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WILL DEMOCRACY SURVIVE?

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DEAR READER,

In recent issues, we have highlighted the critical significance of this year for democracy, given that over 70 countries are holding elections in 2024. While the state of democracy has been debated for years, 2024 may prove decisive for its future. This issue of *New Eastern Europe* examines whether democracy can withstand its current challenges. We explore this question from multiple perspectives and consider trends emerging from our region that may now be influencing other democratic nations.

Despite such factors as globalization and digitalization, which many believed would spread democracy and openness, we see in many countries, including Russia and Belarus, how autocrats have learned to adapt to the 21st century reality. Far right and other extreme forces look to these autocrats and aim to replicate some of the tools and techniques employed by more established autocrats. Certain methods, for example a law on "foreign agents", have even starting making their way to countries inside the European Union. On top of this many of our societies are faced with extreme polarization and social nihilism which makes many wonder if democracy is already a thing of the past. Even voting trends among younger people raises cause for concern.

Admittedly, there is no single solution to reverse these trends, but understanding the symptoms is the first step toward addressing the underlying issues. Democracy activist, Samuel Chu, speaks on how democracy is more than just voting in elections. It requires the desire to want to make a change and then seeking the agency and ability to influence such a change.

Finally, we should not forget those who are literally fighting on the battlefield to preserve their own democracy. It goes without saying, should this battle be lost, the consequences for our own democracy's survival would be severe.

Thank you for your readership and support. Please make sure to stay up with the latest developments by reading the latest stories, analyses and insights from the region on our website at www.neweasterneurope.eu.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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Fighting global authoritarianism

An interview with Samuel Chu, a community organizer for human rights and democracy. Interviewer: Ottilie Tabberer

OTTILIE TABBERER: You are an internationally wanted fugitive. How does it feel to have such a label?

SAMUEL CHU: I've had a lot of opportunities to reflect on my status. It's been almost four years and I think it reflects the fact that fighting and organizing for democracy works. It threatens across borders the regimes that are being targeted. I didn't set out to be a wanted fugitive. It was never my career goal. But what I have always been, looking back on my career, is a serial offender when it comes to making democracy work in places where it hasn't. And that's true particularly in the United States, where I've spent most of my adult life.

Does this give you a boost, a cause for hope?

I am always in this tension, I don't necessarily consider myself an optimist or idealist, I think a lot of people think that I sound like an idealist because I constantly see opportunities for people to acquire political power in ways that they didn't have before. That's how I define democracy. It's not defined by election cycles. It's not just defined by mass large-scale street protests, but it's about whether we can continuously create space for people to exercise their political power where it hasn't been present. In a lot of ways, I think this goes back to my comment during the Forum (referring to the "Europe with a view to the Future" forum in Gdańsk held in June – editor's note) about how I believe in this innate desire people have, not so much just for freedom, but for freedom to act according to their own hopes and dreams. Finding ways to do that is, for me, what democracy is about.

This borderless, human desire for democracy is a powerful idea. But what about the people living within the autocratic regimes of this world, who are subjected to endless

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propaganda and brainwashing? What is freedom to the brainwashed?

My case is a good example. Regimes really like accusing foreigners of inciting democratic activities in their countries. We see this foreign agent law spreading from Russia to Georgia and other countries. I went on tour with Pussy Riot for a few months and obviously many of them are considered foreign agents. We were talking about this idea, and I said that the Chinese government also wants the population to think that I am the one who is somehow planting ideas in the heads, hearts and minds of people in China and Hong Kong, when what we're really doing is reflecting what we have heard and seen among the people in Hong Kong and China.

But this is a long game for regimes like China. They begin with the schools, public commemorations and arrests. Every year on June 4th, even if you just stand at the wrong place, dressed in the wrong colour, they arrest you because they think you might be doing something to commemorate the Tiananmen Massacre. Those are the things that we have to continue to keep a spotlight on so that we can fight this erasure of history. It's definitely a real challenge. In Hong Kong, the Communist Party understands that it will require decades of brainwashing and history rewriting for them to rewire, and that's what they have started.

Again, I don't see the movement as being either you take down the regime or you don't win anything. Every one of these acts of rewriting history, erasing memory, rewriting textbooks and suppressing freedom of thought and speech creates an opportunity for opposition. That's the fight that we have, the act of being able to tell the truth, to continue to tell the truth, for some to even risk their lives to tell the truth, is invaluable in this sense.

Chipping away at the regime can really add up. This grand revolutionary, romantic idea doesn't necessarily exist…

As I said in Gdańsk, I want people around the world to remember that the revolution in Poland started with a very specific but limited right to unions, and because that's where it's built, that's how democracy is created. It's not created by millions of people overthrowing and rushing the palace, but it's by people who recognize that they can build power. And as they build that power, they can begin to imagine what a free reality or future looks like.

You've worked with lots of different international movements. What are the challenges with working with those movements?

A few things come to mind. In the age of social media, our relationships, collaboration and solidarity are often superficial. Real change, particularly when it comes to democratization, requires a lot of resources and a lot of sacrifices. And it requires very deep kinds of relationships and understanding to build to the point where solidarity is not just clicking and retweeting somebody, but

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to be able to say that I'm going to risk my own freedom for yours. That's hard to build and create in this age. I also think the tactics of the regimes have become much more sophisticated.

Due to technology?

Yes, but not only. There's a reason why autocratic regimes are so willing and open to talk about how their political system is better; to indoctrinate the citizenry with that same mentality. The reason why Chinese surveillance works so well is because people are part of the apparatus. You have people on the mainland who report on each other, who are holding each other accountable to what the national security goals are. In Hong Kong, for example, right after the national security law, they started a hotline. It would have been unheard of previously, prior to 2019 in Hong Kong, for someone to call a government hotline to report on someone they know for violating national security. It's a sophisticated way of using both technology and this unabashed way of manipulating the body politic of these countries. I don't know, right now, if we have the adequate political culture and apparatus to counter what the regimes are doing.

How has your role developed at the international level?

I've always been clear that my role was to amplify the aspirations, voices and experience of people in Hong Kong on the world stage. I try to stay authentic because I honestly got tired of having white men try to save Hong Kong, particularly the colonial British. I got tired of watching. So I started with an intention to create a platform where Hong Kongers could speak for Hong Kong in a way that can be translated into American and European politics, which is a tricky combination. Dissidents and opposition movements are really good at talking to their own, and that was the gap that I saw – no matter how courageous, no one in the US or Poland or Britain wakes up in the morning thinking about Hong Kong and what's happening over there. But that's how a dissident thinks; that's how a protester thinks. Someone needs to help to translate that into a way that makes sense politically and culturally to the outside. We have to work hard not to be lazy and allow the propaganda free reign, because there are people in the US and Europe who, based on their own ideology would say that Russia is right, or China is right because we're constantly battling that propaganda.

During the forum in Gdańsk, you said that the most important factor that would stop the Chinese army's invasion of Taiwan would be Ukraine's victory. Why?

We're in a day and age where rarely do we have to incur real costs when it comes to our actions. The invasion of Ukraine opened the floor for international bodies and countries both in Europe and North America, to be able to say that we actually do value what we say and are going to do what we say we will. That's important. Even with all the struggles along the

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Photo courtesy of Samuel Chu

way, and is it perfect? No. But I think that there's some optimism to be had that after two and a half years now, there's still a commitment, even if it's costly.

