have already pledged more than four billion dollars under the PURL framework.

Towards integration

Institutional structures only matter as they succeed to produce operational delivery. In Ukraine's case, the transformation is visible across three interconnected dimensions: how the country is reforming its defence institutions, how it participates in Alliance exercises, and how it is achieving interoperability under conditions that no NATO partner and/or aspirant has previously faced.

The Annual National Programmes (ANP) are another important instrument for guiding aspirant NATO countries through the reforms required for membership: democratic civilian control, defence institution building, and interoperability standards. Historically, all countries that joined NATO did so through the Membership Action Plan (MAP) and ANP process in peacetime conditions. Ukraine appears to be the first aspirant to implement an ANP under conditions of an active large-scale war, a distinction with no clear parallel in the Alliance's enlargement history.

At the 2023 Vilnius summit, allies took two consequential decisions regarding Ukraine's accession path: the MAP requirement was dropped, converting Ukraine's path to NATO from a two-step process to a one-step process, with the adapted ANP becoming the sole instrument for tracking accession readiness. The adapted format, endorsed at the November 2023 NATO-Ukraine Council meeting of foreign ministers, was explicitly redesigned to reflect the conditions in which Ukraine has to operate. Adapted ANPs are much shorter, focused on key reforms (previously, ANPs would have 80 to 100 pages, while the first adapted version was only nine), and complementary rather than duplicative of Ukraine's EU commitments.

Crucially, the implementation assessment is much less of a bureaucratic exercise. The quality of institutional reforms in the defence sector during an active war has immediate and visible effects on Ukraine forces, creating a compressed feedback loop between battlefield performance and reform priorities. This arguably inverts

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the traditional model into one in which the operational reality informs the drafting of the next iteration of a document.

Before 2022, Ukrainian participation in NATO exercises (such as "Rapid Trident" or "Sea Breeze") followed a regular pattern in which Ukraine acted as a partner learning NATO procedures. Now that relationship has fundamentally shifted. The "Hedgehog" exercise held in Estonia in May 2025, and involving more than 16,000 troops from 12 NATO countries, crystallized the change. Ten Ukrainian drone operators rendered two NATO battalions combat-ineffective in a single day. NATO forces were assessed as moving with little concealment, hardly able to make rapid decisions, while Ukraine's "Delta" battlefield-management system quickly detected and neutralized them. In September 2024, Kyiv for the first time joined NATO's annual Counter-Unmanned Aircraft System Technical Interoperability Exercise in the Netherlands, with the exercise designed to learn from Ukraine's experience in countering small drones.

The structures NATO has built since 2022 constitute institutional innovation with little to no precedent in the Alliance's history.

In March 2026, the Netherlands became the first NATO ally to systemically embed drone and counter-drone units across every combat formation in its army. This transformation follows directly from the Ukrainian institutional innovation. Already in 2024 Ukraine established Unmanned Systems' Forces as the first separate branch in the world that uses airborne, sea surface and underwater, and ground-based unmanned and robotic systems in combat operations. Thus, Ukrainian innovations are now being incorporated directly into NATO exercise planning, and translated into structural changes within NATO member states.

Decisive questions

Ukraine is simultaneously operating donated western platforms like Patriot air defence systems, HIMARS, F-16s, Leopard and Challenger tanks alongside legacy Soviet-era equipment, all whilst actively fighting. This de facto technical interoperability was not planned: it emerged under combat necessity, compressing into years a transition that NATO's traditional planning frameworks assumed would take decades. The formal architecture to sustain and systematize it was put in place later: in September 2023, Ukraine and NATO agreed on a concept for interoperability, so that Ukrainian defence planners would incorporate interoperability requirements into their long-term capability development plans for the country's defence and security sector. As part of this interoperability roadmap,

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NATO defence planners advised Ukrainian officials on interoperability requirements and assisted in developing a set of initial guidelines that were presented at the 2024 Washington summit.

What distinguishes this process from any previous NATO enlargement trajectory is that interoperability is being exercised under active warfare. While other NATO applicants had the time and institutional capacity to build long-term systemic transformations across all dimensions as well as apply immediate, rather operational changes, Ukraine is unable to pause the combat operations for comprehensive institutional reform. Thus, Kyiv pursues a dual-track approach: immediate operational adaptations that help survive the war, alongside selective long-term reforms tied directly to urgent needs, inter alia - defence procurement reform.

Ukraine's extensive modern battlefield experience has forced NATO to re-evaluate approaches to security and defence on a scale and speed unprecedented since the Alliance's founding. This has focused on drone warfare, continuous electronic warfare adaptation, and new planning frameworks built around short, high-intensity engagements. NATO members now have to revise their equipment stockpiles, industrial base sustainability, mobilization capacity and policy. In addition, Russia's adaptation across more than four years of high-intensity combat has simultaneously provided NATO with a detailed intelligence picture of a peer adversary's actual operational performance.

Five years on, the distance travelled by NATO and Ukraine is impressive. While 2022 saw ad hoc bilateral donations and improvised coordination, 2026 has seen such initiatives as NUC, NSATU, JATEC, PURL, and adapted ANPs become integral parts of an ecosystem with no precedent in NATO's history, and one that has already delivered measurable results. Ukraine's battlefield lessons are feeding into doctrines within months, procurement cycles are replacing fragmented bilateral initiatives, and Ukrainian tactical expertise is reshaping how allied forces train and fight on the ground.

In addition, this war has been a decisive catalyst in driving NATO members towards the five per cent GDP defence spending commitment agreed at The Hague summit in June 2025 (a target long demanded by the United States). The structure of that commitment ensures that up to 1.5 per cent is distributed domestically towards critical infrastructure protection, cyber defence, civil preparedness, innovation, and industrial base development, meaning more security dividends (and potentially workplaces) for each individual ally.

Yet the decisive questions remain open: how powerful is the inertia of the conceptual and institutional changes caused by the Ukrainian factor? Multidimensional cooperation with Kyiv has demonstrated that NATO can adapt faster than its own initial design had assumed. Whether that adaptability is now permanent or was

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rather caused by crisis is what the coming years will reveal. The burning issue for this author as a Ukrainian is how long will this current quasi-integration without membership last while Ukraine's experience is now shaping the Alliance's doctrines and translating into defence reforms in the member states? Would peacetime bureaucratic gravity cause setbacks in what is now intense cooperation?

One thing, however, is already beyond question: European and transatlantic security is no longer something NATO does for Ukraine. It is what NATO and Ukraine are building together, with Kyiv being a critical asset in this equation. EE

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Russia struggling for influence in the South Caucasus

MEGI BENIA

The South Caucasus is no longer a peripheral space between larger powers, but an increasingly important corridor linking Europe with Central Asia and wider Eurasian networks. Yet as its strategic importance grows, the region is becoming the focus of a broader struggle between competing visions of order: one based on connectivity and diversification, and another rooted in dependency, constrained sovereignty, and buffer-zone politics.

The South Caucasus is frequently described as a geopolitical space situated "between" larger powers, a formulation that reduces it to a passive object of external competition and obscures its enduring structural role within broader trans-regional dynamics. In reality, the region has long functioned as a strategic corridor linking Europe to the Caspian basin, Central Asia, and the wider Eurasian systems of exchange, energy transit, and political interaction. However, only under current geopolitical conditions is this role being operationalized in practice.

The post-2022 security environment, shaped by Russia's war against Ukraine and the resulting push to diversify transportation routes, has reduced dependence on Russian-controlled infrastructure. It has also encouraged alternative energy corridors and elevated the functional importance of the South Caucasus, allowing its hidden transit potential to be more fully realized. This process, however, remains contested, as Russia simultaneously seeks to preserve and reconstruct a buffer zone along its periphery by exploiting internal vulnerabilities and constraining

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external alignment. The region thus emerges as a strategic environment defined by the tension between two competing logics: one that advances connectivity and diversification, and another that reproduces dependency and limits sovereignty.

Russia's buffer logic

Russia's approach to the South Caucasus is best understood through a model of influence that prioritizes control without formal incorporation and overt territorial expansion. As a result, it predominantly relies on the systematic production of constrained sovereignty. This buffer logic operates by ensuring that neighbouring states remain politically fragmented, institutionally weakened, and strategically ambiguous, limiting their capacity to integrate into alternative geopolitical and institutional frameworks.

The instruments through which this logic is implemented are varied but interconnected, including the maintenance of unresolved conflicts, economic entanglement, disinformation campaigns, and the exploitation of domestic political divisions. These mechanisms usually represent a system, reinforcing one another in ways that sustain influence over time without requiring constant escalation. Their effectiveness lies precisely in their ability to operate below the threshold of open confrontation between stability and instability, where external pressure is diffused through internal processes. This model relies on shaping the conditions under which political decisions are made, limiting the range of available options for neighbouring states. The outcome is a form of indirect control in which sovereignty is formally maintained but substantively constrained, allowing Russia to preserve strategic depth while avoiding the costs associated with direct domination. Importantly, buffer conditions are not imposed unilaterally but emerge through interaction between external pressure and internal vulnerability. Where governance is weak and political fragmentation is pronounced, external influence becomes more effective and less visible. In this sense, Russia's strategy is not only about exerting pressure, but about amplifying existing structural weaknesses in ways that align with its broader objectives.

The growing strategic importance of the South Caucasus is closely tied to international efforts to expand transport, trade, and energy connections that bypass Russian-controlled routes and reduce Europe's dependence on Moscow. Central to this process is the so-called Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. This project links China and Central Asia to Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, all before continuing toward Turkey and European markets. At the same time, initiatives such as the

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Trans-Regional Infrastructure and Peace Platform seek to institutionalize regional cooperation by connecting transport infrastructure, energy networks, and political stabilization efforts across the South Caucasus, potentially including Armenia alongside Azerbaijan and Georgia. Together, these projects illustrate how the region is being integrated into alternative Eurasian connectivity networks that serve not only economic purposes, but also broader geopolitical goals. In this framework, connectivity has become a mechanism of strategic diversification, allowing European and regional actors to reduce reliance on Russian transit corridors while strengthening the South Caucasus as a critical link between Europe and Asia.

Strategic consequences

Yet, the implementation of such projects depends on political and institutional conditions that remain uneven across the region. Infrastructure alone cannot guarantee functionality, as effective corridors require governance stability, regulatory coherence, and security arrangements that ensure predictability and continuity. Without these conditions, connectivity remains vulnerable to disruption, not necessarily through direct intervention but through the gradual erosion of the systems that sustain it.

Georgia's geography makes it the primary land bridge connecting the Black Sea to the South Caucasus and onward to Central Asia.

Within this context, Georgia occupies a central and structurally indispensable position. Its geography makes it the primary land bridge connecting the Black Sea to the South Caucasus and onward to Central Asia while bypassing Russian and Iranian territory. As such, its internal political trajectory has direct and far-reaching implications for the viability of regional connectivity and the broader strategic balance. The ongoing democratic crisis in the country, characterized by the consolidation of power within the ruling elite, the diminishing autonomy of independent institutions, and the suppression of dissent, is increasingly eroding Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic trajectory and weakening its overall alignment with the West.

This shift has direct strategic consequences, as declining trust and reduced political alignment constrain the depth of cooperation and weaken Georgia's role as a credible partner within the existing or emerging transit frameworks. Thus, regional implications are systemic since a politically unstable or externally influenced Georgia introduces structural vulnerabilities into corridor systems, affecting regulatory predictability, investment confidence, and the overall reliability of transit routes.

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Under such conditions, the corridor is not dismantled but functionally degraded, as infrastructure remains intact while its strategic utility becomes progressively constrained through the gradual erosion of the political and institutional conditions necessary for sustained connectivity.

Armenia's trajectory adds another layer of complexity to the region. In recent years, Yerevan has sought to strengthen relations with the West and reduce its dependence on Russia, particularly after the deterioration of its security ties with Moscow. Yet this shift remains fragile and only weakly institutionalized. It is driven mainly by the current leadership's political orientation and by short-term security concerns, rather than by a broad strategic consensus supported by state institutions, economic structures, or long-term security arrangements. As a result, Armenia's foreign policy reorientation lacks the structural foundations needed to endure domestic political change, external pressure, or shifts in the regional balance of power. This makes the process highly vulnerable to reversal.

At the same time, western engagement has not kept pace with the strategic implications of this shift. Although political dialogue and support have increased, western involvement remains largely reactive, responding to developments rather than shaping them. It has not translated into a comprehensive framework that would secure Armenia within a stable alternative order through sustained economic integration, long-term investment, or credible security guarantees. This gap between political signalling and structural commitment limits the effectiveness of western engagement and reinforces Armenia's strategic uncertainty. Thus, Armenia's role within the emerging corridor remains constrained, as its capacity to contribute to regional connectivity is undermined by the absence of stable alignment and predictable external support.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that the functioning of the South Caucasus as an effective corridor is constrained not by geography, but by the interaction between internal governance and external engagement, meaning that where resilience is weak and alignment is ambiguous, corridor potential remains underutilized and vulnerable to reversal.

Fragmented engagement

The West's approach to the South Caucasus has expanded in recent years, but it remains fragmented and strategically inconsistent. The European Union has increased its engagement through initiatives such as the Global Gateway, a large-scale connectivity strategy designed to finance transport, energy, and digital infrastructure linking Europe with neighbouring regions. It has also promoted the

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Economic and Investment Plan, which supports regional development projects and infrastructure investment across the Eastern Partnership states. Alongside these initiatives, the West has played a more active diplomatic role by mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This has been done through linking political cooperation to governance and reform standards.

NATO, meanwhile, continues to rely on existing partnership mechanisms such as the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package and Individual Partnership Action Plans. These frameworks encourage defence reforms, joint training, and political cooperation, but they do not provide a credible path towards deeper integration or membership. The US has also remained involved, particularly through diplomatic mediation and support for regional connectivity initiatives, including projects linked to the so-called Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). However, American engagement has been intermittent and largely diplomacy-driven, rather than part of a long-term and comprehensive regional strategy.

The West's approach to the South Caucasus has expanded in recent years, but it remains fragmented and strategically inconsistent.

This pattern reveals a gap between strategic recognition and practical implementation. Although the growing importance of the South Caucasus is widely acknowledged, fragmented western policies are often directed at individual states or sectors rather than the region as a whole. Connectivity projects are rarely coordinated with governance reforms, while security cooperation remains detached from broader economic integration efforts.

The consequences are significant. Isolated conditionality weakens incentives for reform when it is not backed by credible long-term commitments, while selective engagement creates asymmetries that competing powers can exploit. This contributes to uneven institutional resilience, inconsistent investment frameworks, and limited security guarantees across the region. Most importantly, the absence of a sustained strategic framework undermines western credibility, leaving regional actors uncertain about the depth and durability of western engagement.

This strategic incoherence creates a permissive environment in which buffer logic can persist and adapt. By failing to integrate connectivity, governance, and security into a unified approach, western policy does not counterbalance structural vulnerabilities but, in effect, allows them to proliferate. This dynamic is directly relevant to the broader question of whether a return to business as usual in the South Caucasus with Russia is feasible. After all, it demonstrates that current challenges are rooted not in temporary disruptions but in enduring systemic gaps within the existing policy framework.

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Systemic test

The idea that the West can return to pre-2022 patterns of engagement with Russia in the South Caucasus rests on a fundamental misreading of how Russia exercises influence in its neighbourhood. Russia's approach is not reactive or situational but structured around a durable model that seeks to prevent the consolidation of alternative regional orders by maintaining neighbouring states in conditions of limited sovereignty. Instead of depending on large-scale military presence, this model operates through a combination of political leverage, economic dependency, manipulation of unresolved conflicts, and the promotion of institutional fragility. The persistence of Russian influence in regional states and the broader reliance on ambiguity to shape regional alignments illustrate that this strategy remains operational even under the constraints imposed by the war in Ukraine. Under these conditions, any attempt to "normalize" relations without addressing these mechanisms would not stabilize the region but would effectively legitimize their continued use.

The strategic implications of this model are amplified by the evolving role of the South Caucasus within wider European and Eurasian systems. Emerging regional projects are instruments of geopolitical diversification. If the South Caucasus is reconfigured into a buffer space characterized by political uncertainty and constrained alignment, these initiatives become structurally vulnerable, reintroducing dependencies that recent western policies have sought to reduce. The consequences of such a shift would extend beyond infrastructure.

A "bufferized" South Caucasus would fragment the Black Sea security environment by weakening the link between maritime and land-based connectivity, reducing coherence in regional deterrence, and complicating coordination among western and partner states. At the same time, it would signal that indirect forms of influence are sufficient in preventing the consolidation of alternative regional orders, encouraging the replication of similar strategies in other regions. In this sense, the South Caucasus is not only a regional case but a systemic test of whether the West can effectively counter models of influence based on ambiguity and indirect control.

Preventing this trajectory requires a shift from fragmented engagement to a structured regional strategy that directly targets the mechanisms through which buffer conditions are produced. First, the West should treat connectivity as a strategic system and not a set of infrastructure projects. This means integrating transport, energy, and digital corridors into a coherent framework that is supported by regulatory harmonization, financial instruments, and long-term investment commitments. Second, governance and institutional resilience must be elevated from a normative objective to a strategic priority. Support for judicial independence,

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anti-corruption frameworks, and regulatory capacity should be directly linked to the functioning of corridor systems, recognizing that infrastructure without governance cannot deliver strategic outcomes.

Third, western security engagement in the South Caucasus needs to be adjusted to reflect the region's growing strategic importance. Existing partnership frameworks should be reassessed to ensure that efforts to strengthen deterrence and defence cooperation remain consistent with democratic principles. Otherwise, continued security cooperation with states experiencing democratic backsliding may unintentionally legitimize authoritarian governance instead of promoting long-term strategic alignment. Fourth, western actors need to reduce policy fragmentation by improving coordination across institutions. EU, NATO and US initiatives should be integrated into a common strategic framework rather than continuing as parallel and sometimes disconnected efforts.