My point at the forum was that the Taiwanese people see what China has been doing. It's not new to the people of Taiwan. They have been living with this for their whole lives, but I think that there is definitely renewed attention in the last three years on what China has been doing. It is not something that China can ignore. The degrees in which NATO, the European Union, and the US have been willing to both proactively support Ukraine and have these primitive sanctions, which, again, are not perfect, but it's a really important way of making China think twice about any military aggression. I think the parallel has always been there, that both Xi and Putin have this worldview and propaganda that this (Taiwan and Ukraine – editor's note) has always been part of their historic empire. There's a similarity in the narrative and I think China is concerned about what the reaction from the western economies and governments would be. An unconditional victory in Ukraine is by far the best deterrent to really any kind of aggression from China outside of its border.

Freedom isn't a monolithic concept, and it has different layers and interpretations for different movements. How do you work

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with those cross-country movements? How do you build trust?

I travel a lot. I travel a lot because I really want to be in the same room. It's really about being able to hear and learn the stories and the history and the motivations. For me, it's not about "I believe you on social media, and I agree with what you said and what you posted in 144 characters." I have to get to the roots, the roots of what motivates people to fight for what they fight for. I also find a cult of personality at the centre of movements problematic, because you're not encouraging the kind of solidarity and relationship building from top to bottom and across a diversity of leaders. We tend to really want, and I think media contributes to this, to simplify movements into a singular personality. We want to have faces and figureheads. At the end of the day, that doesn't help because it's not helpful democratically to have celebrities driving pro-democracy movements. A celebrity figurehead in a symbolic-driven movement will always have a difficult time collaborating, because the skills, the relationships, and the trust are not reflective and not transferable or reliable.

What about in democratic countries…?

We tend to be overly reliant on democratically elected governments because we somehow believe that simply because they are democratically elected, they will do the right thing in the fight against autocratic leaders. That is not true. It's not inherently in the interests of any government "to fight the dictators", they do so because of the political will of the people who make that happen. For there to be enough power for the people who are indigenous to the country where they are fighting back against the authoritarian regime, there needs to be an equally strong force to make the rest of the world do what we want them to do for us to win. I think so often about people in anti-authoritarian movements. They are more or less screaming at the top of their lungs as much as possible because they feel like they're morally right, and they are, and they're on the right side of history. But to balance the actual scale and to be able to take advantage and get an upper hand requires us to have real political power, not just being right. I think that was always my aim, I wanted to change the way pro-democracy movements see themselves and how the equation is created. It shouldn't be the American government and politicians, protesters in jail against dictators, it needs to be pro-democracy people, both abroad and in those countries, making as many of them – not just governments, but businesses and all of these other entities – do what we want them to do. We see this in the test of Ukraine, right? I was in Berlin when the invasion happened on February 24th and you can tell that people immediately felt a shift. Almost immediately, you begin to see that it's not something that just happened in a country far from you… but you need to aggressively organize people to support this idea of supporting Ukraine in

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spite of the political and economic costs. It turns out that fighting these regimes requires really robust and strong domestic democracies. And we're not necessarily in a great moment of history for that.

When you say "people", who do you mean exactly?

I mean there's a growing fringe ideology that doesn't see democracy abroad as being a priority, and you see this in the US now, along with the worries about the nationalist, extremist growth in Europe. I see the root cause being that people simply don't feel like they have political agency anymore. I don't blame the people who are manipulated to vote for extremist candidates and parties. Again, there's a similarity between the way that power and democracy are experienced and understood by the nationalists, extremists and autocratic regimes. It's about taking away people's individual sense of agency and putting it in the centre of a centralized person or symbol. And that's what I think we're fighting. I also see a lot of, honestly, similarities between my work abroad with people in autocratic countries and people in democratic countries.

What about the lack of voters, especially young people?

This is an unpopular view of mine. I think we did it to ourselves. We have been so narrow and superficial in our understanding and teaching of democracy that we've convinced people that you just need to go and vote. But what I tell people is that – and this is actually why I never ran for office – I find elections and political offices to be too narrow of a definition of politics. My job to promote democracy is not about getting people to vote for me or donate to my campaigns. My job is to teach people to see an issue that they face in their lives, to make them feel like they have the ability, the relationship, the influence, and the direct power to make a change about it. It's not for a person to feel that they are a participant in democracy just because they voted in the last election. What I want them to feel is that this is happening in their community, to make them feel "I'm going to go make that person who is in office, that I put in office, do something about it. And they are going to do something about it because they are accountable to me." It is our own damn fault that we have stripped democracy down to something that is so distant, remote and somewhat disempowered. We've just been promoting a kind of democracy that feeds into this disempowerment and so I'm not surprised that people don't want to vote because voting doesn't give you any power, winning stuff does.

It takes us back to the topic of social media signalling, yet the simple black-and-white outlook is what we need to distance ourselves from.

I've done a lot of voter programmes. I don't do them for specific candidates. I don't start with, "Do you want to go vote?" I start with, "Come to a meeting with your representative. Let's ask for some-

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thing that you want." I want people to aspire to more than just voting. I want people to aspire to run for office themselves. I want people to aspire to defeating a political officeholder who didn't do what they wanted them to. And I want more people to aspire to become fugitives from and dissidents to foreign governments. All of these things, I think, are what makes democracy workable.

You inspire people to run for office, and yet you don't want it for yourself – why?

I don't want to run for office because I can influence so many more things and people. I can influence so many more elected offices. I have helped people influence government at every level from city, county, state, federal and global in ways that I would never be able to do as a single elected official, not even if I was ever going to be the president of a country. That is again a misconception of how democracy works. I look at my 20-plus years of doing this and see I have created more political agency and power than anybody can ever do in a political office. So that is how I see my work. I'm actually glad that the Chinese government at least recognizes the potential in my work. Even if I'm not in my own country, at least I'm appreciated by the people who I think understand political power and democracy pretty well, because they're trying their hardest to keep it from happening. EE

Samuel Chu is a community organizer. He is the founder and president of the Campaign for Hong Kong, which advocates for US and international leadership and policies that advance democracy and human rights for Hong Kongers and works at the nexus of anti-authoritarian and pro-human rights movements globally.

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Contemporary hybrid regimes

LEONARDO MORLINO

If in the expression "hybrid regime" the adjective will be the focus of this short essay, understanding the meaning and implications of the term "regime" is an unavoidable starting point. The subsequent questions will be: How do we define a hybrid regime? Are there different types? And what is the crux of the issue today?

The mainstream notion of regime refers to all government institutions and norms, either formalized or informally recognized as existing in a given territory and concerning a given population. When, more precisely, we look at the patterns that shape the channels of access to the leading government positions, the characteristics of the actors who are admitted or excluded from such access, and the resources or strategies that they can use to gain access, we understand that to have a regime we need some stabilization. If there is no stabilization, we are in a fluid transitional phase that can also go towards either an authoritarian solution or a democracy.

But what does stabilization mean? How long should this situation last? Here, the decision is necessarily an arbitrary one. If we refer to the experience of transitions to democracy over the past decades, since the early 1970s, our experience suggests that there is an institutional stabilization if there have been at least three elections, that is, about a decade. Elections, which also take place in authoritarian regimes, have a stabilizing impact on the existing institutions as they give formal power to a new or even old political elite and legitimize that elite. The problem with this decision is that it comes once a decade is over. From this perspective, it is an ex-post assessment, but we often need an immediate evaluation. Consequent-

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ly, we often are compelled to assess a "hybrid arrangement" or "hybrid situation". This is when we have yet to determine if it will be a regime and how long it will last.

Defining hybrid regime

To better understand a hybrid regime or situation, we should realise that it is a notion that goes against the mainstream competitive theory supported by thinkers such as Robert Dahl from 1971. That theory assumes that if there is competition, complemented by some social or political pluralism, then that competition develops its own dynamics. We can see this during a successful transition to democracy. The very existence of a hybrid regime suggests an opposing reality. That is, that competitive dynamics can be stopped and even reversed for some without returning to the previous situation of authoritarianism, democracy or even traditionalism. This fact has been captured by several authors. Let us add that other expressions have been adopted to refer to the same reality, for example: "illiberal democracies", "competitive authoritarianism", "semi-authoritarianism", "defective democracies", and "partial democracies".

In the end, a definition that is acceptable mainly considers a hybrid regime as "a set of institutions that have been persistent, be they stable or unstable, for about a decade, have been preceded by an authoritarianism, a traditional regime … or even a minimal democracy and are characterised by the break-up of limited pluralism and forms of independent, autonomous participation, but the absence of at least one of the four aspects of a minimal democracy." Following Dahl, the four features are: 1) universal male and female suffrage; 2) recurring, free, competitive and fair elections; 3) more than one political party; and 4) different and alternative sources of information.

Of course, in such a regime, there is an effective guarantee of civil and political rights. Thus, as I wrote in 2021: "the key feature of the definition is that a hybrid regime can be either the deterioration of democracy with some of the characterising aspect of this regime that falls short, or the deterioration of authoritarianism with the break of limited non-responsible pluralism, or also the weakening or transformation of the personal rule that is typical of traditional regimes."

Patterns of hybridity

From an overview of the literature on our topic, three patterns or models of hybrid regimes emerge. The first is competitive authoritarianism. This definition, from

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Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, highlights the existence of "incumbents' abuse of the state places". It is "competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but … not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favour of the incumbent. Competition is thus real but unfair". In this regime, elections occur regularly, and the opposition is not barred from contesting them. What is, however, distinctive about this kind of regime is that the government violates at least one of the three critical attributes of democracy: free elections, the protection of civil liberties, and a reasonable level playing field. Levitsky and Way pay special attention to the necessity of having an even playing field to consider a regime democratic. Of course, they are fully aware that also in a democracy, the incumbent authorities have a competitive advantage. But in competitive authoritarianism, the governing elite routinely abuses state resources; denies the opposition adequate media coverage; harasses opposition candidates and their supporters; and manipulates electoral results. Their model of competitive authoritarianism is supported and consequently strengthened by the empirical analysis of several (35) cases in different areas of the world.

In the illiberal model, the national community comes first and related interests take precedence over the individuals.

Although already present in the scholarly debate, illiberal democracy has become a critical model, especially since the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán started using this expression in a speech in July 2014. Later, Orbán clarified that with this expression, he meant a political regime characterized by the primacy of the nation and Christian values and not by individualist liberalism. In this model, the national community comes first and related interests take precedence over the individuals. In the words of Yascha Mounk, the illiberal model is characterized by the existence of democratic institutions and, at the same time, substantial constraints on freedom of speech, the separation of powers, and the protection of individual rights. These are, of course, the most critical aspects of liberal components of democracy. Despite the success of this model in terms of attention and debate, today, there is no convincing scholarly development concerning the model that differentiates it from competitive authoritarianism. This is true except on one important, even decisive point. This is namely when following the definition of the hybrid regime as suggested above, we consider the first model as a deterioration of authoritarianism and the second as the end result of a democratic crisis. In other words, we refer to their trajectories and related legacies.

Protected democracy is characterized by the coexistence of apparently new democratic institutions and the resilience of powerful veto players, such as the po-

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lice, army, strong economic oligarchies, traditional powers like the monarch, or even forces external to the country. These all heavily condition the regime. The actual democratic procedures, such as universal suffrage; formally correct electoral procedures; and elective posts occupied on the basis of elections and a multiparty system; is constrained by those powers, which eventually limits the guarantees of civil rights and the effective rule of law. Consequently, there is minimal political opposition and, above all, the media are compromised by a situation of monopoly to the point that part of the population is prevented from exercising their rights.

In addition to previous analyses, this author built a data set in 2012 by including the empirical cases that Freedom House assessed as "partially free" for at least ten years and assuming the correspondence between the notion of hybrid regimes and that of partially free. Within this data set of about 60 cases (the precise number changing from one year to another), seven domains of assessment (rule of law; electoral process; functioning of government; political pluralism and participation; freedom of expression and beliefs; freedom of association and organization; and personal autonomy and individual freedom) were considered with its indicators.

Thus, first, if there is a combination of absence/weakness regarding the electoral process, political pluralism and participation, freedom of expression and beliefs, and freedom of association and organization, then we have a limited democracy. Several cases – especially a few African countries – belong to this pattern. Second, if there is a combination of absence/weakness of the rule of law and personal autonomy and individual freedoms, and the absence/weakness of state functioning, then we have a democracy without a state. Several African countries also belong to this category. Third, several cases also have all seven dimensions present but in a rather weak way. Hence, we have a quasi-democracy. Under this category, there are several cases from different areas of the world, with a slightly higher number from Europe.

Key elements to consider today

If the hybrid regime is the point of arrival of a transition to democracy, then two factors create severe impediments to achieving a minimal democracy. The first concerns the effective implementation of civil and political liberties, supported by the development of a rule of law where the magistracy is independent of the political power. For example, in Bolivia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico and Paraguay, among Latin American countries, we see this situation with a poor guarantee of civil and political rights compounded by an equally poor rule of law. In these countries, we can detect the

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presence of active, territorially widespread criminal organizations, high levels of corruption and the inadequate development of effective public institutions. These are essential factors of impediment in several African countries as well. But, if we focus on countries such as Armenia, Georgia, Moldova or even Ukraine, another key negative factor appears. This issue is an external one; that is, in the examples, the high conditioning role of Russia. In a nutshell, the gap between a hybrid regime and a minimal democracy is always paved by external or domestic obstacles that often are intertwined – see Moldova, for example – and only a robust, highly supported leadership might remove them.

If we change perspective and the hybrid regime is instead the result of erosion or also the backsliding of democracy, then the factor we have to point to is the significant undermining of inter-institutional accountability. We have seen this in several countries, such as Venezuela or Turkey, during the 21st century's first decade or in its first steps in Poland after 2015 and Hungary after 2010. We can read the discourse that is proposed by the notion of illiberal democracy as laid out by Orbán in 2018.

Briefly, a significant weakening of inter-institutional accountability means governmental control of media, and the poor to absent independence of the magistracy, especially the Supreme Court or the Constitutional Court. This situation ultimately constrains the activities of the political opposition. Moreover, Orbán made other important economic decisions by using laws and procurement contracts to create a wealthy Fidesz-affiliated business constituency that could finance political campaigns, reward party supporters and operate friendly media outlets.

It is important to stress that the weakening of inter-institutional accountability is unavoidably translated into a consequent weakening of liberal rights at the individual and group levels. The most affected rights concern the personal private sphere, freedom of association and union. When this happens, democracy backslides and the actual transition to a hybrid regime has begun. EE

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Foreign agent laws in the authoritarian playbook

ISKRA KIROVA

From Russia to Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia to Hungary, "foreign agent" style laws have become a preferred instrument for authoritarians to extinguish critical voices, shield their rule from scrutiny and strengthen their hold on power.

By stigmatizing independent civil society, media and other dissenting voices as "Trojan horses", "foreign agent" laws have offered a convenient framing to delegitimize and isolate them. In addition, they have also helped to impose harsh monitoring and reporting requirements and shut critics out of public life. As the promotion of democratic practices and human rights threatens authoritarians' grip on power, foreign agent laws offer a handy tool to discredit these activities by equating them with promoting the interests of a foreign power.