Finally, western policy must explicitly reject the re-emergence of buffer logic as an acceptable organizing principle in the region. This requires moving beyond reactive crisis management towards the proactive shaping of the strategic environment, ensuring that no part of the South Caucasus is left in a condition of managed ambiguity or limited sovereignty. The objective is not only to prevent the re-emergence of Cold War-style dividing lines, but to ensure that they are not reconstituted in more diffuse and indirect forms under contemporary conditions.

The central implication is clear. A return to business as usual would not restore stability but would instead encourage the reconfiguration of the South Caucasus into a constrained geopolitical space defined by dependency and fragmentation. Preventing this outcome requires sustained, coordinated, and strategically integrated engagement that addresses both the visible manifestations and the underlying drivers of Russian influence. The question is no longer whether the South Caucasus matters, but whether the West is prepared to act in a manner consistent with its strategic significance. Without such an approach, the strategic value of the region will remain only partially realized. The choice, therefore, is not between engagement and disengagement, but between shaping the region's trajectory as a functioning corridor or allowing it to revert to a constrained buffer, with consequences that will extend far beyond the region itself. EE

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Georgia's government takes on the diaspora

NINO CHANADIRI

Georgia's ruling party argues that new restrictions on diaspora voting are meant to protect elections from foreign interference. In practice, however, the changes could make it nearly impossible for many Georgians living abroad to participate in future elections.

In November 2025, the Georgian government announced that Georgians living outside the country would soon no longer be able to vote in Georgian elections from polling stations abroad. To exercise their constitutional right to vote, they would need to travel back to Georgia. The amendments to the election code were passed in a month. Previously, Georgians living abroad were able to vote at polling stations specifically set up for election day. The embassies and consulates were involved in the organizational process to enable citizens to exercise their constitutional rights from abroad.

The Georgian government argues that the new rules are there to limit external interference in elections and to make the process more resilient. The government believes the decision is fully in compliance with European and democratic practices and cites examples from other countries, such as Ireland and Malta. Yet, it raises questions on the motives behind the decision when the country has been experiencing a dramatic democratic backsliding in general. How does it affect the diaspora for whom in practice the decision might mean complete inability to vote; and what does the case say about wider and common practices of securitizing diasporas, including or excluding them from political process to maximize the gains for the regime?

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Effects on diaspora

The recent decision has sparked debate both inside Georgia and among the Georgian diaspora abroad, as it will in practice likely make participation in elections far more difficult. Until now, Georgian citizens living abroad could vote in person at designated polling stations set up in different countries. Even this system, however, posed significant challenges due to the limited number of polling stations, particularly in countries where large Georgian communities are dispersed across multiple regions and cities. For many voters, long distances and travel costs already created serious barriers to participation.

Because of this and other reasons, such as fear of revealing themselves among those not necessarily legally staying in host countries and a mistrust of the election process in general, the voting turnout from Georgians living abroad was always low. During the last parliamentary election in 2024 only about 35,000 people participated, while the number of those abroad is significantly higher. At the same time, the foreign ministry has estimated that the number of Georgians abroad reaches 1.5 million. The current decision exacerbates these challenges even for those willing to participate. Thus, this decision risks almost the complete exclusion of the diaspora from the electoral process.

There are also questions and concerns about the decision from a moral perspective and about "fairness" towards Georgians abroad, given that their share in the country's economy is significant due to the money transfers and financial support they provide to their families. Governmental representatives have been claiming that the recent decision does not take away the right to vote from those living abroad and practically changes nothing, as those who want to vote can return to the country for the elections.

However, imagining one simple, generalized example of a citizen of Georgia living abroad and the challenges they would face – including leaving a job for several days to travel, spending hundreds of euros for tickets, organizing a stay logistically and financially – demonstrates the practical impossibility of participation. The majority of this group might not be able to afford it even though they might have a desire to vote. This leaves the government's argument that the decision does not deprive the diaspora of the right to vote under serious question as, even though on paper it might not state so, in practice it can be interpreted as a deprivation of that right.

Fighting interference or managing risk?

The government of Georgia has framed its decision as a step to prevent foreign interference in elections. The framing itself has been deeply concerning for many, as it portrays the Georgian diaspora as a "foreign force" – or at least as vulnerable

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to being used by external forces to influence Georgian elections. This approach effectively casts the diaspora as a security risk, something to be controlled.

This development should also be seen in the broader context of Georgia's democratic backsliding and the government's increasingly questionable efforts to curb so-called "foreign influence". In recent years, the ruling authorities have intensified pressure on civil society and independent media through the controversial "foreign agents" law, which forces organizations receiving funding from abroad to register as acting on behalf of foreign interests. The law has been widely criticized by the European Union and civil society groups as an attempt to weaken democratic checks and balances by portraying outside engagement as a threat to the state. Framing the Georgian diaspora as a danger to the integrity of elections appears to be a continuation of this broader campaign against actors beyond the government's control.

The Georgian government argues that the new rules are there to limit external interference in elections and to make the process more resilient.

Securitizing a diaspora is not a new political phenomenon. Governments often view diaspora communities either as a potential threat or as a valuable political ally, and their policies tend to reflect one of these two approaches. Some regimes seek to limit the influence of diaspora groups they perceive as hostile, while others invest heavily in maintaining close ties with citizens abroad in order to secure political and economic support. The strategy adopted depends on a range of factors, including the government's ability to mobilize diaspora communities for its own political benefit.

Many states choose engagement over alienation. They invest resources in strengthening connections with their diaspora, supporting community organizations abroad and maintaining cultural and political ties. Turkey is one of the clearest examples of such a policy. The ruling authorities have long cultivated strong links with Turkish communities abroad, and this engagement has often translated into significant political support for the government among diaspora voters. Another case of effective diasporic engagement, specifically in Georgia's neighbourhood, is Moldova, where, for instance, during the elections in 2024, the diaspora played a crucial part in the victory of the pro-European Maia Sandu. This shows that effectively engaging with a diaspora in the voting process can have an effect on political developments. In 2024, Moldova expanded the number of polling stations in diasporic settings to facilitate maximum possible participation, suggesting that the diaspora was seen as a valuable resource by the government.

Georgia's government, however, seems to be choosing the path in diasporic politics that prioritizes framing a diaspora as a "de-stabilizer" for the regime and thus chooses

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to alienate it. Much scholarly work and case analysis suggest that diaspora is often seen as a risk not only in host countries but also by political regimes in countries of origin. In the Georgian case, this can be explained by the results of the previous parliamentary elections. During the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia, which drew significant international attention due to their importance for Georgian democracy, the ruling party lost heavily among diaspora voters. It is often suggested that this happened due to the ruling party's inability to influence diasporic votes and the voting process itself, which, in the local Georgian case, has been highly controlled. A number of serious violations have subsequently taken place according to official reports by election observers. Thus, in the Georgian case, securitizing the diaspora follows the political logic of minimizing risks for the regime. First, it neutralizes the risk that votes from abroad opposing the regime will affect local results that are more controlled by the regime, and second, it takes those votes and political support away from political opponents as well. And if, legally, it would be difficult to officially deprive citizens abroad of the right to vote, in practice, the aim has been fulfilled by significantly complicating voting, making it logistically impossible for many.

European practice?

Officially, there are no international legal obligations for states that would bind them to the responsibility to grant voting rights to their citizens abroad. Many European countries practice a model that allows citizens living abroad to participate in either all elections or specific types of elections. Yet, there are some European countries that do have more restrictive practices regarding voting from abroad.

The government of Georgia has cited Ireland, among other states, to argue that the decision should not be regarded as undemocratic. Indeed, Ireland presents an interesting case of a historically democratic state with one of the biggest diasporas across the world, which also gives significantly limited voting rights to citizens abroad. The country limits those rights to those employed by the state and on a mission abroad, such as diplomats or military personnel.

Approaches to diaspora participation also tend to vary across political parties, with those better positioned to mobilize support abroad generally favouring broader voting rights for citizens living overseas. Importantly, debates in European countries that maintain restrictions on diaspora voting, including Ireland, have in recent years moved towards expanding participation and strengthening the political inclusion of citizens abroad rather than limiting it. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe have encouraged reforms aimed at increasing diaspora engagement in democratic processes.

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Against this backdrop, Georgia's recent decisions point in the opposite direction. Rather than expanding participation, the government appears to be moving from a relatively open system that enabled citizens abroad to vote towards one that risks excluding them from the electoral process. As such, comparisons with European examples cited by Georgian decision-makers are not entirely convincing. Viewed in the broader context of diaspora politics worldwide, the move fits more closely into a pattern in which regimes include or exclude diaspora communities depending on political calculations and perceived risks to their hold on power.

This interpretation becomes even more persuasive when considered alongside the ruling party's broader efforts to tighten control over the electoral process, weaken transparency, and marginalize independent actors such as civil society organizations and the media. In this sense, the new restrictions can be seen as another example of the securitization of the diaspora, which is aimed at minimizing perceived political threats and consolidating the regime's control.

It is also telling that debates over diaspora participation tend to intensify only in the run-up to elections, when political parties begin to assess whether citizens abroad are likely to serve as a political asset or liability. Changes introduced between election cycles often receive far less public attention. Diaspora politics therefore remains an understudied and underreported issue, underscoring the need for greater engagement from both researchers and journalists. EE

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A storm over Lithuania

NIKODEM SZCZYGŁOWSKI

In Lithuania the second half of 2025 was marked by mass protests, the likes of which the country had not seen in a long time. They were caused by a shift in the political landscape following the 2024 parliamentary elections, which resulted in a victory for the Social Democratic Party. From the very beginning, this situation stirred up strong emotions and deepened divisions within society.

"Any efforts aimed at changing a society must, above all, be based on the belief that every person is capable of change. And that this change can be influenced in some way – slowly, carefully, with empathy, by talking to people and using the right words. The moment you lose faith in this possibility, you lose faith in humanity," says the Lithuanian filmmaker Karolis Kaupinis.

In 2019, Kaupinis directed *Nova Lituania*, a film inspired by the interwar visionary Kazys Pakštas who, faced with mounting geopolitical threats, imagined creating a "spare Lithuania" on a distant exotic island. Set against the backdrop of late-1930s Lithuania, the film explores questions of nationalism, identity, and survival through the story of a geography professor's radical plan to save the country.

This year, Kaupinis released a new film dedicated to the tragic events of January 13th 1991, when Soviet troops attempted to crush Lithuania's independence movement by storming key institutions in Vilnius, killing 13 civilians and injuring hundreds. The violence marked a turning point in Lithuania's recent history. Today, Lithuania once again faces new challenges. This time primarily to its democratic institutions.

"The most striking phenomenon we're seeing today is that a certain segment of the society has decided that a world based on certain principles, and adherence to them, are not worthy of respect. According to these people, rules aren't meant to be followed, but to be circumvented, since supposedly 'no one follows them anyway'. Their worldview is based on the belief that anything can be achieved only through

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a peculiar kind of cunning, not through honesty," says Kaupinis. Meanwhile, the rest of the society continues to try to live by established rules. However, they see that their conviction is constantly being called into question and tested.

Drifting backwards

According to Kaupinis, the main problem of today is that state institutions are unable to ensure compliance with these rules and politicians lack the courage to guarantee their observance through their actions. Kaupinis emphasizes that it was the Lithuanian Social Democrats who introduced the elements that led to the eroding of trust in state institutions.

"Contempt for the system of international relations which, in a global context, is epitomized by [Donald] Trump's actions also has a huge impact on us," says the director.

"According to this line of thought, whoever holds power is right. As a result, we are very quickly drifting back towards what we experienced in the 1990s. Not in economic terms, since in that regard Lithuania is a completely different country than it was back then, but in terms of values."

In Lithuania the second half of 2025 was marked by mass protests, the likes of which the country had not seen in a long time. They were caused by a shift in the political landscape following the 2024 parliamentary elections, which resulted in a victory of the LSDP – the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party. From the very beginning, this situation stirred up strong emotions and deepened divisions within society. Despite earlier announcements and campaign promises by the popular politician and party leader Vilija Blinkevičiūtė, the newly formed government was ultimately headed by Gintautas Paluckas, a less prominent figure, while Blinkevičiūtė chose to retain her seat in the European Parliament. Some members of the public viewed this as a form of political manipulation of voters' expectations, to which the Social Democrats responded that voters had, after all, cast their ballots for the party rather than for specific individuals.

Paluckas's government did not last long. After just eight months in office, the prime minister was forced to resign at the end of July 2025, stepping down simultaneously as party chairman. The decision followed a series of scandals revealed by the media in the preceding months. They concerned his past business connections and suspicious financial transactions. After a lengthy search for a suitable candidate, Lithuania's 20th government was formed with Inga Ruginienė as prime minister. Ruginienė was a trade union activist with limited political experience. In Paluckas's government she served as minister of social security and labour.

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Yet it should be noted that the political crisis in Lithuania stemmed less from the Social Democrats' ineptitude or lack of charismatic figures than from their decision to form a governing coalition with Nemuno Aušra ("Dawn of the Nemunas"), which won 14.99 per cent of the vote in the 2024 elections. Led by Remigijus Žemaitaitis, the party appeals primarily to anti-establishment voters through a brand of radical populism. At the same time, Nemuno Aušra remains ideologically difficult to classify. Žemaitaitis frequently invokes "traditional values" and "national pride", rhetoric that in practice is often accompanied by overt chauvinism.

Deeper divide

From the outset, the participation of Nemuno Aušra in the governing coalition provoked strong opposition and discomfort among a significant part of Lithuanian society. This was mainly because Žemaitaitis had been stripped of his seat in the Seimas, Lithuania's parliament, during the previous term for violating the constitution. This happened while criminal proceedings related to his antisemitic statements were also initiated against him. Nevertheless, he succeeded in assembling party lists for the elections, drawing largely on individuals who had failed to find a place in other political groupings or who appeared motivated primarily by the prospect of gaining rapid political visibility regardless of circumstance.

In Lithuania the second half of 2025 was marked by mass protests, the likes of which the country had not seen in a long time.

The party itself, both in its name and symbolism, appeals to a simplistic and romanticized notion of folk culture. Among other things, it employs motifs resembling traditional folk patterns, some of which have been compared to designs featured on the flag used by the Belarusian regime. This implies a form of crude electoral populism. In Lithuania, critics of the party mockingly refer to the party as "Nemunas sausage" – a sarcastic play on words linking *aušra* ("dawn") with *dešra* ("sausage").

Nevertheless, the stimulus behind the protests that began in cultural circles was an attempt to appoint a representative of Nemuno Aušra as minister of culture – a man with no experience or competence in the field, but a relative of Žemaitaitis. Although the protests ultimately succeeded and the nomination was changed to a less controversial Social Democratic representative, this did little to calm the public mood. While part of society perceived the government's actions as a threat to democratic norms, others saw no danger in them at all. This revealed a deeper divide within Lithuanian society: not all citizens view democracy as an unquestionable

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or supreme value. It also raises a broader question: why does the development of democracy not necessarily go hand in hand with a society's growing prosperity?

"This issue requires consideration of the political, social, and cultural context of Lithuania, as well as the changes taking place in the world," says Paulius Gritėnas, a philosopher, political scientist, and analyst. "In my opinion, a rather narrow understanding of how democracy functions has taken root in Lithuania. Democracy is often equated with the electoral process or the functioning of political institutions. If, at first glance, everything seems to be functioning, it is assumed that democracy is working. More abstract issues related to freedoms or rights – processes that are gaining momentum and could affect the efficiency of institutions or the freedom of choice – are downplayed or dismissed as posing no threat. Simply put, we are not yet aware of the potential impact of threats to democracy on our daily lives, our freedoms, and our opportunities as individuals."

Paradox of success

Global trends have also shaped developments in Lithuania. In Gritėnas's view, the Lithuanian information space now functions under conditions similar to those seen in the United States and elsewhere. The speed and overload of information, the dominance of social media over professional and responsible journalism, the fatigue of late-capitalist society, and the weakening of critical and alternative thinking have all contributed to a growing sense of social and political anaemia. Gritėnas does not, however, assess the state of democracy in Lithuania as bad. He emphasizes that in the face of new challenges or global anti-democratic trends, in a small country like Lithuania, all the flaws of the current era and the weaknesses of the social fabric are revealed as if through a magnifying glass.

"The fact that intellectuals have withdrawn from active participation in political life, that civil society lacks strong foundations and has even been deliberately weakened for a long time, and that the concept of democracy is equated with socio-economic prosperity or inertia, as a confirmation of activity, means that the number of defenders of democratic processes is not as large as one might expect from a country that constantly speaks of its ideals of independence and freedom," says Gritėnas.

Lithuania is undoubtedly a country that has come a long way from being a poor Soviet republic to becoming a relatively prosperous EU member state with a well-functioning economy and a relatively high standard of living. The scale of the changes that have taken place in Lithuania from the restoration of independence on March 11th 1990 to the present day is truly impressive.

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At the beginning of the transition, Lithuania, like its neighbours Latvia and Estonia, found itself in a far weaker position than most of Europe. Even among other Central and Eastern European states it ranked near the bottom of the countries embarking on free-market reforms at that time. Estonia was the wealthiest of the Baltic states and of all the former Soviet republics with a GDP per capita of only around 2,700 US dollars. Meanwhile, Lithuania's own figures stood at less than 2,000. This compares with roughly 10,700 dollars in Slovenia, 4,900 in Croatia, 5,800 in the Czech Republic, and 4,500 in Hungary at the same time.

By 2025, however, Lithuania had effectively moved to the forefront among the post-communist countries. The developmental gap separating it from most other former Soviet republics is far greater than it was in the mid-1990s. However, this has now happened in the opposite direction. Today, Lithuania is the undisputed leader in growth and economic (as well as political) transformation among all countries in the region. Over the course of three decades, it has not only overtaken Latvia and Poland but has also nearly closed the gap with Estonia.

Contrary to common stereotypes, for at least the past five years Lithuania has been a country of net immigration, rather than mass emigration. Since 2020, more people have arrived in Lithuania each year than have left. This trend reflects both the return of Lithuanian citizens, particularly from the United Kingdom, and growing immigration from third countries. Alongside refugees from Belarus and Ukraine, migrants have increasingly come from the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as from countries such as India and Turkey.

Litvinism, weather balloons, and propaganda

Large-scale immigration is still relatively new to Lithuania. As a result, the society is only beginning to adapt to these changes, leading to social tensions and an ongoing search for policy solutions. Since January this year, all economic migrants from third countries have been required to demonstrate documented proficiency in the Lithuanian language. At the same time, the presence of a particularly large community of new migrants from Belarus – both political and economic – as well as war refugees from Ukraine, has fuelled heated debates over the widespread use of Russian and the prospects for social integration based on knowledge of Lithuanian.

In the case of Belarusians, the issue of so-called "Litvinism" is frequently invoked by various politicians and social activists. Although the theory itself remains marginal, it is amplified by repeated provocations, such as the appearance in public spaces of Belarusian-language signs bearing the slogan *"Vilnia naša!"* ("Vilnius is ours!"), which understandably is negatively perceived in Lithuania.

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"Litvinism" is a fringe historical theory claiming that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was essentially Belarusian and that only Belarusians can legitimately claim its heritage.

All of this has contributed to growing tensions within Lithuanian society, tensions that have increasingly been exploited by extremist politicians, particularly, though not exclusively, by Žemaitaitis. The Mayor of Vilnius, Valdas Benkunskas, has also called for legislative changes that would require non-EU nationals seeking to extend their residence permits after two years to demonstrate at least a basic knowledge of Lithuanian. He has additionally stated that he would oppose the construction of a mosque in Vilnius. Today, one of Lithuania's mosques is located in Kaunas and traditionally serves the country's historic Tatar Muslim community, which has at times experienced tensions with more recently arrived Muslim migrants, whose numbers now exceed their own.

The migration crisis on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border was followed by a series of hybrid activities orchestrated by the Belarusian authorities.

Lithuania has also struggled to respond effectively to the intense disinformation war waged against it by Russia and Belarus. Parts of the society, including segments of the country's large Polish minority, remain under the influence of Russian-language media and are vulnerable to narratives promoted by Kremlin propaganda. As a result, some perceive the government's often ineffective handling of crises linked to Belarus as evidence that Lithuania itself is "doing something wrong" in the words of Kaupinis. Frustration among the broader population also continues to grow.

The migration crisis on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border was followed by a series of hybrid activities orchestrated by the Belarusian authorities. These included attempts to disrupt operations at Vilnius Airport, located only around 20 kilometres from the border, through the mass release of weather balloons typically used by smugglers. Between October 4th and December 7th 2025, temporary airspace restrictions were imposed over Vilnius airport 15 times due to objects detected coming from the Belarusian side. During the same period, restrictions were also reportedly imposed once over Kaunas Airport.

War of narratives

Clearly, none of this happens in a vacuum. Subversive narratives promoted by both domestic and foreign propagandists are finding fertile ground and a receptive audience, particularly among less educated segments of society and those who

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feel that their personal circumstances have not improved alongside the country's broader development. Compounding the problem, the Lithuanian public broadcaster LRT – one of the country's key public education and information institutions – has itself come under pressure from the ruling populists. At the end of last year, they proposed legislative changes that would make it easier to dismiss the LRT director, alter the functioning of the broadcaster's board, and increase political influence over its operations. Both the journalistic community and the parliamentary opposition opposed these actions, describing them as an attempt to seize control of the public broadcaster.

At the same time, the Council of Europe's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and the Promotion of Journalists' Safety recently expressed concern over LRT's situation. According to the platform, several initiatives currently underway in Lithuania threaten the independence and effectiveness of LRT. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) has already expressed concern over these changes. This sparked further mass protests in defence of LRT's independence. However, as was the case with the protests by the cultural community, not everyone supported them. One thing is certain: social polarization in Lithuania is intensifying, and so far no one has found a way to prevent it.

Subversive narratives promoted by both domestic and foreign propagandists are finding fertile ground and a receptive audience in Lithuania.

Donatas Puslys, a historian, educator and columnist, argues that all of these processes are surfacing simultaneously at a moment when Lithuanian society is grappling with profound uncertainty. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also heightened fears among Lithuanians about their own security.

"I believe that it is precisely in this context that a lack of trust in institutions is revealed, a lack of trust that is also fuelled by disinformation, but we cannot place the blame solely on it, because it merely exploits and exacerbates already existing problems," Puslys says. "Just like in other countries undergoing a transformation, the divide between winners and losers emerged here at some point, which is not an objective reality but rather a socio-cultural construct, within which even people whose living conditions have significantly improved may complain because they feel that certain expectations have not been met," the columnist argues.

In one scene from the film *Nova Lituania*, the president – a fictional character symbolizing Antanas Smetona, the last interwar president of Lithuania – addresses a crowd gathered in a square with the words: "Neither we nor anyone else in the world knows what tomorrow will bring." Later, while listening in a car to the prime minister's report on the threats surrounding Lithuania in a Europe already

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consumed by war, he remarks: "There's a storm over the country. And in a storm… you must trust the helmsman."

"We will sail through; we'll figure it out," the president insists. For Lithuania, navigating the storms tearing through today's world – amid the erosion of an international order based on respect for international law – may prove extraordinarily difficult. Yet it is also a task essential to the country's very survival. EE

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P.S. Lithuania's social democrats voted on June 6th to reshuffle the governing coalition by kicking out the controversial Nemuno Aušra (Nemunas Dawn) populist party and inviting Saulius Skvernelis party – Democrats "Už Lietuvą" (For Lithuania).

"We can see that we are not moving towards greater stability in the country, and the party's chairman may even be becoming more radical. We believe that what society needs today is the opposite: stability, a clear direction, decision-making, rather than political noise," Mindaugas Sinkevičius, chairman of Lithuania's Social Democratic Party (LSDP), told reporters.

The opposition and some Social Democrats from the outset have questioned whether the LSDP should remain in coalition with the controversial Nemunas Dawn populist party led by Remigijus Žemaitaitis. This LSDP movement may temporarily ease some of the tension in Lithuanian society, but it does not fundamentally change the essence of the situation, since it was the Social Democrats who introduced the erosion of democratic institutions, the devaluation of certain political institutions, and a lack of trust in state bodies into Lithuanian politics.

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Hungary's foreign policy post-Orbán

BENJÁMIN LUX

To hope that Péter Magyar will be the complete opposite of Viktor Orbán is too naïve. In foreign policy, the new prime minister may even follow some of his predecessor's paths, but with a more moderate stance. For the moment, the new government appears eager to rebuild relations with the European Union and contribute to a strong Central Europe.

Foreign policy played a significant role in the 2026 election campaign in Hungary. By accusing the opposition of serving the interests of Brussels and Ukraine, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party tried to convince the Hungarian society that only they were able to defend the country and its people from the terrors of war and illegal immigration. The opposition Tisza party – led by Péter Magyar, now Hungary's prime minister – focused mostly on domestic issues. Yet it was certain that once Tisza wins, a more pro-European approach will follow, with a greater focus on regional cooperation.

Make Central Europe great again

Although little was known about Tisza's policies in the area of foreign relations, there were indications that showed the possible direction of a future Magyar government. First and foremost, during the 2024 European Parliament (EP) election, the then newly formed Tisza party joined the moderate right European People's Party (EPP) fraction. This illustrated their more consensus-oriented positions on

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European affairs compared to Fidesz, which co-founded the far-right Patriots for Europe (PfE) grouping in the EP.

The second indication was the introduction of Antia Orbán as Tisza's foreign policy expert in January 2026. Orbán (no relation to neither Viktor nor Balázs from Fidesz) was not only an academic but also served as the ambassador-at-large for energy security of Hungary between 2010 and 2015. In this role, she spoke in front of both the European Parliament and United States Congress, representing the Visegrád Group, thereby maintaining excellent relations with political and economic leaders of Central European countries. Later she joined the private sector, working at energy and telecom companies. When she became a member of Tisza, Orbán emphasized the need to revive Polish–Hungarian friendship and the creation of a strong Central Europe.

The third sign was during this year's Munich Security Conference in February, where Péter Magyar conducted closed sessions with several European leaders (mostly affiliated with the centre-right European People's Party). These included the prime ministers of Poland and Croatia and the chancellors of Germany and Austria. Most of the talks revolved around restoring bilateral relations and strengthening the Central European region – should Tisza win the April election in Hungary. The negotiations with Poland's Donald Tusk stood out, however, as both politicians additionally discussed the need to restore Polish–Hungarian political, economic and cultural ties and to give a new momentum to the Visegrád Group. Finally, the two sides agreed that if Magyar wins the election, his first foreign visit will be to Warsaw.

On April 12th, Tisza won the election with a landslide two-thirds majority, gaining more votes than any party in any election in Hungary since 1990. After the victory, Magyar gave an international press conference outlining his views on foreign policy and shared his thoughts on specific countries.

Starting with general comments, Magyar stressed the importance of adopting a compromise-seeking attitude in EU affairs, and striving to make Hungary a front-runner state in the region. Concerning other issues – similar to his predecessor – Magyar emphasised the significance that ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries have for his government.

Turning to the next point, the topic of bilateral ties centred on Central Europe, Ukraine and Russia. Generally speaking, the new prime minister aims to restore relations with countries with which Viktor Orbán had disagreements. These include Poland, Austria, Croatia and Germany. However, he also argued for the need to maintain and even strengthen ties with those states that Budapest already had good relations. These countries include Czechia, Serbia, Slovakia and the Turkic states (such as Turkey and those in Central Asia).

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Admittedly, Poland has a special place in Hungary's new policy. Magyar reiterated his decision to choose the country as his first international destination (implementing the trip in late May, visiting not only Warsaw but Kraków and Gdańsk as well). He also confirmed his commitment to renew Polish-Hungarian friendship and cooperation, which could lead to an unbreakable bond between the two countries.

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Regarding Austria – which was determined to be the second international destination for the new government – Magyar has placed an emphasis on the history that both countries share. He has already expressed his desire to merge the Visegrád Group with the Slavkov Triangle – a loose trilateral format between Slovakia, Czechia and Austria – with the aim to create a stronger Central Europe within a strong EU. The possibility to further enlarge the group later with Slovenia, Croatia or even Romania was also suggested.

With Germany, Hungary's main trading partner, the goal is to increase political and economic ties. At the same time, the focus is on resolving disagreements and building future cooperation with Croatia. As for the Czechs, Magyar aims to pursue pragmatic cooperation, much like with the Slovaks. It is important to note here that the Beneš Decrees – which included a declaration on the collective guilt of German and Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, resulting in the revocation of citizenship, property confiscations, and forced expulsions – remains a point of contention between Budapest and Bratislava. Robert Fico's government still uses these historical laws to deprive Hungarians (or descendants of Hungarians) of their lands without paying them any compensation.

Regarding Ukraine, which is a country of great interest to the international audience and with which Hungary has had particularly poor relations in recent years, Magyar shares the view of many European politicians of not supporting any fast-track EU integration. At the same time, he has made it clear that no one but Kyiv has the right to decide what territories it should relinquish. The new government also stresses that – as with all of Hungary's neighbours – he will strive for good or even friendly relations with Ukraine, while making sure that the rights of ethnic Hungarians are respected.

Finally, Magyar admitted that Russia is a security risk. Despite this, at the moment of his coming to power Hungary still remains highly dependent on Russian energy. Magyar has promised to revise this energy policy and if needed renegotiate contracts with Moscow. It is thus very likely that the new Hungarian government will diversify the country's energy imports.

More Europe and (a bit) less Russia

With all this in mind, the new Hungarian foreign policy will differ from the previous one in at least two major aspects. First, the government's relation with the EU will improve. Even before his inauguration, Magyar started high-level negotiations with European politicians to facilitate the disbursement of previously frozen EU funds. Moreover, the new government also expressed the intention to

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join the European Public Prosecutor's Office and the Eurozone as soon as possible. In addition, Tisza's membership in the EPP in the European Parliament indicates that the new government aims to have a more balanced approach to Brussels. Yet to hope that Péter Magyar will be the complete opposite of Viktor Orbán is naïve. In some regards he is likely to follow his predecessor's path, but with a more moderate stance. This leads us to the second difference – the perception of Russia and Ukraine.

The new government will no longer be tightly connected to Moscow. While Vladimir Putin endorsed Orbán and Fidesz – as they have served the Kremlin's interest better – the Russian president has never even met the leader of Tisza. Additionally, a key theme of Magyar's campaign was dissatisfaction with growing Russian influence in Hungary, which frequently manifested itself in chants of "Russians out!" (*Ruszkik haza*) at Tisza rallies. Having said that, it is also worth keeping in mind that Hungary is highly dependent on Russian energy – not just in terms of oil and gas, but also nuclear energy through the ongoing development of the Paks II power plant. Although there is political will within Tisza to diversify energy imports, it is also clear that while the process of diversification is underway, Magyar will strive for pragmatic relations with Moscow – as almost all previous Hungarian prime ministers did.

For Ukraine, the most notable change will be the end of demonizing the country and using it for political purposes. Yet, the new government is unlikely to become an open supporter of Kyiv. During the election campaign, Fidesz attacked Tisza for its alleged plans to support Ukraine by all means possible – claims denied by Magyar several times. However, as in Hungary more people still consider Ukraine a threat, compared to Russia, openly supporting Volodymyr Zelenskyy or sending weaponry would be politically risky. Nevertheless, now is a good moment to resolve the conflicting issues between the two countries through constructive dialogue – although Magyar's approach to ethnic minorities will be similar to that of Orbán.

Russian narrative in Central Europe without Orbán

For the time being, the new government in Hungary appears serious and ambitious to contribute to a strong Central Europe, which may culminate in enhanced multilateral cooperation. The general pro-Europeanness, the anticipated decline of Russian influence in Budapest, and a more pragmatic stance vis-á-vis Ukraine, all provide an opportunity for strengthening ties with regional partners.

In contrast to Hungary, a reverse can be observed in other Central European countries, such as Poland, Slovakia and Czechia, where anti-Ukrainian sentiment

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is gaining ground within the societies and the rhetoric of political parties. In other words, the initial positive perception of Ukraine in the region as the victim of Russian aggression has severely declined since 2022. This change is mainly the result of social exhaustion with refugees combined with the indirect effects of the war, Russian disinformation, and populist rhetoric. Yet – crucially – this process has not been accompanied by a significant improvement in the perception of Russia. Considering other regional actors, Austria – a traditionally neutral country – is also quite divided on the issue, and Slovenia too has a minor pro-Russian party. In contrast, Croatia lacks any relevant Kremlin-friendly voice – while some Croats believe that President Zoran Milanović sticks to Moscow's narrative, others find him simply pragmatic.

Notably, there is growing concern that the longer the war in Ukraine continues, the stronger the Russian narrative may become. This risk is compounded by the rise of Ukraine-sceptic political groups, which could create a basis for resetting relations with Russia. Yet, with Orbán out of the game, this process has lost its main regional proponent, which seems to have a moderating impact – as shown by the reactions of regional populist leaders previously seen as likely to maintain their pro-Russian stance.

The new government in Hungary appears serious and ambitious to contribute to a strong Central Europe, which may lead to enhanced multilateral cooperation.

The prime ministers of Czechia and Slovakia were both seen as allies of Orbán in opposing Brussels and expressing scepticism towards Ukraine. Yet unlike his Slovak and Hungarian counterparts, Andrej Babiš, the Czech prime minister, was more pragmatic and did not obstruct EU policymaking through vetoes. As a result, his openness towards Magyar was not surprising, unlike Robert Fico's. The case of Slovakia's prime minister shows that without a strong, ideologically motivated ally – such as Orbán was for Fico – a political survivor could tone down his pro-Russian rhetoric in favour of EU funds and consequently regional cooperation. The selfie posted by Fico on X with his Czech and Polish counterparts (the three – Visegrád – musketeers waiting for the fourth) could be an indicator that Central European cooperation can truly find new momentum, for now without the risk of renewed rapprochement with Russia.

Regional cooperation in a post-Orbán era

Although the idea of a strong Central European partnership dates back centuries, the region's most prominent grouping – the Visegrád Four (V4) – remains far less significant than other formats of regional cooperation in Europe. Unlike

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the Benelux Union or the Nordic Council, Visegrád cooperation was never truly institutionalized, aside from the creation of a common fund. As a result, whenever political will is lacking, the group struggles to deliver meaningful outcomes.

Beyond the early period of Euro-Atlantic integration and the 2015 migration crisis, there have been few issues capable of uniting all V4 members. Russia's war against Ukraine has, in fact, deepened divisions among them, and the region remains highly heterogeneous in its views on Russia. However, as noted above, with Orbán out of power and Fico adopting a more pragmatic stance, differing approaches towards Ukraine and Russia may no longer constitute a major obstacle to regional cooperation. Yet it remains unclear, as to what specific issue could now drive the group forward, let alone how it would address the challenges and questions complicating effective cooperation.

To begin with, it should be noted that regional formats covering much of Central and Eastern Europe and focusing on specific areas – such as the Three Seas Initiative on infrastructure or the Bucharest Nine on security – already exist. What remains absent, however, is a comprehensive, multilateral and institutionalized partnership.

Whether all parties agree on making Central European cooperation resilient, a proper institutionalization should take place – taking the examples of Benelux or Nordic models. Without it, the risk of V4 becoming irrelevant whenever the leaders are ideologically non-aligned will remain in place, which could be further exploited by greater powers to sow division in the region. Needless to say, having a strong Central European group within the EU is not only against Russia's interest, but may also be unfavourable for some member states in the West.

Regarding the question of the group's enlargement – recently proposed by Magyar – it is crucial to remember that cooperation between members of the V4 has already encountered difficulties in forming a common position. Even if the current members were to agree on V4 enlargement – which was never the case before – the question of which states should be admitted remains unresolved. The most obvious candidate is Austria, which has previously expressed interest in joining the group. Meanwhile, Slovenia and Croatia have maintained close cooperation with the format, although neither has formally indicated a desire to pursue full membership.