It has not helped that democracies, including the European Union, have entertained foreign influence style legislation as part of the ill-conceived attempts to counter foreign interference. While in the case of the EU, an effort is being made to narrow down the scope of application and build in safeguards to protect civil society, such laws carry the risk of a chilling effect and authoritarian governments cynically use them to justify their abusive legislation.

Targets of foreign agent laws

Foreign agent laws vary but they have a few elements in common. Chief among them is the requirement for groups receiving foreign funds and carrying out broadly defined "political activity" to register as "foreign agents", "foreign representatives",

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or "organizations serving the interests of a foreign power". The publications, communications and other materials of these groups are then labelled accordingly. Such designations have come with further harsh restrictions on activity, intrusive government meddling, and the monitoring of such groups' work. There have also been excessive reporting requirements, penalties for alleged non-compliance, and the outright closure of organizations.

The notion of "political activity" in these laws can involve anything from advocacy, research, legal or policy analysis, and other activities aimed at influencing public policy, to organizing public debates, events, rallies and demonstrations. Other activities include conducting or participating in election monitoring; carrying out public opinion surveys; disseminating legal or expert opinions; monitoring the work of government institutions; and a whole host of legitimate civil society activities.

The primary target of these laws are civil society and media organizations – not-for-profit lobbying groups, or other commercial organizations engaged in the same type of activities. The laws apply regardless of whether foreign donations come from state or non-state sources, or whether the groups carry out activities on behalf of the foreign donor. Foreign agent laws have been found to violate freedom of association and to discriminate against non-profit groups and media by various international bodies such as the UN Human Rights Committee, the European Court of Human Rights, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

The UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has repeatedly emphasized that the ability to seek and receive resources from both domestic and foreign sources is an integral and vital part of the right to freedom of association, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Russian origins

The archetypal foreign agent law is Russia's 2012 legislation on regulating the activities of non-commercial organizations performing the function of "foreign agents" ("law on foreign agents"). Adopted just months after Vladimir Putin's return as president of Russia in the wake of large-scale protests against his rule, the law was a foundation for the Kremlin's entrenching authoritarianism and a precursor to the wide-scale repression to come.

It has resulted in the closure or decimation of the activity of a wide swathe of groups, including prominent human rights organizations; anti-corruption, environ-

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mental and polling groups; service providers working on issues such as HIV prevention and diabetes care; media organizations; and others. Many organizations have closed down on their own, citing stigmatizing labelling, a lack of resources to cope with overwhelming reporting requirements, and a lack of funds to pay the fines.

Successive amendments have expanded the scope of the law to the point that it could now apply to almost anyone. As of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, authorities no longer need to prove any foreign funding as the legislation was drastically extended to include any individual or organization deemed to be under vaguely defined "foreign influence". Amendments also exclude alleged "foreign agents" from many aspects of public life, such as the civil service, elected office, teaching children, etc. Penalties range from hefty fines to up to five years in prison.

Russian authorities also included opposition to the war and support of Ukraine to justify numerous "foreign agent" designations. In the first two years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the list of foreign agents more than doubled, from 336 to over 700 at the end of 2023. In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russia's law violates the right to freedom of assembly and association but Russia – by then no longer a member of the Council of Europe – ignored the ruling.

In Russia, but also elsewhere, "foreign agent" laws appeared in the context of a vibrant public sphere as a method to advance autocracy. Hardened authoritarian states – the likes of Turkmenistan – where no civil society was ever allowed to develop from the moment the Soviet Union broke up – hardly need a "foreign agent" law. The experience of what followed Russia's adoption of the law on "foreign agents" does not bode well for what is to come in countries that have recently passed similar legislation, such as Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Punishing critics

On May 14th this year the Georgian parliament passed a "foreign agent" style law that requires any civil society and media organizations receiving 20 per cent or more of their funding from a foreign source to register as organizations "serving the interests of a foreign power". An almost identical bill had been withdrawn a year ago in the face of massive protests. Ahead of crucial parliamentary elections this October, the authorities are out to discredit and dismantle Georgia's vibrant civil society and independent media. These are the last vestiges of free expression and independent scrutiny that can challenge the government's policies and conduct.

Authorities in Georgia claim the law promotes transparency – a typical and convenient excuse for "foreign agent" laws. However, their rhetoric has made clear that it will be used to stigmatize and punish critical voices. This has been confirmed by

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On May 14th the Georgian parliament passed a "foreign agent" style law. Ahead of crucial parliamentary elections this October, the authorities are out to discredit and dismantle Georgia's vibrant civil society and independent media.

a campaign of violent intimidation and smear tactics against civil society and political activists that was under way even before the law's final adoption. Civil society organizations have noted that only certain types of organizations are singled out in the law – excluding for example businesses or non-governmental groups receiving government funding – as a clear indication that the goal is not transparency, but to silence critical groups that speak out against government abuses.

Earlier in the year, on April 2nd, President Sadyr Japarov signed Kyrgyzstan's abusive "foreign representatives" law, matching the Russian prototype even closer than Georgia. The law applies the stigmatizing designation of "foreign representative" to any non-governmental organization receiving any amount of foreign funding and engaging in vaguely defined "political activity". The bill had been widely criticized after its initial submission in November 2022.

Many organizations had already self-liquidated or ceased activities on the territory of the country, including LGBTQ+ and youth groups, already before the deadline to volunteer to be included in the "foreign representatives" registry. The full impact of the law on Central Asia's most vibrant civil society is yet to be seen.

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Many shades of repression

"Foreign agent" laws are not the only method to shrink the civic space. Governments can crack down on civil society through other types of repressive legislation. These can include laws with excessive, burdensome registration and operating requirements, as well as those that require the registration and government approval of grants, excessive reporting, and intrusive government monitoring with criminal sanctions for non-compliance. Azerbaijan has virtually closed the space for independent activism and journalism through such means.

Foreign agent laws add on top of these restrictions a stigmatizing label that allows governments to present the crackdown through a narrative that has a greater chance of certain public acceptability than that of blunt government control over civic activity. There is an added benefit of delegitimizing the causes that many of these organizations work for – civil and political rights, equality and anti-discrimination – as the agendas of foreign powers rather than universal values.

Even in the much more robust EU regulatory and justice context, "foreign agent" or foreign influence style laws have been making their way to EU countries. Hungary's 2017 NGO Transparency Law is a classic example that targeted exclusively non-profit organizations receiving foreign funds and engaging in almost any type of activity. Affected groups had to identify themselves in all published and online material as "foreign funded organizations".

The law was repealed in 2021 after the EU Court of Justice ruled in a landmark case that it violates EU law, including the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The Court identified the right to access funding as a substantive element of freedom of association and recognized the chilling effect of such laws, which can foster a climate of distrust in the work of associations.

Foreign agent laws add a stigmatizing label that allows governments to present the crackdown to be publicly acceptable.

Yet, the government of Viktor Orbán did not give up in its effort to stifle independent groups. In December 2023 Hungary's parliament approved a new Law on the Protection of National Sovereignty that gives a government-controlled body broad powers to target civil society and independent media. The law's vague definitions of "foreign interests" and "national sovereignty", combined with the unchecked power of its enforcement arm to access government and intelligence data alongside conducting unchallengeable smear campaigns, have fostered a climate of fear and self-censorship in Hungary. Even though the European Commission has opened an infringement procedure against Budapest over the law, the government has already used it to target the anti-corruption

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organization Transparency International Hungary and a local anti-corruption investigative media group.