It also remains undecided which issues an enhanced format would address. Due to historical and size differences, combined with developmental disparity and varying security interests, it would be difficult to reach a common point beyond cultural and economic themes. Yet, due to the current unpredictable nature of global politics, it would be essential to involve security cooperation in a reconfigured regional format. This raises further questions vis-á-vis the members. For instance, Poland's population and economy, access to the sea, borders with Russia

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and Belarus, and a foreign policy reorientation towards the Nordic states means that its security interests are distinct from those of the rest of Central Europe.

All things considered, the most plausible outcome is that – despite the ambition – no substantial changes will likely occur within the Visegrád Group, with the V4 states rather continuing to adhere to the current, relatively flexible form of cooperation. There is a tenable chance, however, considering current developments, that the group may be expanded to include Austria, but there are not yet any other possible candidates. The question of institutionalization – although crucial to initiate – will probably be dismissed by one or several members, as was the case in previous years. An alternative scenario would be to create a completely new platform with new goals and new members, but this too remains highly unlikely.

As the future of NATO and the EU are clearly uncertain and with Russian imperialism continuing to threaten Europe, it is important now that smaller Central European states seek deeper alliances in order to counter-balance the great power politics within, or outside the EU. The new government in Budapest provides a real opportunity to begin such a process. The question is will Central European leaders take it? ~~ÉE~~

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Hungary's new momentum for democratic renewal

GÁBOR ÉNEKES

Hungary's Péter Magyar learned that technocratic politics alone is insufficient, since politics is also largely about identity, community, and storytelling. Thus, unlike earlier opposition forces, Magyar's Tisza did not limit itself to anti-Orbán slogans, but instead brought back something that was painfully absent from Hungarian public life: a nation-unifying narrative capable of transcending political camps.

On April 12th, Hungarian voters chose to put an end to Fidesz's 16-year rule. Viktor Orbán suffered a crushing two-thirds electoral defeat, ending one of Europe's longest and seemingly most entrenched governments. Yet due to the unprecedented constitutional majority secured by the Tisza party, the result means far more than a change of government.

Although the scale of Tisza's landslide was undoubtedly amplified by Hungary's highly disproportional, winner-favouring electoral system, the record high turnout of 79.55 per cent after years of political apathy nevertheless reflects a political will that cuts across traditional camps. Many voters were not simply voting for a new government, but for the promise of completing a democratic transition that had remained unfinished, abandoned, and at times actively dismantled over the past 36 years. The demands are accountability, social renewal, democratic institution building, and a new constitutional order, this time with greater public oversight.

But how was such an extraordinary level of political mobilization achieved, one so powerful that even Viktor Orbán immediately accepted defeat? How did the Tisza movement manage to tap into frustrations and demands that had remained

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politically unaddressed for decades? To answer this, we must first examine Hungarian society's experience with political power, and the long-neglected grievances that are fuelling the current political transition.

From unfinished transition to democratic backsliding

In the 36 years preceding this election, Hungary experienced two major moments of systemic transformation, yet neither produced lasting democratic consolidation. The first was the transition from Kádár-era communism to liberal democracy between 1989 and 1990. Unlike Poland, where the bottom up Solidarity movement drove democratic change, Hungary's transition was largely orchestrated by the political elite and the intelligentsia.

Despite introducing a multiparty system, free elections, and press freedom, much of society remained excluded from institution building and never developed a strong sense of responsibility for shaping democracy itself. Lustration remained incomplete as elites prioritized peaceful reconciliation over confronting the past, a choice that often aligned with their own interests and left many victims of socialism without real closure. As a result, broad social consensus and civic ownership of the new system remained weak. For many, the transition became associated less with democratic freedoms than with industrial collapse, job losses, and regional decline, gradually fuelling nostalgia for a period that had been less free, yet more predictable and seemingly stable.

The second opportunity came in 2010. After years of disillusionment with the socialist liberal governments, Fidesz received an overwhelming two-thirds mandate, promising to correct the failures of the transition and restore stability. Yet this chance also remained unfulfilled. Although the government initially delivered a degree of economic stability, it simultaneously built an authoritarian patronage system while postponing accountability. In many ways, the Orbán regime marked a return to an older political logic, combining Kádár-era paternalism with a right-wing fear narrative centred on external threats, whether those be migrants, Brussels, the Soros network, or the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, constitutional changes, media consolidation, and increasing control over institutions enabled Fidesz to preserve constitutional dominance for four consecutive terms.

Over time, this deepening state capture produced an unusually high degree of political apathy by European standards. Political participation declined, public trust weakened, and many assumed Orbán's system had become nearly impossible to challenge. Yet cracks gradually emerged. Economic stagnation, systemic corruption, and the withholding of around 20 billion euros in EU funds fuelled

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growing dissatisfaction. This was compounded by a major moral crisis triggered by the 2024 child abuse pardon scandal, which led to the resignation of President Katalin Novák and Justice Minister Judit Varga. Over the following two years, unprecedented mass demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands became increasingly common, culminating in the 2025 Pride march, where around 350,000 people mobilized after the government banned the event, making it the largest act of civil disobedience since the fall of communism.

Credible alternative

Yet dissatisfaction alone is not enough. Serbia offers a clear example – despite years of mass protests, Aleksandar Vučić has remained in power. Public frustration must be channelled into a credible political alternative. In Hungary, such an alternative emerged in 2024 through the Tisza movement and its leader, Péter Magyar, who succeeded in transforming long-neglected frustrations into an unprecedented level of political mobilization. But how?

It was almost inevitable that the challenger to such a deeply entrenched authoritarian system would emerge from within the regime itself. Péter Magyar was the former husband of the previously mentioned minister of justice forced to resign, and was highly familiar with the inner circles of Fidesz. This gave him two important advantages: first, Fidesz struggled for a long time to attack him credibly, since he had been "one of them" before. Second, he possessed extensive insider knowledge of the system, and understood the internal workings of Fidesz, and its communication machinery. As a result, he was able to avoid the traps of the government's propaganda apparatus and, through a highly cautious yet effective campaign, dominate public discourse for much of the period following his political emergence.

Tisza achieved overwhelming support among first-time voters, reportedly dominating this demographic with close to an 80 per cent advantage.

In addition, he followed a highly disciplined communication strategy. He consistently engaged only with issues on which he believed he could politically prevail, while avoiding other risky topics that did not necessarily serve his narrative, such as the Pride march from which he remained absent. His communication and agenda-setting dominance is all the more remarkable given that he achieved it in a media environment in which the overwhelming majority of media outlets were aligned with the government. Relying primarily on social media, he nevertheless often reacted more quickly to key political and societal developments than the government itself.

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The effective use of social media was not only a necessity due to Fidesz's control over much of the traditional media landscape, but also an important tool for reaching younger generations who no longer consume conventional media. The style, humour, language, and overall tone of Magyar's videos, texts, and online content were, in big part, designed to appeal to younger, opposition leaning audiences, who had largely been neglected by Fidesz. As a result, Tisza achieved overwhelming support among first-time voters, reportedly dominating this demographic with close to an 80 per cent advantage.

In many ways, this outcome was predictable. It was Orbán himself who admitted that he does not understand today's younger generations, and on several occasions he dismissed their criticism as a fake rebellion. As a result, the youth increasingly developed into a distinctly anti-government subculture in recent years. This was visible in the frequent emergence of anti-Fidesz chants at music festivals, as well as in the growing number of openly government-critical artists and influencers whose reach has expanded to audiences in the millions. Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that, as a symbolic gesture toward younger generations, Magyar organized a massive techno party in front of the parliament building following his inauguration on May 9th.

Winning over the countryside

Tisza managed to gain support not only in the digital sphere, but also in the offline world. Much of this can be attributed to a remarkably simple method, one that previous opposition forces had largely failed to use effectively: extensive nationwide, on-the-ground campaigning and the introduction of locally-organized Tisza "islands". This way, Magyar succeeded in bringing rural Hungary back into politics by visiting more than 700 villages, actively engaging communities that previous opposition parties had often neglected or effectively written off.

At public forums, Magyar answered questions directly and listened to people's concerns, an approach that many voters, unsurprisingly, appreciated. For years, a significant share of rural voters had supported Orbán, yet as face to face political communication gradually disappeared from Fidesz's own practice, Tisza managed to turn this into a political advantage. Despite Magyar's upper middle class background and socialization, he gave the party a distinctly movement-like, grassroots character and succeeded in reaching social groups that had previously been considered reliable Fidesz strongholds.

Compared to previous opposition forces, one major innovation was that Magyar sharply criticized not only the government, but also the entire parliamentary

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opposition. This approach resonated strongly with a general sentiment that had already emerged in Hungarian public discourse: that, due to Fidesz's repeated constitutional majorities, opposition MPs had virtually no influence over parliamentary decision-making. Yet by remaining within the system, they also helped legitimize what many increasingly perceived as a political theatre dominated entirely by Fidesz. Magyar built his critique on the growing sense of disillusionment among opposition voters, arguing that the opposition had failed to offer a credible political alternative, had lost credibility through repeated political bargains, and had become increasingly disconnected from the people they claimed to represent.

As a result, many citizens became deeply cynical not only with the parliament, but with politics itself. Within Magyar's narrative, Fidesz and the (left or right) opposition came to be framed as two sides of the same coin. By aligning himself with neither camp, he was able to build his movement as a quasi-outsider, an approach that appealed strongly to voters. In doing so, Magyar avoided the trap that had consumed nearly every previous opposition challenger, namely forming alliances with compromised parties. Rather than creating an inter-party alliance, Tisza brought together people of different ideological backgrounds and party preferences into a single, new political force.

Magyar also understood the scale of public demand for accountability, justice, and a genuine political reset, including constitutional reform and the rebuilding of democratic institutions. Tisza therefore positioned itself not merely as an anti-government force, but as an anti-establishment movement, making its promise of systemic change appear far more credible.

Unifying narrative

Magyar learned that technocratic politics alone is insufficient, since politics is also largely about identity, community, and storytelling. Thus, unlike earlier opposition forces, Tisza did not limit itself to anti-Orbán slogans, but instead brought back something that was painfully absent from Hungarian public life: a nation-unifying narrative capable of transcending political camps. This offered an inclusive and hopeful populist response to Orbán's exclusionary and polarizing populism, which had long relied on fear, division, and enemy construction. Like Fidesz, Tisza also communicated in simple and accessible language, mobilized emotions, used various national symbols, and offered a shared identity.

A particularly revealing example came just weeks before the election, during the March 15th national holiday commemorating the beginning of the 1848-49 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence, when both major political blocs

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Photo: Istvan Csak / Shutterstock

Despite Péter Magyar's upper middle class background, he gave his Tisza party a distinctly movement-like, grassroots character and succeeded in reaching social groups that had previously been considered reliable Fidesz strongholds.

organized massive public rallies. The speeches delivered at these events highlighted how the two campaigns (despite both being right wing) promoted fundamentally different values. Orbán framed the legacy of 1848 almost exclusively through the lens of national sovereignty against oppressive foreign powers, treating the historical anniversary primarily as a vehicle for contemporary political messaging. Hungarian history was presented as a sequence of externally imposed regimes and national tragedies, with a continuous historical struggle for freedom. In this narrative, threats still come from external actors conspiring against Hungary, most notably Brussels and Ukraine, reinforcing a politics of fear centred on war and national vulnerability.

By contrast, Magyar emphasized social sovereignty and national unity. Without reducing the occasion to day-to-day politics, he commemorated the historical significance of the revolution and argued that Hungary's greatest threat was not external, but internal divisions. As an antidote, he promoted civic dialogue and attempted to broaden Orbán's increasingly narrow definition of Hungarian identity, using the concept of Hungarianness in a more inclusive way. As he repeatedly emphasized: "No left, no right, no conservatives, no liberals, only Hungarians."

The methods described above succeeded because they resonated with deeper collective needs and frustrations within Hungarian society. The unprecedented level

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of public attention and political engagement following the election itself suggests that support for systemic change now runs deeper than before. Large segments of society are following politics closely, expressing opinions, voicing demands, and engaging in public life in ways rarely seen in recent decades. Although the real test of democratic renewal is only beginning, Hungarian society experienced a deeply needed moment of national unity, collective pride, and shared achievement, one perhaps not seen even after the fall of communism. For a country shaped by a history of failed and suppressed revolutions, the peaceful yet decisive nature of this transition made the moment especially meaningful.

A recurring question since the election has been whether Magyar can truly be trusted, or whether he is simply another, more polished Orbán in the making. After all, Magyar is also charismatic, highly ambitious, comes from the political right, and, as a former insider, became deeply familiar with the methods used by Fidesz.

Yet this question risks overlooking something equally, if not more, important: the agency and civic responsibility of Hungarian society itself. For the first time in decades, millions of Hungarians actively participated in a political transformation they can genuinely claim as their own. The more important question, therefore, may not be whether Hungarians can trust the new prime minister, but whether this momentum can help society place greater trust in its own capacity to shape political life, rather than investing all hope in a single leader. The success of this transition depends just as much on citizens remaining engaged, participating in public life, and holding power accountable. Hungary has rarely had a better chance. EE

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The left bench in Hungary is empty

GÁBOR HARANGOZÓ

With a two-thirds majority, Péter Magyar and his Tisza party can push through almost any decision. The question is not whether the new authorities will be more democratic than Viktor Orbán – they clearly are – but whether they will restrain themselves over the long term.

When the new Hungarian National Assembly elected Péter Magyar as prime minister on May 9th 2026, for many the scene was more than a routine change of government. It marked the end of an era. The European Union flag was restored to the front of the parliament building. At the inaugural session, the national anthem and "Ode to Joy" were followed by the Roma anthem, performed partly by Roma children, during which members of the far-right Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) walked out. The image was almost too potent not to become a historical symbol: Europe, Roma dignity, a new parliamentary majority, the visible retreat of the old regime's nationalist and illiberal reflexes – all at once.

Among Hungarians committed to democratic values, the mood is euphoric. Many feel the country is undergoing its second regime change since 1989. Not only has the 16-year Orbán system fallen; the new government's first gestures speak the language of European and rule-of-law restoration. In his inaugural address, Péter Magyar declared that Hungary will no longer be a country without consequences. That sentence expresses the sense of justice felt by millions. Voters expect not just a calmer public life but accountability – not just new ministers but acknowledgement that the privatization of public assets, party-political capture of state institutions, and the humiliation of civil society cannot go unanswered.

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A breakthrough and a risk

This hope is understandable. The Orbán era was not simply a long period of right-wing government. After 2010, Hungary gradually constructed a political system known abroad as illiberal democracy and at home as the System of National Cooperation, or NER. Elections remained formally in place, but political competition grew ever more unequal. The governing party dominated public media, controlled economic resources, redistributed state and EU funds on the basis of political loyalty, and filled the constitutional institutions with its own people. The current turn is more than a party swap. For many, it is a liberation.

For *New Eastern Europe*'s readers who want a less ecstatic picture, the story cannot end here. The Tisza victory is at once a democratic breakthrough and a new structural risk. What happened did not amount to a pluralistic coalition displacing authoritarian power, but a social majority defeating Orbán that was compressed almost entirely into a single party, behind a single leader.

In the 199-seat National Assembly, Tisza won 141 seats – a two-thirds supermajority. Fidesz–KDNP was pushed back to 52 seats, and Mi Hazánk entered with six. There is no left-wing, green or social-liberal caucus in the new parliament. The old opposition parties either fell below the threshold or were politically marginalized. The Democratic Coalition (DK), recently the strongest opposition party, has collapsed: its leadership has resigned, its apparatus is being dismantled, its politicians and voters are scattering. Other parties and other smaller formations did not survive as independent forces.

Thus, Tisza has not simply defeated Fidesz – it has absorbed the entire opposition space. Many old left-wing voters have switched to it, but more has happened. Left-wing and liberal intellectuals who kept their distance from Magyar during the campaign are now seeking contact with the new government. They want to take part in the rebuilding of the country. As advisers, experts or critical supporters, they are looking for their place in the new era. Tisza's popularity has grown since the election; Fidesz's has fallen. In the short term, there is no real demand for a new alternative. Everyone is watching the government.

Team Magyar

From a democratic perspective, however, this is not reassuring. Hungary has barely any meaningful political checks left. There is an independent press, a civil society, an awakened public opinion – but no parliamentary opposition representing a coherent alternative, and no coalition partner inside the government to

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restrain Tisza. The Polish parallel only works up to a point. After 2023, Donald Tusk led a coalition government: alongside the liberal-conservative centre stood centrist agrarian-liberals and the Left (Lewica). In Poland the left is overall weak and often frustrated, but it exists. It has its own voice, ministerial presence and social-policy leverage. In Hungary, there is none of this.

Magyar's government is hard to place ideologically, but its foreign policy and symbolic direction is unambiguously pro-European. His first foreign trips included Warsaw, Brussels and Vienna. The new foreign minister, Anita Orbán (no relation to Viktor), summoned the Russian ambassador after Russian drone strikes hit Transcarpathia, home to a sizeable ethnic Hungarian population. This is a sharp break with the previous government's cautious and often accommodating line towards Moscow. The government promises rule-of-law restoration, the unblocking of EU funds, accountability, and the recovery of public assets.

Péter Magyar's government is hard to place ideologically, but its foreign policy and symbolic direction is unambiguously pro-European.

The cabinet is mixed. It contains market-friendly technocrats, professionals from earlier Orbán governments, liberal intellectuals and policymakers with left-wing roots. In the realm of finance, András Kármán represents fiscal credibility, investor confidence and European economic integration. Transport and major infrastructure went to Dávid Vitézy, a technocratic urban policy figure from outside the old left. The prime minister's office is led by Bálint Ruff, a left-leaning intellectual who comes from circles close to the Hungarian independent media outlet "Partizán". Education went to Judit Lannert, broadly welcomed by the profession. Social democratic and liberal experts have also resurfaced in the policy-making background.