Other European politicians close to the Kremlin have also drawn inspiration from the Russian laws. Under intense local and international pressure, the authorities in the Republika Srpska entity of the EU candidate country Bosnia and Herzegovina in May 2024 withdrew a foreign agent law strongly modelled on the Russian example. It included vague definitions of foreign "support" for almost any type of activity that would trigger the designation of a non-profit group as an "agent of foreign influence". In Bulgaria, the pro-Kremlin far right has unsuccessfully attempted to push a "foreign agent" law since 2022.

Unintended consequences

In the case of foreign agent laws in Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, as well as the 2017 Hungarian law or the recently withdrawn law in Bosnia, ambiguity and the overly broad scope of definitions appear intended to permit arbitrary interpretations of the law. This allows the government to target inconvenient groups and critics, and create legal uncertainty and a chilling effect, leading to self-censorship, the stifling of work and even the closure of such organizations.

However, even legislation with no punitive aims towards civil society can bring unintended consequences if it unduly discriminates between groups. This is the case with narrower foreign interest representation laws that limit registration and other requirements to groups acting on behalf of foreign principals. For one, authoritarians have hypocritically cited these laws to justify their purely repressive legislation.

The Kremlin and others customarily speak of reciprocating the US Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), even though it applies only to organizations and individuals that operate under the direction and control of a foreign principal. It also does not equate receiving foreign funding with being under the direction and control of a foreign entity.

However, even such narrower foreign influence laws can have damaging consequences by stigmatizing the work of legitimate civil society representatives. France has recently passed a law on foreign interference, including various online surveillance measures and a registry for groups carrying out foreign interest representation, that has been criticized by civil society. Likewise, a December 2023 proposal by the European Commission for a new "Directive on Transparency of Interest Representation on behalf of Third Countries" sent shockwaves through European civil society with the proposal to create a register of foreign-funded organisations.

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The EU Directive built in safeguards such as limiting its scope only to interest representation services carried out on behalf of foreign states, rather than simply the receipt of foreign funds from any source – a provision that distinguishes it from typical "foreign agent" laws. Yet, an overwhelming number of civil society groups and many EU member states have expressed serious concern over the risk of stigmatizing civil society and the potential for the law to be perceived as similar to "foreign agent" legislation.

The Georgian ruling party and authorities in Bosnia's Republika Srpska referred to the EU Directive to justify their own abusive legislation. To avoid stigmatization and misperceptions, many EU states and civil society organizations have argued for a lobbying or transparency register, covering all actors engaged in influence on decision-makers, not one that singles out "foreign" interest representation.

Tracking the influence of money in politics has a legitimate aim in promoting democracy. But that makes it all the more important for governments that are using influence tracking measures to promote a healthy democracy to make sure those measures do not discriminate against certain groups. They have to be absolutely necessary, proportionate, narrowly drawn, and monitored by an independent body to identify any pernicious impact.

Many governments have created legal constraints on non-governmental groups recently that, intentionally or not, may constrain their activities or silence them. We can only hope that the EU will establish a solid standard that fosters free expression and civic space at home and helps to counter malign stigmatization and curbs on civil society abroad. EE

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The metamorphosis of Soviet dictatorships

TATEVIK HOVHANNISYAN

In the past, authoritarian regimes such as the Soviet Union maintained power through the total control of information and propaganda. Today, the situation has changed significantly. Many of the new features of contemporary dictatorships have been imposed by the process of globalization and technological progress.

Throughout history, dictatorial rulers have been a consistent presence, evolving from tribal chieftains and monarchs to modern-day autocrats. Even in different settings, these leaders had one thing in common: pursuing and maintaining power by utilizing diverse tools to secure their dominance. In ancient times it was often sufficient for a ruler to claim divine endorsement, such as being the representative of a rain or fire god, and to eliminate any threat or expression of disobedience. Over time the methods of controlling and subjugating people have transformed and the current dictators in some countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Vladimir Putin, Alyaksandr Lukashenka or Ilham Aliyev, have adopted more sophisticated tactics, including mimicking democratic processes and portraying themselves as legitimate leaders to serve their bigger strategy: to disguise their dictatorial nature and maintain their grip on power.

From classical to contemporary dictatorships

In contemporary discourse, the term “dictator” typically evokes the image of a person who holds absolute power and tries to maintain it through intimidation,

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imprisonment, violence or assassination. This conceptualization of dictatorial power bears clear similarities to the methods utilized by totalitarian leaders throughout history. Notably, the archetypal dictators of the 20th century – Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler – are prominently remembered for their crimes and the profound impacts of their regimes.

The mechanisms employed by these three leaders to consolidate and maintain their power were rooted in a robust ideology characterized by nationalism and authoritarianism. They used pervasive propaganda, the total control over information and the strategic use of symbols to manipulate public perception and reinforce their regimes. Additionally, they exercised extensive control over the economy and had aggressive if not criminal foreign policies.

With the arrival of globalization, digital technologies and economic development, the era of traditional strongmen began to fade. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent third wave of democratization stimulated the emergence of new democracies that replaced former dictatorships. However, following the global financial crisis of 2008, a trend of democratic backsliding emerged, revitalizing authoritarian regimes with more adaptive and sophisticated characteristics.

Who are the current dictators, especially among the countries of the former Soviet Union, and how are they different from the classical ones? In their groundbreaking book *Spin Dictators*, published in 2020, Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman classify the modern dictators around the globe. Their rule has the following characteristics: "a) the country is a non-democracy; b) national elections are held in which at least one opposition party is allowed to run; c) at least a few media outlets criticise the government each year; d) fewer than ten state political killings occur each year on average; and e) fewer than 1,000 political prisoners are held in any year."

With the arrival of globalization, digital technologies and economic development, the era of traditional strongmen began to fade.

Leaders of non-democratic countries such as Putin, Lukashenka and Aliyev have something in common: they belong to the club of those who have developed a cult of personality-style regime and do anything to stay in power. Madly in love with power and convinced of the supposed superiority of autocratic and dictatorial systems over democracy, these leaders of Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan have shown little willingness to reform or open up their respective systems, even when encouraged to do so.

After a short period of rapprochement with NATO in 2002, Russia has returned to pursuing an imperialistic foreign policy. At the same time, Belarus and Azerbaijan, despite the chance offered by the European Union to democratize themselves through initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership, have chosen not to integrate

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with the democratic world and to maintain close ties with Moscow. This alignment with Russia often correlates with persistent dictatorial practices and resistance to democratic reforms. In parallel, for the Russian establishment it is easier to deal with like-minded autocratic leaders than with democratically inclined governments.

Fake democracies

These leaders regularly organize presidential and parliamentary elections that are largely nominal, featuring opposition leaders who are either ineffective or controlled, thus ensuring predictable outcomes. In other words, there is a systemic opposition that is allowed limited seats and some freedom to criticize the government on non-essential issues. Simultaneously, the non-systemic opposition is suppressed through fear or preventive measures. A notable example of this pseudo-opposition was Vladimir Zhirinovsky in Russia, the leader of the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, who consistently secured seats in the State Duma despite "criticizing" the government. In Belarus, following the 2020 presidential elections, Lukashenka disqualified or imprisoned major opponents, yet still held elections to maintain the appearance of democratic processes. In Azerbaijan, the Milli Mejlis, the national parliament, is composed of the ruling right-wing New Azerbaijan Party and some smaller parties whose presence aims to create a flavour of pluralism.

To avoid any backlash to absolute media shutdowns, authoritarian regimes have adopted more nuanced steps to curtail media freedom. Governments have utilized legislative interventions to restrict media activities under the guise of democratic principles. In Russia and Belarus, the "foreign agent" and "fake news" laws criminalize the dissemination of information deemed false by the government, thus restricting independent journalism. Azerbaijan similarly has enacted legislation targeting defamation and "insulting" the state, which serves to suppress criticism towards the government. These legislative measures are designed to restrain genuine independent media while allowing state-controlled outlets to present themselves as independent. Media critics and organizations who are persecuted often continue their work from abroad, such as the Russian Meduza, Belarusian Belsat TV or Azerbaijani Meydan TV with all the limits and contradictions that independent media may have.

> To avoid backlash to media shutdowns, authoritarian regimes have adopted more nuanced approaches to curtail media freedom.

The repression of civic and political opponents in these countries, albeit limited in numbers compared to the past, is well-documented. Notable cases include the

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The methods of controlling and subjugating people have transformed over time with the current dictators in some countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Vladimir Putin, having adopted more sophisticated tactics.

imprisonment (and later death) of Alexei Navalny in Russia, the opposition leader Sergei Tsikhanouski in Belarus, and Gubad Ibadoghlu in Azerbaijan. The repressive actions undertaken by the leaders also have a preventive character. They are designed not to result in mass killings as they may have in the past. Indeed, the current regimes, aware of the unsustainability of committing mass killings in front of a watchful international community, play with fear in order to create a deterrent effect against those who would like to rebel. However, Russia still has not given up more "classical methods", as was the case when around 20,000 pacifists were detained on political grounds before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, modern dictators often employ a strategic facade of openness to the international community to counteract their negative global image. A clear example can be seen in the Aliyev government's habit of recruiting foreigners to work in state-owned think tanks and companies. Moreover, Azerbaijan hosts high-profile international events like Formula 1 or COP29 to enhance its global standing, while tourism is promoted in order to present a nicely packaged image of safety, security and hospitality. The examples of Belarus after the 2020 crackdown on the opposition and in Russia after the invasion of Ukraine showcase that openness and other characteristics are not

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yet well consolidated in these countries. The dictators may subsequently go back and forth and use both traditional and more current methods to achieve their goals.

Dictatorships and globalization

Many of the new features of contemporary dictatorships have been imposed by the process of globalization and technological progress. In the past, regimes such as the Soviet Union maintained power through the total control of information and propaganda. Therefore, only those who travelled to the Soviet bloc countries could get a taste of what was going on beyond the Iron Curtain. A piece of German sausage, Polish textile cloths or Czech crystal chandeliers brought home by a traveller were the only evidence of an alternative and unknown world, largely divorced from the state-controlled news and narratives in these countries.

> As autocrats can no longer fully control information, they pollute it, making it nebulous, incomprehensible and highly polarized.

Today, the situation has changed significantly. Digital technologies and widespread internet use have facilitated access to information. A citizen in a remote village can now access the internet, in certain countries sometimes using a VPN, to see what is happening in the outside world. This transparency poses a substantial challenge to modern dictators for whom it is much more difficult to maintain a monopoly on the dissemination of information.

Another factor complicating the lives of dictators is the increased accessibility of transportation. Previously, many citizens of the Soviet Union had never flown on a plane. Now, affordable airlines connect people globally, facilitating travel and broadening horizons (naturally, there are still people for whom taking a plane is a luxury, but generally speaking there is a chance to travel freely). Exposure to different cultures and systems of governance becomes a point of comparison for citizens, making them more critical of their own regimes.

Additionally, numerous educational programmes are designed for individuals from non-democratic countries or those in transition, enabling them to travel, live and study abroad. Today a 14-year-old adolescent may win a scholarship and go to study in the United States and live on a campus or with a US family. These opportunities not only enhance personal development but also allow participants to experience democratic values and practices, further challenging authoritarian rule upon their return.

These factors appear to favour democracies and provide challenges for current dictators. However, dictatorships have gradually adapted to these new threats,

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saturating the information space with fake news and social bots alongside launching large-scale disinformation campaigns. In other words, as they could no longer fully control information, they polluted it, making it nebulous, incomprehensible and highly polarized.

Demonizing the West

Another move made by the current dictators to circumvent such current challenges is to mimic democracy in order to deceive their citizens. As a result, they implement electoral authoritarianism, with elections held but with outcomes that are always predictable. Putin, Lukashenka and Aliyev, for instance, systematically "win" elections in which sometimes non-competitive opponents also participate. They legitimize the extension of their rule by amending the constitution, as seen in Belarus (2004), Azerbaijan (2009) and Russia (2021). Due to this, Lukashenka has been in power for 30 years, since 1994; Aliyev for about 21 years; and Putin for almost 24 (including Dmitry Medvedev's one-term presidency).

Another tactic employed by the current dictators is to demonize the West through propaganda and information manipulation. This tactic is a classic tool of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. However, the scale and intensity of these measures have increased in particular following the 2020 crackdown on the opposition in Belarus; the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Dictators work tirelessly to convince their citizens that the West is a threat, often portraying it as antagonistic to traditional family values and cultural traditions. This narrative justifies their defensive stance against western influence.

Demonizing the West goes hand-in-hand with self-victimization in the rhetoric of the modern dictators.

In the newly established countries of the former Soviet Union, a western presence has manifested also through investments in human capital including support for non-governmental organizations. Recognizing the potential threat of civil society, these regimes have taken steps to eliminate such influences in legitimate ways. Russia, for instance, enacted the foreign agent law to curtail NGO activities. In Belarus, civil society activists faced persecution, imprisonment, or were exiled as traitors to the nation. Finally, in Azerbaijan most NGOs have now been defined as government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), which masquerade as independent entities.

Demonizing the West goes hand-in-hand with self-victimization in the rhetoric of the modern dictators. For example, Putin has portrayed the full-scale inva-

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sion of Ukraine as a defensive measure against NATO, claiming that the Alliance's expansion poses a direct threat to Russia. This narrative casts Russia as a victim of western aggression and positions Putin as a father – the protector of the nation, invoking historical imagery of the tsar. This narrative was already used to justify aggressive foreign policy actions, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Similarly, Aliyev has long been directing domestic discontent regarding poor social policies towards the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia itself. Even after the successful 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Aliyev continued to employ a victimization narrative, portraying Azerbaijan as a nation permanently under threat from Armenian forces, thus justifying his aggressive military policies and diverting attention from domestic issues.

In contrast, Belarus's Lukashenka, not being an expansionist leader by nature (although supporting Putin and Aliyev's expansionism), has limited himself to maintaining power as much as he can. This is because, as he once said, he does not know what to do if he is not the president anymore. Thus, instead of creating external enemies, Lukashenka adjusts his strategy to fight against internal threats. This has been evident in his crackdown on dissent following the disputed 2020 presidential election, where he has labelled opposition figures and protesters as agents of foreign powers attempting to destabilize Belarus.

All three leaders seek to get support from their populations to legitimize their illegal and aggressive actions. By employing soft power tactics, such as propaganda and information manipulation, they attempt to convince their citizens that (military) aggression or repressive policies are the only viable solutions to perceived threats in any given situation. Having little discontent or the silence of the population allows them to share responsibility with them, thereby presenting a facade of popular support to the international community.