Therefore, it would be inaccurate to say one shade of the right has simply replaced another. Yet, what has happened is that a centre-right, leader-centred party has absorbed many liberal and left-wing experts. This may improve the professional quality of governance, but it does not offer a substitute for independent left-wing political representation. An expert is not the same as a political force. A minister or state secretary can be replaced at any moment. A movement with a social base, by contrast, can exert sustained pressure.

One of the most striking features of the new government's first days was that public scrutiny immediately began to function. In two controversial appointments, rapid corrections followed public criticism. Magyar had initially intended to appoint his former classmate and family associate, Márton Melléthei-Barna, as minister of justice. The nomination drew serious concern, as the appearance of personal loyalty in such a key portfolio would have been particularly troubling. Melléthei-Barna

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eventually withdrew, arguing that "not the slightest shadow" should fall over the political transition. He was replaced by Márta Görög, the dean of the law faculty at Szeged University.

Something similar happened around education. Rita Rubovszky's name met serious resistance from teachers, liberal intellectuals and education experts. In the end, Tisza turned to Lannert, who commanded much broader support. Both episodes demonstrated how the country's society has woken up. When something displeases it, it speaks up. And the new power has responded reflexively.

That is the good news. But this is also where the problem begins. If democratic checks and balances depend above all on whether the government listens to civic and press criticism, the system is not yet institutionally secure. Today Tisza listens. But what if it stops? What if popularity falls, economic difficulties grow, and the cabinet feels critical media or civic actors are obstructing the ongoing "regime change"? With a two-thirds majority, Tisza can push through almost any decision. The question is not whether Magyar is more democratic than Orbán – he clearly is – but whether he will restrain himself over the long term.

A strategic dilemma for the left

Governance also presents a double image. The cabinet looks more expert-driven than any Hungarian government in recent decades, yet decision-making is strongly leader-centred. Magyar's campaign style was highly effective: speaking directly to voters, holding several rural town halls daily, bypassing the pro-government media machine through Facebook and YouTube. In opposition this was understandable, even necessary; in government this takes on a different meaning. If a prime minister keeps announcing personnel decisions, policy shifts and political expectations mainly through his own social media channels, the press becomes an after-the-fact commentator, not a watchdog.

The cabinet looks more expert-driven than any Hungarian government in recent decades, yet decision-making is strongly leader-centred.

Some analysts call this "influencer governance". The term may sound too breezy for the democratic question at stake, but it captures something: direct, personal, platform-based mobilization is not the same as transparent, procedural, institutional government. Democratic restoration is a matter not just of good aims, but of good methods.

This will be particularly important for accountability, which much of Hungarian society expects. The establishment of the National Asset Recovery and Protection

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Office is a strong signal: the government intends to investigate public procurement, concessions, public assets transferred to foundations, overpriced state investments, EU-fund abuses, and private equity vehicles. This is necessary. But what separates rule-of-law accountability from political revenge is not good intentions but procedure. If Tisza follows the Polish "Bodnar model" –proceeding institutionally, on evidence and an independent judiciary – the democratic turn can be consolidated. If political pressure outpaces legal procedure, the reflexes of the old system may return with new content.

All this creates a strategic dilemma for the left. The Tisza government must be supported wherever it genuinely dismantles illiberal dependencies, restores European rule-of-law norms, frees the public media, returns autonomy to education and protects civil society. The democratic framework is the precondition for any left-wing politics. But the left cannot become Tisza's enthusiastic appendage. Its task is to be a social radar, signalling who is being left out of the new era.

The first major conflicts of the Tisza era will not appear in constitutional law, but in the deeper layers of society. The health system has deteriorated, education is overstretched, public services unequal, rural poverty persistent, and the situation of Roma communities in many regions bleak. Worker precariousness will also not be resolved simply because another party forms the government. The 2018 "slave law" on overtime, weak collective bargaining, weak trade union protection, and the degrading wages of the public work scheme continue to demand left-wing answers. If Tisza offers only technocratic, fiscal or middle-class answers, social disappointment will be inevitable.

The left's realistic task is not to establish a new party in haste. There is not enough social base, local infrastructure, or trust for that. The task is deeper: social embedding. The left needs to rebuild its connection to the world of work, trade unions, housing movements, Roma emancipation, green justice causes, young intellectuals and people on the periphery. It needs institutional and intellectual spaces for long-term political learning, not campaign logic. New community and educational initiatives, and their convergence, can play a key role. A new social democratic pole can be built only from below.

A test

The 2029 European Parliament and local elections may be the first serious test. Not because a strong left-wing party will necessarily exist by then, but because it will then be clear whether there is a social network capable of speaking on its own behalf, alongside Tisza and against it. In a healthy democracy, the government is

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constrained not only by its own goodwill, the momentary strength of the press, and civic protest, but also by organized political alternatives. In Hungary, that is what is missing today.

The other name for this danger is Mi Hazánk – for now, a small party with just six MPs. If Tisza's centrist restoration fails to answer social frustrations credibly, disappointment will not automatically move leftwards. Without a left-wing offer, the far right may easily become the most visible parliamentary voice of social anger. Mi Hazánk has already shown that it can manufacture cultural conflict, as the Roma anthem walkout demonstrated. If social discontent is added later, the mixture could be dangerous.

Hungary today is experiencing liberation and a political hollowing out at the same time. The fall of the Orbán system is a genuine democratic success. The Tisza government's first days are encouraging in many respects: European gestures, an expert cabinet, the capacity to step back from contested appointments, the promise of accountability, and openness to social criticism. Yet the parliamentary structure, leader-centred governance, press-bypassing communication, and the absence of an autonomous left mean the story is not yet on safe ground.

The question is not whether Hungary is in a better position after Orbán. It is. The real question is whether the current democratic euphoria can be transformed into a durable, institutionalized and genuinely pluralistic democracy. That will require restraint from Tisza, vigilance from society, and a reorganization of the left. An electoral landslide may help liberate a democracy, but building a just and lasting one demands long-term social and political work. FE

Gábor Harangozó is a former member of the European Parliament and former member of the Hungarian National Assembly. He currently works as programme director for social policy at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Budapest.

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Calls to save the Ohrid region grow in North Macedonia

MIKI TRAJKOVSKI

For nearly five decades, the ancient city of Ohrid and its lake have enjoyed UNESCO protection as one of the world's rare mixed natural and cultural heritage sites. Yet a wave of uncontrolled construction, illegal development and mounting tourism pressure is now transforming the region's historic panorama, and raising the real possibility that Lake Ohrid could soon be placed on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger.

Mass and uncontrolled urbanization is gradually changing the face of Ohrid and Lake Ohrid in North Macedonia, which have been under UNESCO protection for nearly five decades. In 1979, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed Lake Ohrid on the list of natural heritage, and already the following year, in 1980, Ohrid was also listed as cultural heritage. The Ohrid region is one of only 39 mixed sites in the world protected by UNESCO as both cultural and natural heritage. However, in recent years the region has been facing a serious challenge of being placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, precisely due to urban degradation, as well as a number of other problems.

"I still believe that the process of de-urbanization and de-appropriation of the Lake Ohrid shoreline should begin. Everything that has been usurped should be returned, and urbanization as a process should be moved away from the city centre. Without these two elements – de-urbanization and de-appropriation – we cannot achieve more serious progress, and this will be noted in UNESCO missions," says Dejan Panoski, founder of the Day of Lake Ohrid, an initiative which aims to raise awareness for the protection of the lake's unique, ancient ecosystem.

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More harm than good

In recent years, several activities have been carried out to remove illegally constructed structures and urban equipment along the shoreline of Lake Ohrid. These measures were undertaken as part of the country's obligations to improve the protection of the natural and cultural heritage of the Ohrid Region, which is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Particular attention was given to the removal of unauthorized platforms, terraces, hospitality facilities, and other structures that had a negative impact on the natural appearance of the shoreline, biodiversity, and the integrity of the area. These activities are directly linked to the recommendations set out in the reports of the Reactive Monitoring Missions of UNESCO, IUCN, and ICOMOS, carried out in the Ohrid Region on several occasions.

"According to UNESCO findings, urbanization and construction pressure are among the main threats. This involves uncontrolled or inadequately planned construction, especially in the coastal belt and sensitive zones, which directly undermines the integrity of the area," says Konstantin Zdraveski from the Ecology Association Ekomenolog in Ohrid. "There is a serious problem with urban planning. According to reports, some plans are not aligned with protection regimes or are not consistently implemented, and in some cases decisions are made without a full assessment of their impact on the heritage," he adds. Zdraveski says that according to all relevant analyses, this is a systemic problem, a combination of institutional weaknesses, insufficient control, and development policies that are not always aligned with protection principles.

It is time for the growth of the city of Ohrid to be directed away from the old city core, says environmental activist Gjoko Zoroski. "This would be necessary because Ohrid has for decades faced pressure from urbanization, especially in the central urban area and along the lakeshore. Although such development is inevitable, it is becoming increasingly clear that its current concentration in the heart of the city creates more harm than benefit, both for cultural heritage and the environment," says Zoroski.

He adds that the old town core and the city centre have limited space and capacity. "Overcrowding with new buildings, increased traffic, and tourism pressure will lead to a growing degradation of authenticity, as well as infrastructure problems such as water supply and waste management. The solution is not to stop development, but to redirect it. Urbanization should be planned in peripheral areas where there is more space for sustainable settlements with modern infrastructure and as many green spaces as possible. This would reduce the pressure on the city centre and enable more balanced economic development," he says.

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Photo: Zeuslight by Alexander / Shutterstock

The North Macedonian Flag flies above the old town of Ohrid and Lake Ohrid. "Ohrid's cultural heritage is today under serious pressure, pressure that is not only theoretical, but clearly visible on the ground," says Konstantin Zdraveski from Ekomelog.

The National Institute and Museum–Ohrid argues that the city and the entire region have great value as a UNESCO World Natural and Cultural Heritage site. However, they also face vulnerabilities such as illegal construction and excessive urbanization, which damage their authentic appearance. Measures are now being taken to preserve it.

"The state is taking actions to demolish some illegal buildings, has adopted a management plan, and has initiated the restoration of significant sites, but the process is slow and not always consistent. Positive aspects include growing public awareness among the local population and the activities of institutions such as our Institute and Museum-Ohrid, with numerous projects for conservation, as well as for digitization and presentation of cultural heritage. There is increasing discussion about sustainable tourism. The general conclusion is that Ohrid is not "destroyed", but it is not safe either. It is in a delicate balance, if protection is strengthened, it can remain on the World Heritage list, but if uncontrolled development continues, the risk to its UNESCO status is real," says Goran Patchev, the director of the Ohrid Museum.

Patchev says that the latest recommendations from the UNESCO monitoring mission in 2025 are quite realistic and concrete. "They also refer to the Albanian side, as well as to the natural heritage, which is not under the responsibility of our institution. Our institution is only one piece of the mosaic of institutions and

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stakeholders that need to jointly complete the progress report on addressing these remarks. The biggest concerns relate to the rapid urbanization on both our side and the Albanian side. As for individually protected sites and locations, we take care of them as much as the cultural budget allows, which we know is always on the margins," Patchev notes.

Under pressure

After several years of efforts, UNESCO also placed the Albanian part of Lake Ohrid under its protection as World Heritage in 2019. This means that since then, all recommendations from the agency apply to both sides of the lake, i.e. to the authorities in both Skopje and Tirana.

"As for cross-border dialogue at the institutional and operational level, we can say that it is taking place in close cooperation with representatives from the Albanian side, who are also responsible for the cultural heritage of the Ohrid region on their side. We had successful discussions on the sidelines of the 47th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, held in September [last year], in Paris," explains Patchev.

"Ohrid's cultural heritage is today under serious pressure, pressure that is not only theoretical, but clearly visible on the ground," says Zdraveski from Ekomelog. "In the old town, there are visible interventions in buildings that do not always respect traditional architectural values, which gradually undermines the city's authentic appearance. According to findings from monitoring missions, inappropriate reconstruction and extensions are also being carried out on buildings that are part of the protected area. Additionally, the coastal zone is exposed to urbanization, with the installation of platforms, hospitality facilities, and other infrastructure that alter the historical and natural image of the area," Zdraveski says.

> In several parts of Ohrid one can observe serious urban chaos, with inappropriate additions, disrupted architectural lines, and deviations from the traditional appearance.

According to him, it is particularly concerning that the visual integrity of the cultural landscape – the relationship between the city, the lake, and the surrounding hills – is gradually being disrupted. "The construction of new buildings with inappropriate height, volume, and materials creates disharmony in the traditional urban fabric. In some cases, cultural heritage is placed under pressure from commercial interests, where short-term economic gains are prioritized over long-term protection. There is also a risk

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of an indirect impact on cultural heritage through the degradation of the natural environment. Pollution of the lake and the disruption of the ecosystem affect the overall cultural landscape, which is an essential part of the region's value. According to expert assessments, this connection between natural and cultural heritage is one of the most endangered components," adds Zdraveski.

He further notes that insufficient control and the selective enforcement of laws create a sense of impunity, which further encourages the degradation of protected values. According to him, in several parts of Ohrid one can observe serious urban chaos, with inappropriate additions, disrupted architectural lines, and deviations from the traditional appearance. "If these trends continue, there is a real risk that cultural heritage will lose its authenticity, integrity, and recognizability, which are the key criteria for its international status," Zdraveski warns.

Regarding the remark about preserving the authenticity of old buildings, the Ohrid Museum states that the construction materials of traditional old-town architecture-made from natural and easily vulnerable materials-are, as physical matter, destined to deteriorate and are difficult and complex to maintain without sufficient skilled and trained craftsmen.

"Conservators, or guardians of heritage, are obliged to slow down this process as much as possible so that it remains as testimony for future generations. So far, conservation practice in our country has tended to follow the path of least resistance-meaning reconstructions are often carried out using modern materials and new structural elements, while preserving the external appearance. This mainly applies to secular architecture, whereas in sacred architecture, where more durable materials are used, authenticity in both technique and form is more successfully preserved," the museum states.

Living city

"Ohrid is a beautiful place. The lake, cultural heritage, and nature come together as one, and it is precisely this richness that makes it very difficult to manage", says Ron Depik, a conservation architect.

"From a management perspective, this is a transboundary site that belongs to both Albania and North Macedonia, and from that point of view, management is even more complex. Management is key. But it is very, very difficult, because you have nature, culture, heritage, and two countries, Albania and North Macedonia," says Depik.

Sasho Korunovski, a professor at the Faculty of Tourism in Ohrid, says that Ohrid is a living city and that there are ways to manage it. "It is normal that it is difficult

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to manage, many processes happen simultaneously. But even if it is difficult, that does not mean it is impossible to manage," he says. According to Korunovski, the first and most important step is to respect the city's development plans. "We need to start from a good starting point. We have various plans that need to begin to be implemented. We have recommendations that are still on paper, but they need to be applied in practice. In other words, we need to carry out activities in line with what has already been recommended."

Korunovski warns that in recent years the city's panorama has been significantly damaged. "There is a lot of uncontrolled construction in the city. The city's panorama and certain areas have been disrupted. These are issues that UNESCO has already noted, but there have been no improvements. These elements still need to be addressed," the professor says.

In Korunovski's opinion, the system to control the construction is not functioning. Some people propose a construction moratorium, but a moratorium could create even bigger problems. The solution, according to the professor, is controlled construction, meaning building in harmony with the space. In its report published in January 2026, the state auditor found that there are 4,847 illegal buildings in Ohrid, including residential buildings and hotels. The agency also found that out of 456 demolition orders, not a single one had been implemented.

Yet Ohrid is a city with a strong tourism industry, and tourism itself creates certain dynamics that endanger heritage, according to experts.

"What is the standard for protection and how can development be controlled? Because tourism is growing, and tourism is a good thing since it brings economic development, but it is also a threat because it can expand and lead to excessive development driven by tourism needs. That is why I think the focus should be on quality tourism and on respecting nature and culture," Depik says.

Professor Korunoski says that the space must continue to live as it does today, as it lived 100 years ago, and as it will live in 100 years: "We should transform and enrich it within the framework of UNESCO recommendations and inherited values. We should not stop construction, but guide it properly, just as in traffic we follow rules instead of banning cars. If we want to remain part of UNESCO, we must change our behaviour.

Intangible cultural heritage

Experts also argue that mass tourism does not always go hand in hand with the preservation of cultural and natural heritage. "Tourism creates significant pressure. According to international assessments, mass tourism without a defined carrying

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capacity leads to infrastructure overload and the degradation of natural and cultural values," says the environmental activist Gjoko Zoroski.

Goran Patchev from the National Institution Museum–Ohrid says that tourist pressure or mass tourism brings economic benefits but also burdens and damages infrastructure and authenticity. He cites examples such as the insufficient maintenance of some buildings that are in poor condition due to limited funds or poor management, as well as institutional weaknesses, sometimes with delays in implementing protection measures.

"The more Ohrid appears attractive to tourists, the more pressure there is for new residents who strain infrastructure capacities," Patchev says. "I think the problem is not entirely urbanization, because it is carried out within the framework of the General Urban Plan for Ohrid's development, which is based on the Basic Urban Plan adopted even before Ohrid entered UNESCO. This means that development was already planned, and more than 45 years have passed since then. The problem is that in recent years there has been a drastic surge in new construction, not because of local population needs, but because of new weekend property owners and apartment renters."

Experts believe that more can always be done for the Ohrid region, but this requires certain legal amendments that are currently in process.

Patchev believes that in the Ohrid region the price of land should be valued more, and construction should be moderate but high-quality, while at the same time protecting the local population, which carries the spirit of the area – the intangible cultural heritage that has been passed down through generations. "This is a well-known problem in other European historic cities as well, not only here. The difference is that Ohrid is our only pearl, and we must take a more serious approach with the help of the entire state. The same laws, such as those on urban planning, the construction, or illegal buildings, cannot apply equally to Ohrid because it is specific and unique," says Patchev.