While the current dictators have proven to be flexible and capable in adapting to new challenges, the real challenge for the democratic world is to remain astute and decisive. It must not be fooled by the well-packaged facades of authoritarian regimes and must continue to advocate for genuine democratic values and human rights. Only through persistent actions and proactive measures can the democratic world prevent these regimes from flourishing. EE

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How Russia exploits right-wing organizations and polarizes societies

An interview with Kacper Rękawek, senior fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. Interviewer: Andrzej Kozłowski

ANDRZEJ KOZŁOWSKI: How is Russia exploiting far-right organizations in Europe?

KACPER RĘKAWEK: This process began over ten years ago and specifically after the 2012 protests in Moscow, when Russians gathered at Bolotnaya Square to express their disagreement with Putin's third term as president. Having seen the protesters, who in large numbers were representatives of the urban middle class, the Russian authorities came to the conclusion that it was the liberals who were the main threat to the regime. Although these enemies were identified internally, the Kremlin decided to attack them abroad as well. In this sense, they picked up on the legacy of the late 1980s and the 1990s when the likes of Alexander Dugin or Vladimir Zhirinovsky, stalwarts of the Russian far-right, began to forge connections with likeminded Western Europeans. Only later did the Kremlin decide to involve resources from different levels to achieve its goals and protect the regime. As a result, we can now see a political war that Russia is waging against the West.

Why the far right? And not the far or extreme left, for example?

Before 1989 the Kremlin mainly worked with the far left. In Soviet times this was its natural ally in the West. Today's Russia relies on the far right, which includes the nativist but democratic radical right – Le Pen, Farrage, VOX etc., and the non-democratic and often violent extreme right, because it provides it with the biggest political and social gains. Right-wing radicalism is currently on the rise throughout Europe. This trend, which was marginalized until recently, has now become part of the mainstream, which is also the reason why Rus-

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sia is working with its representatives. Truth be told: the supporters of the far right hate the European Union. That is why they ally with anyone who wants to politically destabilize or change the EU. And this is where Russia comes in. Let us make it also clear that the supporters of the far right do not wake up in the morning praying to Vladimir Putin. But Russia and the far right do have some common interests. The far right has recently been winning 20 to 30 per cent in different elections in various European countries, forming and co-forming governments, while the far left is in retreat and cannot count on much support, which is why it is not so attractive to the Kremlin.

Why is the far right on the rise?

The most popular explanation is that mainstream parties do not listen to ordinary people: what they think, feel and say. They do not relate to their problems and concerns. As a result, populists have been taking away voters from mainstream parties, in particular the centre right and the Christian Democrats. But there is one more thing that I think is worth noting. The far right hates the European Union as it is. It sees the EU as a kind of façade which is detached from reality and imposed on people by the cosmopolitan elite. Instead of the EU of today, they would prefer to have what they call a "Europe of homelands". Their European patriotism manifests itself in the belief that at home we can all be the Europeans we want to be and this should not stop us from being together, but no one should be imposing their vision on anyone.

Speaking about the growing support for the far right, I would also point out that we have not adequately analysed the political crises that have taken place internationally and which started with the 1990s with the wars in the Balkans. Clearly, the effects of these conflicts are visible today, but have we, the West, accounted for our (in)activity and the consequences? Have we, proverbially, worked it out or through on the therapist's couch? The same can be said with regards to the so-called Global War on Terror, jus think about the 2003 intervention in Iraq or the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. Have we learnt our lessons and faced up to the consequences? In the meantime, there was also the 2008 financial crisis, which brought the world economy to the brink. After all, no one has paid the price for the gigantic losses to the world economy. Another example is the 2015 migration crisis. As you know only now the EU is voting on the migration package and some member states are already announcing their vetoes. Add to that COVID-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine or Israel's war in Gaza. It is very fertile ground for the far right's narrative that the elite are hypocrites who are cheating ordinary people. They impose decisions on them and expect people to accept them with a smile. The far right's offer is, thus, to do the opposite. These parties say: we know how you feel, we feel the same way and we talk about it when others remain silent. They try to

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portray themselves as open to ideas and projects that others are afraid to speak out about. Naturally, this entails giving in to certain political impulses, including nationalist, xenophobic, homophobic or racist ones.

Is there any classification of these far-right groups?

There is, for example, a classification by Cas Mudde, a classic of far-right studies. Mudde divides the far right into two categories: extreme and radical. The extreme far right reaches for non-democratic means and uses violence. In this category are skinheads, paramilitary organizations or street-fighting groups. The radical far right, on the other hand, is made up of political parties that take part in elections and agree with their outcome. As democratic as it sounds, there is a justified fear that once these parties win elections, then there would be no more free and democratic elections.

What does Russia's support for such groups look like?

Russia offers the far right both direct and indirect support, including money transfers. Russia also has many (private and state) curators of the far right. Some of them cooperate, others hate each other and fight. Consequently, we can say that the Russian support for the far right has many faces and operates on different levels. It is channelled through the government, through local governments, as well as various types of political movements and organizations or platforms which bring like-minded groups together. A good example here is the militant and ultranationalist Russian Imperial Movement, which is a non-governmental organization operating out of Russia, one that the Russian government officially distances itself from. With the status of an "independent" organization it can (and does) work with similar groups in the West.

All these activities are not yet as well coordinated as some people think. It is true that recently there has been some changes in this regard and there is more cooperation at the level of individual countries. But even this can be described in the words of Mao Zedong, who famously said, "Let a hundred flowers bloom, and what will be born, we will see." Certainly, Russia's biggest hope is to have an impact on political processes abroad by influencing parties that can win in elections – be it at the national, European or regional level. There is no doubt that the Kremlin wants to polarize western societies as much as possible. It operates based on the assumption that if we cannot get them to cooperate with us directly, we can try to destabilize their political and social scene as much as possible, all to make it dysfunctional. The assassination attempt of the Slovak prime minister is a perfect example of this thinking. I do not believe in any conspiracy theories but I surely can say that Moscow will use this situation to destabilize political and social life in Slovakia. Mutual accusations and divisions are natural fuel for Russia not

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Photo courtesy of Kacep Rękawek / International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

only in Slovakia but in other European countries as well.

What are some key observations that have emerged from your analyses?

With our team we researched ten countries where connections between the far right and Russia are evident. I can say that many things have surprised us. For example, how a militant nationalist Swedish organisation, so by definition anti-Russian, was effectively bribed by the Russians to mend its ways. In France there is Joël Sambuis, who lives in Russia and is one of the pioneers of Russian disinformation in that country and his actions go back to the beginning of this century, well before the advent of social media. Other examples include attempted coups organized by the far right. Here the most famous figure involved is the German Prince Heinrich XIII Reuss but there was a farcical attempt to do the same in France. In Italy the bond between the far right and Russia is not based on anti-Americanism or anti-Europeanism, but on hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community. In Austria, the Freedom Party has an interesting "business" history with Russia, which contributed to the downfall of one of its leaders. In short, there is something for everyone.

How has the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine affected cooperation between Russia and European far-right organizations?

Certainly, these organizations have not suddenly become pro-Ukrainian, pro-American or pro-NATO. We do

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not notice such transformations. The transfer of people and money between Russia and these organizations is now severely hampered, but there are ways around this and that is what Turkey or Serbia is often used for. In contrast, visits to Moscow and paying homage to Putin are now more stigmatized than before.

But some far-right politicians seem to have changed their rhetoric. Take the "pro-Ukrainian stance" of Marine Le Pen. Is this a real breakthrough or just political PR?