How to preserve the UNESCO status?

In order for Ohrid to preserve its UNESCO status, Korunoski says that radical changes are needed. "We need to move from documents to fieldwork, from offices to the field. The question is whether we are ready to act. If we are not aware of the values we have, we destroy them. If we adapt construction to the space, it will be more valuable than poorly integrated buildings." According to him, each problem must be addressed individually.

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"There are no general solutions," he adds. "Ohrid is still not fully prepared, neither politically nor practically, but if we show effort and willingness, we will not be removed from UNESCO. In the end, no one can protect Ohrid from ourselves. We are all responsible – from institutions to citizens. Everyone has their role in this mosaic of responsibility. Ohrid deserves to be on UNESCO and benefits from it, as do all who build here."

Experts believe that more can always be done for Ohrid and the Ohrid region, but this requires certain legal amendments that are currently in the process of adoption. However, they also stress the need for a clear development strategy for the region and state subsidies for municipalities in the region as compensation for the strict protection regime. This is quite restrictive in terms of development, especially in the old town core of Ohrid.

North Macedonia and Albania had a deadline of February 1st 2026, set by UNESCO in July 2025, to fulfil the recommendations and implement the observations in practice. This was to be done in order to prevent the region from being placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Among the experts cited here, this is seen as another opportunity for both countries. UNESCO is expected to conduct a monitoring visit to the region this spring, to assess on-site what has been done so far.

Authorities in Skopje say that the report on the progress made together with Albania has been sent to UNESCO headquarters. "We made major conclusions in the UNESCO commission, formed a crisis headquarters, and were given seven months to intervene. We will see what the recommendations will be in the coming period. Since this is a long-standing problem, as a minister I inherited it, and we did what we could, and I would emphasize that we should expect everything," said North Macedonia's Minister of Culture, Zoran Ljutkov.

Ljutkov concludes that in the past year and a half, significant interventions and efforts have been made in the Ohrid region, but that the period was too short to make major decisions. EE

Miki Trajkovski is a freelance journalist based in North Macedonia. He has contributed to domestic and international media outlets including the BBC, Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, Kanal 77 and others.

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A shared landscape of post-Soviet housing

TEXT AND PHOTOS: KATERINA KOUZMITCHEVA

Across Central and Eastern Europe, panel housing blocks form a familiar and persistent environment – one that carries the traces of a shared political and architectural past. In my project BETONIUM, I approach these spaces not only as physical structures, but as systems that continue to shape perception and everyday ex¬perience. Developed across 11 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the work brings together images from different urban contexts to reveal a visual continuity that transcends national borders.

Built as part of a modernist vision of progress and standardization, these environments were designed to organize everyday life. Today, despite political and economic transformations, their spatial logic remains largely intact. The repetition of forms, materials and layouts creates a sense of a shared landscape that connects cities across the region.

Alongside documentary images, I introduce performative and constructed elements. Through staged gestures, bodies interact with architectural forms, reflecting how these environments are not only inhabited, but internalized.

In the final part of the project, images of housing blocks, printed on a curtain, are transferred across borders and reinstalled in new locations. This gesture creates a symbolic "shared city", questioning where one place ends and another begins, and how this common visual language continues to shape regional identity today. In this sense, BETONIUM suggests that the end of a political system does not necessarily mean the end of its spatial and social consequences. EE

Katerina Kouzmitcheva is a Polish photographer of Belarusian origin, based in Wrocław. Her work explores human interaction, political systems, memory and gender, using photography to question and challenge these forces. She has exhibited internationally, including in Arles, France as well as in Canada, Brazil, Japan, Estonia, Hungary and Poland.

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Minsk, Belarus.

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Installation of a block house from Turec-Boyary, Belarus, printed on a fabric and displayed in Warsaw.

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Human sculpture, BETONIUM

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WHERE EUROPE MEETS ITSELF

From symbol to stage

"If you want peace, prepare for war." The old maxim has returned to European debate with renewed urgency. Yet in Gdańsk, the notion of preparedness has acquired a broader, more nuanced meaning. Here, the question is no longer only how to deter conflict, but how to shape the political and moral architecture of Europe in an era of instability. A city once defined by history is increasingly defined by presence.

For decades, Gdańsk stood as a symbol – of solidarity, democratic awakening, and Europe reclaiming itself. Today, it is evolving into something more tangible: a second political centre, complementing Warsaw, and a meeting ground for decisions that resonate far beyond Poland. What was once primarily a historical reference point is becoming an active platform of influence.

Diplomacy on the Baltic shore

This transformation is visible in the growing rhythm and character of high-level visits. In March, King Carl XVI Gustaf's presence, framed by the Baltic Sea Security Talks, turned Gdańsk into a forum for strategic reflection. Under different geopolitical circumstances, such a visit might have remained largely ceremonial, centred on the long historical ties linking Sweden and the Baltic coast. Instead, it unfolded in the shadow of a profoundly altered security environment, with the Baltic Sea now perceived less as a periphery and more as a frontline of European stability.

In April, President Emmanuel Macron's visit deepened this emerging pattern. Referring to Gdańsk as both "the cradle of Solidarity" and "a symbol of the struggle for freedom," he embedded the city in Europe's living political narrative.

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King and Queen of Sweden
© phot. Grzegorz Mehring / gdansk.pl

At the same time, his message carried a clear contemporary dimension: the values Europe defines itself by are neither self-sustaining nor guaranteed - they require constant political commitment and institutional reinforcement. The visit itself thus functioned as a signal, directed both inward and outward, that European unity is not an abstraction but something that must be constantly reaffirmed through political action.

As historian and diplomatic protocol expert Janusz Sibora has observed, Gdańsk today projects a distinct "moral force" rooted in the legacy of Solidarność. In a Europe increasingly shaped by war, geopolitical rivalry and uncertainty, such symbolic city has regained strategic relevance. Places matter again. Political geography matters again. And Gdańsk holds something that many traditional centres of power struggle to replicate – historical legitimacy that translates into contemporary authority.

May added a more explicitly political layer to this dynamic. Hungary's newly elected prime minister, Péter Magyar, described Gdańsk as "a special place not only in Poland but also in Europe," underlining the deliberate nature of his visit. Donald Tusk reinforced this framing, recalling that he told Magyar he was walking "in the heart of Europe," where "everything that is good in Europe began in Gdańsk – and, more recently, began anew in Budapest."

Emmanuel Macron, President of France
© phot. Grzegorz Mehring / gdansk.pl

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Péter Magyar, Prime Minister of Hungary / © phot. Grzegorz Mehring / gdansk.pl

This deliberate pairing placed both cities within a shared narrative of democratic renewal, suggesting that Gdańsk is no longer merely a symbol of the past, but an active reference point for Europe's political and normative foundations today.

Taken together, these moments reveal a shift in function. Gdańsk is no longer merely a backdrop for diplomacy; it is becoming a political stage on which European leaders project visions of the continent's future.

Towards a centre of gravity

What connects these visits is not their ceremonial character, but their cumulative significance. A single visit may be incidental; a sequence forms a pattern. Gdańsk is not simply hosting dignitaries - it is convening agendas. Security, cooperation, strategic alignment: these are no longer discussed only in capitals traditionally associated with power.

This trajectory will culminate in the upcoming international conference on Ukraine's reconstruction, expected to gather heads of state, prime ministers and representatives of major global institutions. For a brief yet significant moment, Gdańsk will become a hub of decision-making extending far beyond regional politics. Yet even this event should not be read as an exception - but rather as a confirmation of an already visible trend.

The new meaning of preparedness

Gdańsk's evolution reflects a broader transformation within Europe itself. In a context where hard power has undeniably returned, the response cannot

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Baltic Sea Security Talks Conference / © phot.Jan Rusek / gdansk.pl

remain exclusively military. It must also be institutional, intellectual and moral. The structures built today – alliances, legal frameworks, shared commitments – will determine whether Europe remains coherent under pressure.

In this sense, Gdańsk offers a subtle but powerful lesson. Preparation is no longer only about defence - it is about presence. It is about creating spaces where ideas translate into policy, where history informs strategy, and where solidarity becomes practice.

Once a place where Europe remembered, Gdańsk is becoming a place where Europe decides. Along the Baltic shore, the continent is no longer merely reflecting on its past – it is actively rehearsing its future.

Text by Milena Liżewska

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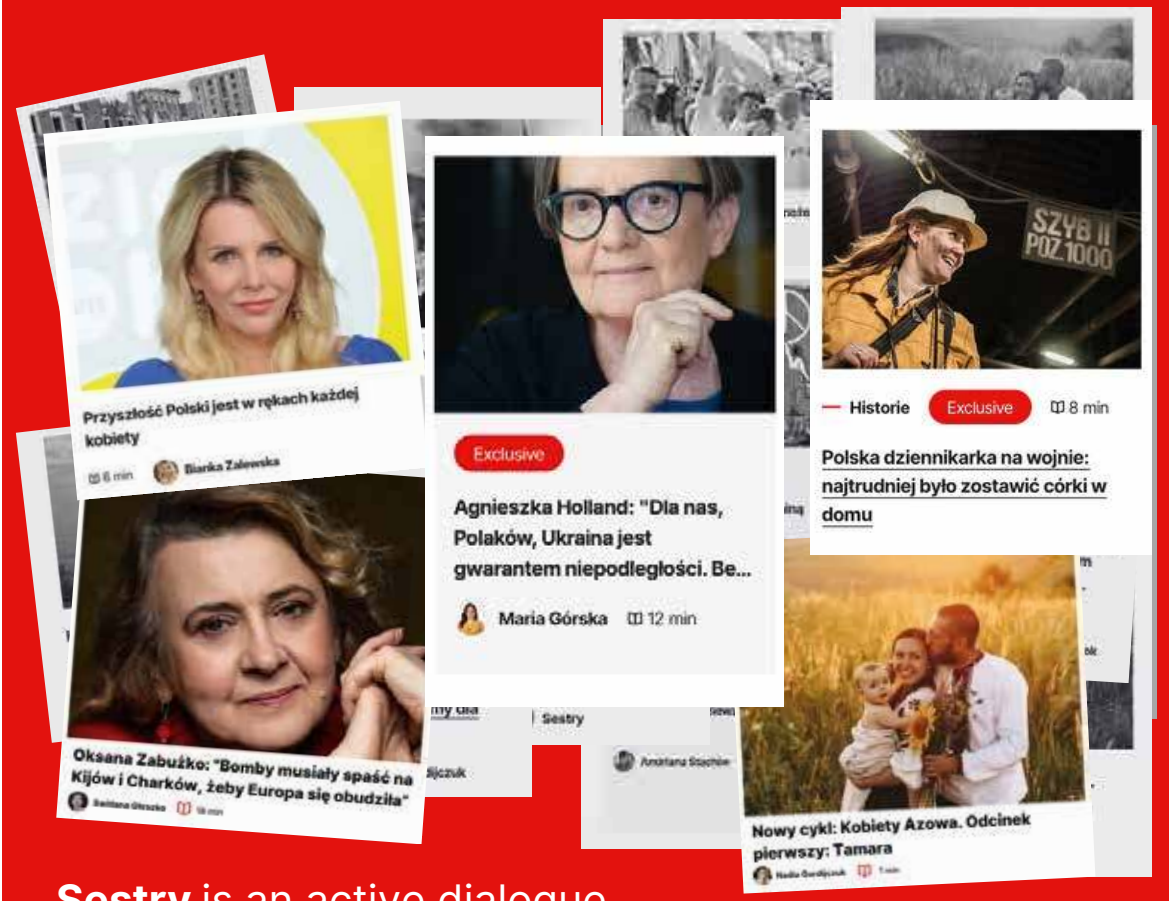

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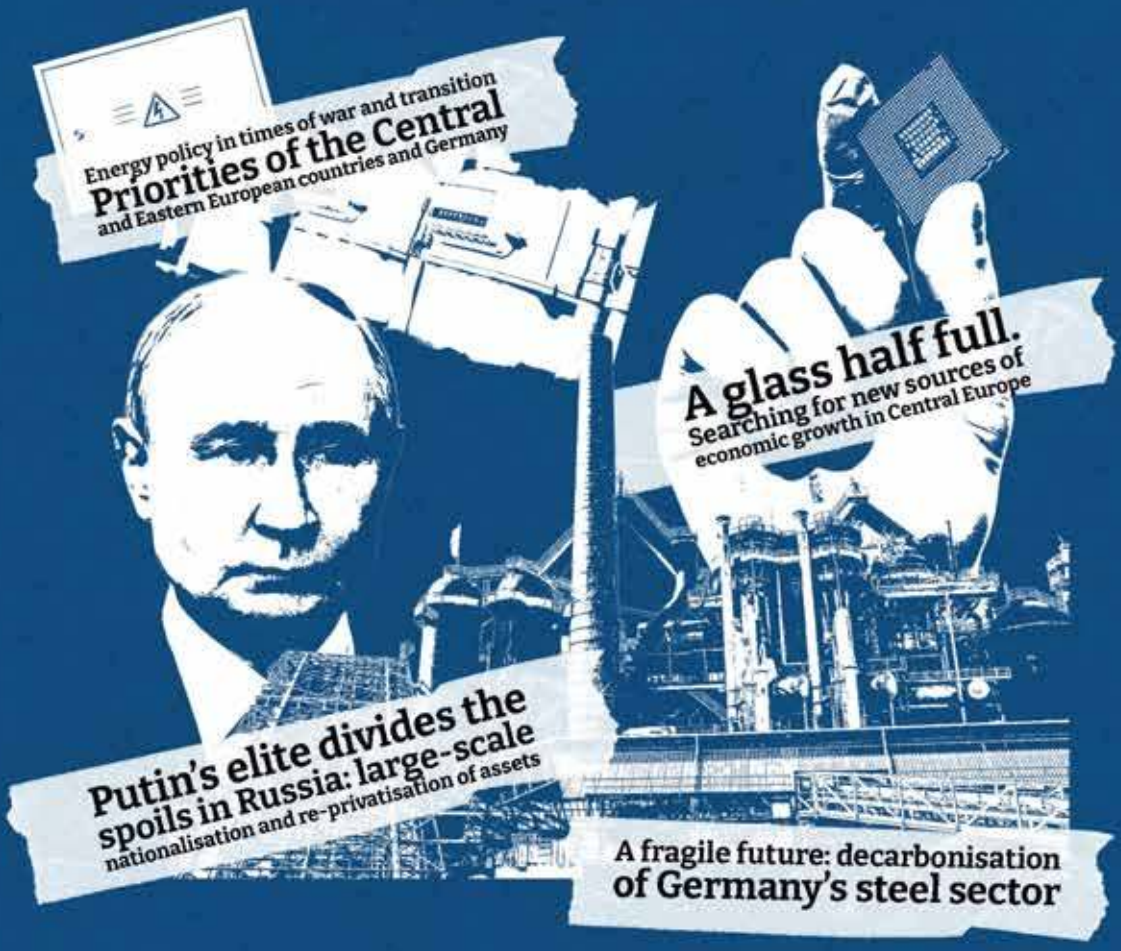

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A father's last recordings before genocide

JP O'MALLEY

A forgotten VHS tape found in a Belgrade second-hand shop became the starting point for an intimate and deeply human story about war, memory and loss. In *The Srebrenica Tape – From Dad, for Alisa*, director Chiara Sambuchi follows a daughter's journey to reconnect with the father she lost during the Bosnian War, while confronting the silences and traumas that still shape lives three decades after the genocide.

Chiara Sambuchi did not intentionally set out to make a documentary about the Bosnian War (1992-1995). "But this intimate story about a daughter looking for her father was hard to ignore," the 51-year-old Italian documentarian explained from her home in Berlin. Sambuchi first heard about it via Jaap Verdenius. A few years ago, the Dutch journalist stumbled upon a collection of old VHS tapes in second-hand shop in Belgrade. "Initially, Jaap couldn't understand the content of those tapes," Sambuchi explained. "But he became fascinated by this man behind the camera, talking to his daughter. With the help of a translator, Jaap was able to piece together a basic outline of this tragic family story."

That original footage ran to four hours and three minutes. It begins in 1991, in the town of Srebrenica, in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina – then still part of Yugoslavia. In the opening shot, an eight-year-old girl, Alisa Smajlović, stands in her backyard, seemingly carefree and happy. She has received a birthday gift from her father, Sejfo. "You put the toy together," she tells Dad with heartfelt gratitude. In the following scene, Sejfo addresses the camera directly. But the mood has darkened. He looks hopeless and helpless. "Alisa," he says. "I got a camera. I've captured lots

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of material from the war. But I've also filmed around the house, the old neighbours, the refugees. To show you how it is now. Don't worry. We will see each other soon. Don't ever forget your father."

Common path

The film then abruptly cuts to a static shot, where grainy black and white dots fill the screen. "When Jaap finished watching this tape, he travelled to Srebrenica and found a way to get in contact with Alisa," said Sambuchi. "After that, he called Antje Boehmert, my executive producer, who asked me if I was interested in working on Alisia's story."

Initially, Sambuchi was sceptical. "I don't speak Bosnian and I'm not familiar with Bosnian culture or the Balkan region more generally, so I didn't think I was the right person to make this," she admitted. "I do, however, remember the Bosnian War. I grew up in Pesaro, Italy, on the Adriatic Coast. When I was a teenager, students from Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia came to my high school as refugees."

For the last 25 years Sambuchi has directed many documentaries about vulnerable individuals on the move. *The Deal* (2022) featured a Nigerian woman rescuing victims of human trafficking in Italy. *Lost Children* (2017) told the story of ten thousand children who vanished crossing Europe's borders during the 2014-15 refugee crisis. Sambuchi has filmed in post-conflict Uganda and rural Rwanda too. "Typically, the documentaries I tend to make are intimate stories, and many are about women," she explained. "Before agreeing to make this documentary, though, I wanted to meet with Alisa to find a common path between us."

Today, Alisa is in her early 40s and lives in the US state of Florida and has a teenage daughter. She first met with Sambuchi while holidaying in northern Italy. The setting was relaxed and informal. They got to know each other by walking and talking in nature. "Alisa and I spent three days together in Italy," said Sambuchi. "After that, I had the feeling that the project might work because we had such a strong connection."

Communicating their respective creative ideas in Italian also helped. "It is, of course, my mother tongue. And Alisa is married to an Italian man, so she speaks the language fluently," the documentary filmmaker explained. "During that first meet-up I remember we both spoke about a feeling of nostalgia you have when you are far away from your hometown."

Alisa no longer considers Srebrenica home. She left it a lifetime ago. *The Srebrenica Tape – From Dad, for Alisa* explores why she departed the small mountainous town and never returned. "Back then, my dad filmed all the time, especially me,"

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Alisa Smajlović, the main character in Chiara Sambuchi's documentary *The Srebrenica Tape – From Dad, for Alisa.*

Alisa tells us in the documentary's opening scene. "My Mum is Serbian. My Dad is Bosnian. It was a carefree time, before it all started, until Yugoslavia collapsed."

That poignant voiceover is accompanied by shots of Alisa as a child dancing and having fun with friends and family at home. Sambuchi's documentary presents an edited version of Seifo's original tape, with added footage from the present day. Alisa still has many questions. To find answers, she travels from her home in the US, back to Serbia and Bosnia, where she meets up with some of Seifo's old friends, and her own close family relatives, including her half-sister.

Too painful to process

Sambuchi also possesses an advantage that Seifo did not have at his disposal when he originally made the tape: the hindsight of history. In one scene, a car drives on a country road at night. Over the radio we hear the voice of Marinko Sekulić Kokeza: "At the beginning of 1991 the secret arming begun," the Bosnian journalist explains. "Yugoslavia had been broken into six countries. In that new system the nationalists took power. The echoes of the war got closer and louder by the day."

In early 1993 Srebrenica had been declared a UN Safe Zone. By July 1995, however, the town had fallen to the Bosnian Serb army, led by General Ratko Mladić.

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His troops murdered 8,000 Muslim men in a few days. Mladić had been given orders to eliminate the Muslim population from Srebrenica and the town's surrounding enclaves by Radovan Karadžić – president and supreme commander of the armed forces of the self-proclaimed entity Republika Srpska. Both men are still serving prison sentences. Their crimes were declared a genocide by The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals.

Alisa left Srebrenica before those events unfolded. Prior to the outbreak of war, she was brought to her grandparents' home in Ljubovija, Serbia. Meanwhile, Seifo and his wife, Dana, both returned to Srebrenica. Their marriage was then falling apart. Seifo believed he could rescue their relationship by following his wife back home. Alisa, we learn, is discovering many of the details of her complex family history, decades later, for the very first time. "Nobody explained anything to me," she tells her mother in one emotive interview.

By July 1995, Srebrenica had fallen to the Bosnian Serb army, led by General Ratko Mladić. His troops murdered 8,000 Muslim men in a few days.

But Dana had her reasons for keeping quiet. Her memories from that time were too painful to process. Following the fall of Srebrenica, she joined thousands of people who attempted to escape through forests and fields to the free territory of Tuzla, one hundred kilometres away. This journey has since become known as "The Death March". It began on July 11th 1995, when Mladić took control of Srebrenica. Dana walked through the forest for 17 days. She was accompanied with a small boy from the locality, Bego.

Today, he is a middle-aged man. With Alisa and Dana, Bego recreates the walk and shares traumatic details. He and Dana survived on food from the backpacks of murdered Bosniaks. They also drank water from streams contaminated with the blood of fresh corpses. Eventually, Bego and Dana managed to make it to Tuzla alive.

Pornography of pain

Sambuchi said it was important to give Dana, and the other women who feature in the documentary space to express their stories. "In most narratives about wars, women don't get enough space," she said. "The narrative is typically about the war itself. But never about the survivors, or about the women who fight. Granted, these women may not always fight on the front lines, but they fight from another position."

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"Women in the Bosnian War were, of course, victims" Sambuchi added. "That is not up for question. But women were very strong protagonists too and I felt it was important to focus on that."

Sambuchi's documentary also features footage from the Bosnian War. Most of it was filmed by western journalists. In one scene we see ethnic cleansing in real time: Bosniak men and women of Srebrenica are separated and driven away in buses. In another, the camera pans to Ratko Mladić posing inside an army tank, wearing sunglasses and smoking a cigarette. During the Srebrenica genocide, the notorious Scorpions unit, a Serb paramilitary unit active during the Yugoslav Wars, filmed a limited number of the killings. That footage shows young Bosniak teenagers with their wrists bound by ligatures and blindfolded, prior to being shot by the Serb militants. This footage was later presented as evidence at the international tribunal. It also features in many other documentaries that have been made about the Srebrenica genocide.

"Initially, I wanted to show this archive footage," Sambuchi said. "We are, after all, talking about a genocide. But Alisa was against it. She said: yes, for you as a journalist, I see your point of view. But think about me, and all the relatives of the victims."

This conversation touched Sambuchi in a profound way. "It made me realize the pain this footage could cause to some of my audience," she explained. "Eventually, I chose not to show it. When I toured the film at various festivals, many people thanked me for not showing the footage. As filmmakers, we don't need to show everything."

Sambuchi believes documentary filmmakers need to respect victims' boundaries when detailing the traumatic events they have suffered. "I call this the pornography of pain," she said. "We need to be careful as filmmakers about this. Through Alisa's feedback I realized that I was abusing the footage. I was so focused on an idea of [justice] that I didn't think about the pain showing the footage might cause to some of my audience."

A conversation

Seifo was killed in the Bosnian War. Sambuchi's documentary contains some allusions to the details. But they are subtle. The director doesn't focus on where and when it happened. Directing the documentary film was a "huge honour" said Sambuchi: "During the three years it took me to make it, I often asked myself: how Seifo would approach this scene? I was also aware that I was using footage from a filmmaker who has since died, and I felt I had to stay true to the film's original idea and aesthetic."

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Fundamentally, it's a conversation – through the medium of film – between a father and his daughter. The chaos of war separated them forever. Some of the scenes are heartbreaking to watch. From Srebrenica, Seifo speaks about witnessing "constant bombs, grenade attacks, and attacks from the air".

He also remembers his last ever encounter with Alisa. "I was back in Ljubovija," Seifo concludes, looking directly into the camera, fighting back tears. "I decided to leave because I had to. They would have killed me, had I stayed. You were sleeping Alisa. I didn't want to wake you. I bent over, gave you a kiss, and left. I went home to Srebrenica. I went to our garden, lied down … I smelled the grass. And I knew that I had come home." EE

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We must learn to live with war

An interview with Jacek Siewiera, former head of the National Security Bureau in Poland. Interviewer: Aureliusz M. Pędziwol

AURELIUSZ M. PĘDZIWOL: We have both heard the words of Nataliya Panchenko, the head of the Euromaidan-Warsaw initiative, who said that the war in her home country, Ukraine, might accompany her for the rest of her life. What impression do those words make on you?

JACEK SIEWIERA: I fear that we must all get used to a situation where an armed conflict is an integral part of our reality. Russia's war against Ukraine clearly shows that the consequences of military action, such as loss of life and economic destruction, occur far from the front line. Cities are on the front line, so to speak. It is they, above all, that are under threat, not only from hybrid warfare but also from conventional military operations, missile strikes and air strikes. The Middle East only confirms this. The capitals of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain have found this out the hard way. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha and Manama – each of these cities has experienced the violence associated with military operations, having been attacked in a war in which they were not a party.

Does this mean that wars which last for a long time, say seven or maybe even 30 years, are not necessarily a thing of the past?

On the contrary, as battlefields become increasingly technologically advanced, the idea that wars can be short with precise operations relying on surprise to achieve rapid political objectives is being dispelled. Such wars are only possible with a significant technological advantage. Large-scale conventional wars will take the form of protracted conflicts, as similar access to advanced technologies will make it very difficult to achieve political objectives through military action.

So what Russia is doing now cannot be regarded as the death throes of a state that would like to be an empire once again?

I believe that, in the long term, the Russian Federation's prospects are bleak.

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Photo: Aureliusz M. Pędziwol

It is, however, a vast, and diverse country, yet one strained by a war. Its economy relies mainly on the sale of raw materials – and subsequently on countries once dependent on fossil fuels, which are slowly moving away from this form of energy production. The future of Russia as we know it is therefore uncertain. This country will certainly become more radical. What remains of it, however, will certainly not be a void. We will therefore have to learn to live for decades alongside a society that has been indoctrinated, deceived and subjected to anti-western propaganda. Children in schools are taught to shoot at the enemy and defend their homeland through acts of cruelty committed against their peers from neighbouring countries. After all, such educational materials are the norm in the Russian education system today.

Do you see the possibility that Russia could attack another European country?

Russia not only possesses strategic nuclear forces, it has also never renounced the possibility of using other weapons of mass destruction, including chemical, biological and radiological weapons. This is why European cities will have to prepare for such threats. I mean this quite seriously. Few people realize that in Russia's war against Ukraine more than 5,000 cases of chemical weapons being used have been recorded to date.

After the elections in Hungary, the European Union managed to unblock a loan for Ukraine and approve another package

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of sanctions against Russia. How significant will the 90 billion euros be for Ukraine?

It means a great deal. Today, Ukraine's military effort is largely funded by the European Union. Its level of dependence on European countries remains very high. Ukraine has tried to compensate for the lack of these funds by sending experts and weapons to the Middle East, where the arms it has supplied have proven effective against suicide drones and other means of aerial attack used by Tehran.

In that sense Donald Trump has inadvertently helped Ukraine…

It seems that Ukraine is carving out a new role for itself both within the global security architecture and in the defence industry. Meanwhile, the decisions taken by the US president show that it is very difficult to predict the consequences of one's own actions. Ukraine is filling a gap where the American arms industry is unable to provide cheap, yet effective, means of intercepting airborne attack weapons, namely simple missiles and drones.

Which cost not millions, but at most tens of thousands of US dollars each.

Exactly. Ukraine has mastered the technology in this area and is now using its capabilities to bridge-finance its own military effort and stabilize the front line. Along this line, small but numerous counter-attacks have recently been observed in many places, which indicate that the morale within the Ukrainian Armed Forces is also rising. These 90 billion euros will not only support arms purchases, but will also enable additional recruitment into the armed forces, all while further boosting the morale of soldiers fighting on the front line and providing them with motivation.

Does this support from the EU provide Ukraine with a chance of winning the war? Of course, it remains an open question what winning actually means…

Unfortunately, if victory means regaining lost territory, Ukraine has little chance of achieving that. And indeed, it is very difficult to say how far Ukraine is from achieving success. We must get used to the fact that this war will be a protracted conflict. That is why it is in Europe's interest for Ukraine to join the European defence industry and the European economy.

And this means membership in the European Union?

In the long term, definitely yes. First, however, the EU itself must develop its own security policy. It must decide what role within the security architecture it should play – coexisting with NATO and cooperating with the United States, its increasingly assertive strategic ally which is scaling back its activities in the European theatre.

Would you agree that the EU is striving to do just that?

This dialogue is certainly ongoing, and we are also seeing concrete and – interestingly – rather swift action by European Commission standards. The EU

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has recently been making a number of sound decisions, though there are certainly some that deserve criticism. The planned internal standardization of armaments, outside the NATO STANAG (Standardization Agreement), is a mistake. Such a move could only speed up arms production in selected European countries; it would not, however, translate into greater competitiveness for the Union as a whole, and certainly not into greater interoperability between armies or the development of the European Union's partnership with the US. The EU also has a great deal of work to do in terms of strengthening the resilience and security of urban areas, i.e. where we are not talking about hard defence capabilities. Crisis communication, the detection and countering of weapons of mass destruction, civil protection and civil defence, and resilience to hybrid threats and sabotage are further major challenges facing the Union. In this area, the Union already has a mandate to act.

How do you assess the evolution of attitudes in Poland and Germany, and perhaps also France, over these four years of war?

I have the impression that within the Weimar Triangle, which brings these countries together, this dialogue was much more dynamic in the early months of the war. I had the honour of accompanying the former Polish president, Andrzej Duda, to the Triangle's meetings, and I remember those discussions. Today, Poland's relations with France – and, since the Christian Democrats came to power, with Germany as well – are being deepened on a bilateral basis. It would be good if the Weimar Triangle were to become a new catalyst for political processes in Europe. It should be permanent, enduring and operate on a more regular basis.

Returning to Ukraine and its arms industry. How have the Ukrainians managed to develop this industry despite constantly being under attack?

They are being attacked and destroyed. They are subject to the same targeting as that carried out by western armed forces in Russia.

What do you mean?

It is no secret that American and European allies are providing Ukraine with intelligence support, satellite imagery, and target identification. The Russians also have their own capabilities in this domain. They use them, among other things, to identify targets within Ukraine, including its arms industry. And they are doing it more effectively than in the early stages of the war. The Russians are also learning.

And the Ukrainian arms production?

The Ukrainians have mastered the ability to decentralize their defence industry in such a way that the contributions of many small plants are combined into a final product, which is manufactured directly to order for commanders, bypassing the entire state central procurement system, and is delivered to the brigades conducting military operations

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in the demarcation zone. I deliberately say "demarcation zone" rather than "line of contact" because these forces no longer actually come into contact anywhere, and in places the strip separating them is as much as 50 kilometres wide. This is a result of the ubiquity of drones on the battlefield. The Ukrainian defence industry has become a model for how to build highly resilient supply chains, in which decentralized production contributes to high efficiency, even if it involves additional organizational effort. This is evident from the numbers of unmanned systems and platforms being produced, which are sent directly into combat and, today, even for export.

Has the Ukrainian defence industry become a model for the EU or NATO?

We still have a great deal of work to do to reach the level of production decentralization that Ukraine has achieved. In Europe, the heavy defence industry still dominates, managed by large conglomerates rather than by a multitude of small entities producing unmanned systems. EE

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The battle for Ukrainian identity

ZACH ROGERS

Russia's war against Ukraine is being fought not only on the battlefield, but also in museums, archives and cultural institutions struggling to preserve the country's historical and cultural memory. From the ruins of Mariupol to diaspora institutions in New York, a growing network of historians, archivists and cultural workers is documenting destruction while resisting the erasure of Ukraine's past.

In the crowded 19th-century European Paintings galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *Red Sunset on the Dnipro* stands out immediately. Its depiction of late sunlight over the Dnipro river, painted in deep reds and burnt orange tones, offers a striking image of the Ukrainian landscape. Over the past three years, the work has become one of the paintings I return to most often at the museum. The piece's author, Arkhyp Kuindzhi (1841-1910) was born in the Karasivka neighbourhood in Mariupol on the shores of the Sea of Azov to Urum Greeks. He grew up learning Greek and Crimean Tatar, later Ukrainian, and then Russian. Although this canvas displays the stillness practiced by the Luminist School, it is impossible not to feel the powerful current of the Dnipro, the beating pulse of Ukraine felt by artists like Kuindzhi.

The vast, unpeopled Pontic-Caspian steppe, often referred to as the "Wild Fields", was never merely a void on the map; it was a laboratory of freedom. As Neal Ascherson explores in *Black Sea*, this was a frontier where the "civilized" world of the Hellenic coast collided with the "barbaric" energy of the nomadic interior. For centuries, the Azov region acted as a sanctuary for the Cossack, dissenters who fled

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the gravity of empires to live in a state of restive independence. Yet, this very freedom made the region a target for imperial settlement. From Catherine the Great's 1778 relocation of the Urum Greeks to the industrial quotas of the Soviet era, the history of the Wild Fields is a cycle of empires trying to bottle up a landscape that, much like Kuindzhi's luminist horizons, refuses to be contained by a single label.

Casualties of empire

In Mariupol in March 2022, the Russian advance for Vladimir Putin's land bridge to Crimea transformed initial border skirmishes into a brutal, claustrophobic siege. While the opening salvos on February 24th had methodically targeted the city's air defence radars at the local airport and shattered the outer apartment blocks of the Skhidnyi district, the violence quickly turned towards the civilian core. By the second week of March, among the most horrifying symbols of this assault were a targeted maternity ward and a children's hospital, accounted in Serhii Plokhy's *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*. Upwards of 50,000 casualties have been officially recorded by forensic imaging done by groups such as Human Rights Watch following the devastating airstrikes.

Plokhy described the aftermath of Mariupol as a "moonscape of rubble". The Arkhyp Kuindzhi Art Museum was also a casualty of that "medieval siege". A strike through the roof of the building damaged the integrity of the institution, setting the museum and neighbouring buildings ablaze. The truth of the war was irrefutable as the bombardments continued, highlighting that even language could not save you. Many of the Russian and Russian-speaking neighbourhoods were devastated in the carnage.

As peace between Russia and Ukraine has been on the discussion table recently, it is easy to be sceptical. During our interview, Corinne Muller from the Penn Cultural Heritage Center, highlighted that what comes next in this conflict remains precarious, as international actors balance solidarity against shifting economic and political liabilities. Many security experts noted that the temporary ceasefire agreed ahead of Russia's May 9th Victory Day commemorations felt less like a genuine step towards peace and more like a short battlefield respite. The predictable fracturing and expiration of that 72-hour window – followed instantly by a devastating resumption of missile barrages against Kyiv's civilian infrastructure and retaliatory drone strikes on Russian refineries – laid bare the transactional emptiness of the diplomatic theatre.

Nevertheless, a pause in the fighting did not halt the cultural dimension of the war. Galleries, libraries and museums continued their efforts to preserve Ukraine's

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story amid ongoing destruction. While Russian forces used the lull to regroup, reports emerged that works by Ukrainian artists, including Kuindzhi, had been "relocated" elsewhere in Donetsk Oblast. After the Kuindzhi Museum in Mariupol was damaged, Russian forces removed countless works from cultural institutions targeted in the attacks.

On the art front

What becomes apparent in times of strife is that one must heed the silences and who is enforcing them. Rose Valland, curator and hero of the Second World War, knew this all too well as she was tasked with aiding the SS in their purge of western art from the galleries of Paris. As documented in *Le Front de l'Art*, her own account of the resistance, Valland secretly transcribed everything she could under the nose of her German occupiers, playing a dangerous game that could have cost her life to preserve the chain of custody for thousands of looted objects.

The vast, unpeopled Pontic-Caspian steppe, often referred to as the "Wild Fields", was never merely a void on the map; it was a laboratory of freedom.

The mantle of Valland and the Monuments Men is frequently claimed in the halls of 21st century western museums as a historical badge of honour. Yet, when the front line shifts eastward, that grand legacy often shrinks into bureaucratic hesitation, a form of selective institutional triage that treats the protection of localized, Eastern European archives as a secondary geopolitical concern.

This selective passivity has deep roots, quietly codified within the West's own academic history. Writing in the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* in 1975, shortly after the Met acquired *Red Sunset on the Dnipro*, the renowned art historian John E. Bowlt published a foundational study titled "A Russian Luminist School? Arkhip Kuindzhi's Red Sunset on the Dnepr."

Bowlt was brilliant in isolating Kuindzhi's audacious spectral contrasts and panoramic space, comparing his luminescent vision to the cosmic light of American masters like Albert Bierstadt. Yet, writing during the geopolitical freeze of the Cold War, Bowlt's framework was inevitably bound by an imperial inertia. By categorizing the master under a singular "Russian" designation, western academia unconsciously participated in the erasure of the polyglot borderlands, setting a 20th-century baseline that treated imperial annexation as an artistic historical fact.

Alina Yefimova is the modern successor who shatters this baseline. Though it was in the autumn of 2018 that she first published her archival discoveries regarding

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the biography of Arkhyp Kuindzhi, her work had transformed by 2026 into a vital forensic weapon against the bloated, revisionist literature of the current Putin regime. It is the ultimate historical irony that this record was originally published within the pages of the state-aligned *Tretyakov Gallery Magazine*. Yet, that edition proved monumental for the memory of a son of Ukraine. The doors of art history were forced open not to an "Arkhip Kuindzhi" born in 1842 to a Russified family, but to the true historical record of 1841: a child registered at the Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church in Karasivka.

This finding laid bare Kuindzhi's Urum Greek origins and polyglot upbringing in Greek and Crimean Tatar, effectively silencing Russia's contemporary imperial designs. The significance of Yefimova publishing this work, having personally studied the region at the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore, was that she extracted Kuindzhi from an imperial canon that had long reduced him to simply another painter associated with the *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers) movement of the Russian Empire. Alongside fellow Ukrainian-born artists such as Ilya Repin, Kyriak Kostandi and Mykola Yaroshenko, Arkhip Kuindzhi was associated with the Wanderers. Yet his artistic imagination remained deeply rooted in the landscapes of Ukraine: the steppe that fascinated Nikolai Gogol and the quiet rhythm of the Dnipro river that runs through so much of Ukrainian history and culture.

Learning to fly

Conversations at the Penn Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Pennsylvania Museum helped me better understand connections across Ukraine's cultural landscape that I had not fully seen before. One important issue in protecting Ukraine's archives is that many records exist only as physical copies. Muller and her team confirmed that the lack of digitization has become a serious vulnerability amid the destruction and looting taking place in cities such as Mariupol, Kherson and Melitopol. The risk is not only that archival records and artefacts may disappear, but also that they could once again be stripped of their Ukrainian context and absorbed into a Russian imperial narrative. In this sense, the war extends far beyond the battlefield, reaching local churches, houses of culture and institutions struggling to preserve Ukraine's cultural memory.

The physical institutions of Mariupol, the Kuindzhi Art Museum and the Museum of Local Lore, were not collateral damage. They were targeted precisely because the archives within them shed light on the historic reality of a sovereign Ukrainian nationhood, therefore it is no surprise that these locations and their contents presented a real threat to the Kremlin.

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The gut-wrenching losses of Ukrainian identity have been recorded since the conflict began by a courageous team at the Ukrainian Heritage Monitoring Lab, or HeMo. Working tirelessly in conjunction with the Penn Center, HeMo also works in tandem with the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative, the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland, and the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab at the Virginia Museum of Natural History. To prevent these scorched sites from being permanently erased from the global registry, the Penn team, alongside Brian Daniels and Corinne Muller, has erected a digital bulwark, transforming raw satellite telemetry and ground-level metadata into admissible forensic proofs.

Highlighted in his work, "International Heritage Organisations and the Case of the Mosul Cultural Museum, Iraq", Daniels explains the methodology carried out by the Smithsonian Institute and the Iraqi State Board of Heritage and Antiquities to investigate other sites that had been harmed in the occupation by ISIS. The combination of FBI methodology and current preservation standards have culminated in a 12-step process for data and archive collection concerning at-risk sites called the "Forensic Heritage Approach".

"While we hope that the need for such documentation in the future is rare, unfortunately the need for such documentation in the present, as well as accountability, remains great," Daniels explains.

Vasyl Rozhko, founder of HeMo and co-founder of the Heritage Emergency Response Initiative states: "Remembrance is an act of resistance." As the destruction continues, Vasyl and his team are working not only to preserve Ukrainian cultural memory, but also to draw international attention to the scale of the threat facing it. The erasure and appropriation of cultural heritage, they argue, should not take place without accountability.

The hours of forensic work, constant communication, and an ad hoc level of expertise with boots on the ground make this process arduous but incredibly necessary. The faces and the people that you meet, Muller tells me, are what we are really fighting for – people protecting their homes and their culture, their lives, and memories of those before. When asked about the practical challenges of conducting lab work in wartime Ukraine, Muller says that local partners described the process as "learning to fly while building the plane". Despite limited resources and constant uncertainty, the partnership has built an extensive network dedicated to documenting the conflict and preserving damaged cultural heritage. Speaking with Muller, it becomes clear that many western institutions have underestimated the scale and effectiveness of the Ukrainian-led effort.

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The New York Sich

The frontline of this archival war does not terminate at the borders of the Donbas or the shores of the Azov. It stretches directly across the Atlantic, finding a vital defensive redoubt within the cultural topography of Manhattan. Where traditional international bureaucracies move with agonizing slowness, the Ukrainian diaspora has long maintained its own horizontal network of resistance. Institutions like the Ukrainian Museum in the East Village and the Ukrainian Institute of America on Fifth Avenue function as modern, urban *siches,* fortified repositories of memory – rooted in the Cossack tradition of self-organization and defence and operating safely out of reach of frontline destruction.

The relationship is fundamentally asymmetrical, yet closely intertwined: Ukrainians defending their culture at home provide the evidence of its resilience and sovereignty, while diaspora institutions in New York help ensure that the wider world pays attention. As Elena Siyanko, the newly appointed Executive Director of the Ukrainian Museum, noted of the diaspora's contemporary mandate, the objective is "to not only represent Ukraine, but to also decolonize Ukrainian culture, continue speaking on the war, and raise awareness on the impact that Ukrainians from the diaspora have had in the arts". This institutional push mirrors the theoretical frameworks of New York-based scholars such as Maria Rewakowicz, Head of Collections, who has long analysed Ukraine as a post-colonial space actively dismantling Russia's metropolitan influence.

The gut-wrenching losses of Ukrainian identity have been recorded since the conflict began by a courageous team at the Ukrainian Heritage Monitoring Lab.

For diaspora leaders like Lydia Zaininger, executive director at the Ukrainian Institute of America, stewardship of these spaces ensures that when grassroots groups like HeMo or independent researchers risk everything to extract an archive from the rubble, those files do not languish in a forgotten database. They become a public indictment on the walls of a global capital, reshaping the permanent canon of art history. Attending programmes at the institute offers an opportunity to engage more deeply with both the war and Ukrainian culture through discussions with authors such as Serhii Plokhy and Yaroslav Timofeyev, performances by musicians like Solomia Stakhiv, and conversations shaped by memories of Kyiv. Through this work, the institution has helped create a lasting cultural space for Ukraine on Fifth Avenue.

To walk back into the 19th-century European Paintings galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art today is to witness the quiet victory of this horizontal vanguard.

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When one looks closely at the updated label beneath *Red Sunset on the Dnipro*, the imperial inertia that John E. Bowlt documented in 1975 has finally cracked. The text no longer yields to the default vocabulary of an empire; it asserts the reality of Kuindzhi's Ukrainian homeland. Even as the illusion of a precarious ceasefire shatters and tanks resume their advance across the grey zones of a fractured map, the permanent ink on a Manhattan museum label serves as a stark reminder: a nation's borders may be temporarily besieged, but its past, when guarded by the immutable shield of the archives, remains absolutely invincible. EE

Zach Rogers is an academic writer and independent researcher based in New York City. He holds a Master's degree in European and Mediterranean Studies from New York University and a Bachelor's degree in history, focusing on cultural memory, archival security, and the legacy of the Soviet era in the post-colonial borderlands. His writing on Eastern European geopolitics and cultural history has appeared in *New Eastern Europe* and *Europinion*.

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Prometheism, post-Russia, and the future of policy in Eurasia

KACPER GRASS

One hundred years ago, Marshal Józef Piłsudski institutionalized a bold vision for Poland's foreign policy in the face of Soviet imperialism and aggression. Today, when Russian revisionism evokes the geopolitical threats of the previous century, western academics and foreign policymakers should look to revive Piłsudski's Promethean strategy to decolonize Russia once and for all.

The year 2026 marks the centennial anniversary of the 1926 May Coup in Poland, when Marshal Józef Piłsudski returned to power in a political environment marked by partisan infighting and conflicting conceptions of the newly independent country's identity and direction. The subsequent decade would be known as the "Sanatian" period in the interwar Second Polish Republic. Piłsudski proposed two clear visions for the future during this time. The first was that of "Intermarium", or a federation of nations between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas that would stand as a bulwark against the expansive ambitions of the Soviet Union. The second was that of "Prometheism", the strategy for achieving an Intermarium. Named after the mythological figure of Prometheus, who defied Zeus by stealing fire for the enlightenment of humankind, the policy aimed to undermine the Soviet Union by promoting national awakenings and secessionist movements throughout the former Russian Empire.

Of course, Piłsudski's vision was itself undermined by Poland's partition between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the Second World War, as well as its

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subsequent re-emergence as an Eastern Bloc satellite state. While it may seem that the Promethean project was destined to remain a historical hypothesis of a bygone era, Russia's revisionist foreign policy today alarmingly recalls the geopolitical realities of the previous century and presents an opportunity for a Promethean revival in western academic and foreign policy circles.

In May 2022, just months after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum convened for the first time in the Polish capital of Warsaw. Composed of political activists and dissidents representing Russia's numerous ethnic and national communities, the forum promotes the decolonization of the Russian Federation's non-Russian regions through the pursuit of independence for the country's non-Russian peoples. As its goal, the forum proposes to counter Russian imperialism by creating an "Intermarium" alliance of free and democratic nations between the Arctic and Baltic Seas in the north, the Adriatic and Aegean Seas in the south, and the Black and Caspian Seas in the east. Although the proposal has garnered interest among certain academics and policymakers in Central and Eastern Europe, the forum's calls for international support have largely fallen on deaf ears in Western Europe and the United States. This outreach has even evoked criticism that attempts to decolonize Russia would only lead to the spread of conflict and violence throughout Eurasia.

Promethean movements during the Cold War

Throughout the Cold War, the US supported Promethean movements in Eurasia. During the Second World War, the Promethean project was adopted by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), who founded the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations (ABN) in 1943. This group was composed of representatives from Baltic, Balkan, Eastern European, Caucasian, and Central Asian nations either already occupied by the Soviet Union or threatened by the prospect of post-war Soviet expansion. The organization was involved in the armed resistance of the OUN's military wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

During the Cold War, the ABN continued as a clandestine organization, coordinating the activities of anti-communist national movements across the Soviet periphery as well as in the heart of Russia itself. Meanwhile in Paris, the Polish emigrant activist Jerzy Giedroyc published the literary and political magazine *Kultura*, which was influential in promoting Promethean ideas among Eastern Bloc dissidents in search of a strategy for the liberation of their respective nations from Soviet imperialism. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Polish-born national security advisor to US President Jimmy Carter, likewise promoted a Promethean strategy

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of supporting national movements in Eurasia in pursuit of a common geopolitical objective: the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991, it did so along ethnic and national lines. As anticipated by Piłsudski decades earlier, the Soviet Union's fictitious ideology of proletarian internationalism was ultimately exposed as just another historical manifestation of Russian imperialism. Within a matter of months, the former Soviet Union was succeeded by a multinational Russian Federation surrounded by 14 newly independent nation-states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. With a few isolated exceptions like the civil war in Tajikistan and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the secessionist transitions were overwhelmingly peaceful processes. Where other instances of violence occurred, they did so because of Russian meddling and aggression – as in the cases of Moldova's region of Transnistria and the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – or Russia's forceful repression of national movements like those in Chechnya and Dagestan.

Russia's covert soft power strategies are being employed alongside its overt hard power tactics in Ukraine and beyond.

Although Russia has tried to preserve its hegemony in the region through the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States and other international organizations in Eurasia, these initiatives have largely lost their legitimacy as many of the post-Soviet populations realized that national consolidation and improved standards of living could be realized more effectively by turning towards Europe and the United States rather than to Russia.

Russian appropriation of the Promethean approach

In the early days of the post-Cold War period, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously declared the "end of history", an optimistic metaphor for the coming peace in the emerging neoliberal international order. This thesis, however, was countered by Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations", which predicted that the coming world order would be marked not by the ideological conflicts of the 20th century but by a new era of conflicts over culture and collective identity. Since his ascent to power at the dawn of the 21st century, it appears that Vladimir Putin has taken Huntington's words to heart, making it a cornerstone of Russia's foreign policy to exploit ethnic and national divisions wherever they may be to Russia's strategic advantage.

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The Józef Piłsudski monument in Warsaw. Piłsudski's Prometheism was a geopolitical strategy aimed at isolating Russia and freeing the captive nations of Moscow.

Today, Russia's covert soft power strategies are being employed alongside its overt hard power tactics not only in Ukraine but throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond. By pairing its traditional geopolitical militarism with "demopolitical" operations that undermine the cultural and ideational fabric of foreign populations, Russia is effectively spreading its influence further, faster, and more affordably than ever before. However, unlike Piłsudski's Prometheism, which was intended to free captive nations from Soviet imperialism, Putin's demopolitics are a cynical perversion of the Promethean approach for the sole purpose of expanding Russia's imperial interests.

Under the Putin regime, Russia has utilized demography as a weapon in its so-called "near abroad", using it as a pretence for its 2008 war in Georgia to support pro-Russian separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as its 2014 aggression against Ukraine to annex Crimea and support pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. More alarmingly for western observers, however, Russia has pursued a similar, albeit more subtle, strategy outside its immediate sphere of influence. Carefully attuned to the culture wars that have divided western societies in recent

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years, Russian propaganda and disinformation have undermined the stability of the European Union by promoting the illiberal narratives of far-right and Eurosceptic parties like Alternative for Germany or France's National Rally. Perhaps even more consequentially, Russia has supported secessionist movements in member states of the European Union. This was notable in the Spanish autonomous region of Catalonia during the controversial push for an unconstitutional independence referendum in 2017. Extending its influence even to the United States, Russian agents took advantage of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests to deepen social divisions along racial and ethnic lines.

For a Promethean western policy

The persistence and pervasiveness of Russia's demopolitical actions against western societies shows the profound understanding that Russian foreign policy experts have of local, regional, and national identities. Meanwhile, their western counterparts, who know much less about the cultures, values, and identities of Russia's localities and regions, are at an alarming disadvantage. If knowledge is power, as the timeless wisdom informs us it is, then western academics and policymakers concerned with this demopolitical dilemma find themselves in a power deficit compared with their Russian adversaries.

To bridge this gap, western universities and research institutions should prioritize area specialists from disciplines as diverse as philology, history, and political science who study not only Slavic Russia – the traditional focus of western "Sovietologists" or "Kremlinologists" – but also the numerous non-Russian ethnic groups whose national identities have been historically suppressed and subject to policies of Russification. If the wave of national secessions that ultimately resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union caught western Sovietologists by surprise, then contemporary scholars of the region should be motivated to pose and pursue the following research question: under what conditions could a new wave of national awakenings in Russia occur? Given the relevance of this research agenda for questions of international security, public grants should be made available to promote such scholarship in Europe and the US.

In the sphere of foreign policy, western diplomats and intelligence personnel should revive the Promethean proposal to provide both moral and material support for the growing Russian decolonization movement. Just as publications like *Kultura* and broadcasters like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe challenged the Soviet Union's monopoly on information and ideas in the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War, similar initiatives should be established to give dissidents and

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activists from Russia's captive regions a platform for organizing and communicating with communities that currently live under Moscow's strict media censorship.

In addition to the Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum that was founded in Poland in 2022, a similar organization of indigenous and ethnic minority groups known as the Free Nations League was established in Estonia that same year. In Ukraine, the Anti-Imperial Block of Nations has succeeded the original ABN, while the Ukrainian military has created several units of volunteers from Russia's colonized and captive regions: the Bashkort Company and the Siberian Battalion, as well as a new initiative called Nomad that includes Buryats, Kalmyks, Tatars, Yakuts, and other oppressed minority groups from the Russian Federation.

In 2025, the Free Nations of Post-Russia held its annual forum in Washington DC, where it issued the "Washington Declaration" to call for western support for its anti-colonial and pro-democratic project. If the US and other western powers are serious about hitting Putin and the current Russian political establishment where it hurts, then they should answer this call. The world became a more peaceful and prosperous place through the decolonization of the Soviet Union. So too could it become all the more peaceful and prosperous through the decolonization of the Russian Federation. EE

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