In my opinion, Marine Le Pen's circles will always see Russia as a greater friend than Brussels or Washington. However, Le Pen's ambition is not the support of ten per cent of the electorate but the French presidency. She probably adjusts her position according to the polls that show the position of French society towards the war in Ukraine. The images and videos showing Russian violence against Ukrainian civilians are also doing their bit and forcing politicians to react, as voters expect them to be decisive. We can see a similar situation with the Sweden Democrats, who once might have wanted to be pro-Russian but who also understood that their society would not have that. Therefore they had to adapt to their voters' views. I have an impression that since 2022 these kinds of reactions by far-right politicians have grown. However, I also do not believe in the sincerity of this change. On the other hand, we may still hope that one day we will see a real and sincere transformation, even though at this moment we are only at the beginning of this road and its development is something we cannot predict. That is why I interpret Le Pen's "pro-Ukrainian" transformation as a tactic which is aimed at attracting new voters. There is no doubt that to defeat Macron, Le Pen needs the right-wing electorate but also those voters from the left who are fed up with the way Macron's been governing. As it turns out, Le Pen's stock continues to grow but it never seems to carry her over the finishing line. At the same time, however, only recently she had zero parliamentarians and can now count on 100+. This is an astonishing success and we should not discount it.

Western intelligence agencies have been reporting on sabotage activities carried out by Russia in the West. Do you think far-right groups are used for such operations?

Since 2014 Russia has started using these groups for spreading disinformation, deepening polarization and disrupting political life in the West. However, I would also argue that since then there has been a change in rhetoric and the way the directives are carried out. The most useful were those people who went to Donbas after March 2014, joining the Russian side. These individuals, once they returned to Europe, started spreading disinformation. Their work was particularly successful in places such as France, Italy and Slovakia. In Poland, fortunately we did not see many of them. Interestingly, in Czechia such people were sent to prison. When we think

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about this group of people we need to keep in mind that it too has its own internal dynamics and that people can move from being the so-called "disinformers" to saboteurs or diversionists. Here I would like to stress that we should also stop looking at terrorism and political violence as something which originates at the grassroots level. States are also involved in terrorist activities and it is important for us to realise it.

How can we counter Russia's support for these far-right groups?

First of all, we should go back to 2014 and see who went to Donbas, who sent them there, who got them hooked on this whole *Russkiy Mir* idea. Perhaps then we will find out that in all these activities were also people from the Russian diaspora, as well as members of all these Eurasian circles and other alternative political projects, which link together the extreme left and right. The problem is that some of the people who fought in Donbas returned to Europe and have stayed here the whole time. Who are they? What are they doing now? It would be a good start to try answering these questions. I would also examine the networks that emerged around 2014 and supported Russia in such countries as Serbia, Georgia and other EU candidate states. We pretend not to see that there is a problem and continue working with these states as if nothing is going on.

Serbia especially seems to be important here…

Serbia has a growing pan-Slavic movement and much of its cooperation with Russia takes place through governmental channels. At the same time, we can see a unique political *danse macabre* taking place. On one side, there is the government in Belgrade and Serbian nationalists who are outside that government. On the other side is the government in Moscow and Russian nationalists, who are also outside of the Putin regime. And yet a bizarre game is being played within this framework. To illustrate it, just look at the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić who tells the EU that he is pro-European and who tells Moscow that he is pro-Russian. He is cooperating with the Kremlin by expelling representatives of the Russian liberal opposition who are on Serbian soil. Moscow likes this, but at the same time occasionally probably reminds him that if he does not do exactly what the Kremlin wants, there are other Serbian nationalists who are even closer to Russia than he is. This includes the grassroots paramilitary movement Narodna Patrola, which presents itself as even more pan-Slavic than the government. It reaches out to Russia asking Moscow to discipline Vučić so that he does not drift off into pro-European territory. The Russians are clever because they do not do these things officially. They send their nationalists to meet Serbian counterparts and through them try to influence the Serbian president not to go too far towards the European Union. Vučić, on the other hand, manipulates the far right by using them in his deal-

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ings with the West. He points at them, arguing that if not him, then the country will be ruled by people like them.

Do you think if western state security services start pursuing radical right groups because of ties to Russia they may nevertheless accuse the government of political repressions?

It is not about politics, but violence. In the case of the organizations we are talking about the relationship between politics and violence is very close. Certainly, any action against radical-right organizations will provoke accusations of repression. This is the problem that Germany has, for example, with monitoring the activities of the AfD, which is a political party. My answer is clear. Far-right parties and organizations must be watched closely. We need to realise that if we want to keep the European project in its current format we are facing more than a political opponent, because this opponent wants to press the reset button and smash the project altogether. EE

This interview was first published in Polish online at Nowa Europe Wschodnia.

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Are young voters a threat to democracy?

GIORGI BEROSHVILI

Across the region there has been a lot of talk about the power of young voters. While this group was seemingly responsible for a recent shift towards the centre in Poland, young people are also linked to growing radicalism. This has seen the youth vote increasingly correlated with a potential threat to democratic values and norms.

The 2023 elections in Poland were historic with a record turnout exceeding 74 per cent. The dissatisfied youth moved against the ruling party, leading to many headlines declaring that "young voters and women saved the elections." Indeed, many polling stations remained open well past closing time, as videos circulated on social media of queues of voters stretching far down the street. There is no doubt that the youth vote played a decisive role in preventing another term for the populist Law and Justice (PiS) party. But did they also stop the far right from gaining influence?

Far-right parties are on the rise across Europe, with Germany's AfD, France's National Rally, and right-wing leaders gaining power in Italy and the Netherlands. Central Europe has seen a similar trend in Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia and Poland. The former has experienced increasing support for the far-right party *Konfederacja* (Confederation), which boasts a larger number of young supporters. As younger generations reach voting age, their votes could make or break these far-right parties. Thus, it makes sense to look deeper not only into the new generational trends, but also the gender divide within the generation that has sparked new debates. This may help us to understand a trend that may be emerging.

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What caused the mobilization?

In Poland, there were several factors and developments during the eight-year rule of PiS that influenced voters' sentiment ahead of last year's election. As summed up by Radosław Markowski, it was characterized by a gradual takeover: the judicial system became over-politicized, independent media was targeted, and party loyalists were installed in the public media. The government also consolidated its control with the help of the largest state-owned oil company in Poland, Orlen, which took over local media publications. There were also surveillance scandals, the introduction of LGBT-free zones in certain regions, and the controversial ban on abortion. The abortion ban in particular sparked significant outrage among the younger generation of women from urban areas. These developments, Markowski argues, painted a clear picture of a potential future under PiS rule if they continued ruling after the 2024 election.

The pre-election period was further characterized by several foreign developments. Due to the constant disagreements with Brussels, the country had damaged its reputation on the international stage. Moreover, EU funding was suspended due to breaches of the rule of law. Lastly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to more than two million refugees entering Poland. These all compounded ongoing issues and resulted in growing discontent.

While the biggest opposition party, the Civic Coalition (KO), competed with PiS for power, Polish voters also witnessed the resurgence of the far-right Confederation party. This group is particularly popular among young voters, being dubbed "a party for provincial young men". In the summer of 2023, they boasted an impressive (and concerning) 15 per cent of popular support, placing them third after PiS and KO. This was particularly alarming given their radical views on the European Union, immigration and support for Ukraine. They also called for lower taxes and less state regulation, which was in stark opposition to the growing social support under PiS rule and the Civic Coalition's shift to the left.

Rise of Confederation

"Everyone has had their Confederation moment" – this is often mentioned by young people while discussing recent political developments in Poland. Many recall voting for the party in their first ever election but have since moved on. The party captured young voters' attention through its social media presence. Dubbed potential kingmakers before the elections, Confederation capitalized on the communication void left by more traditional parties on social media. The party was

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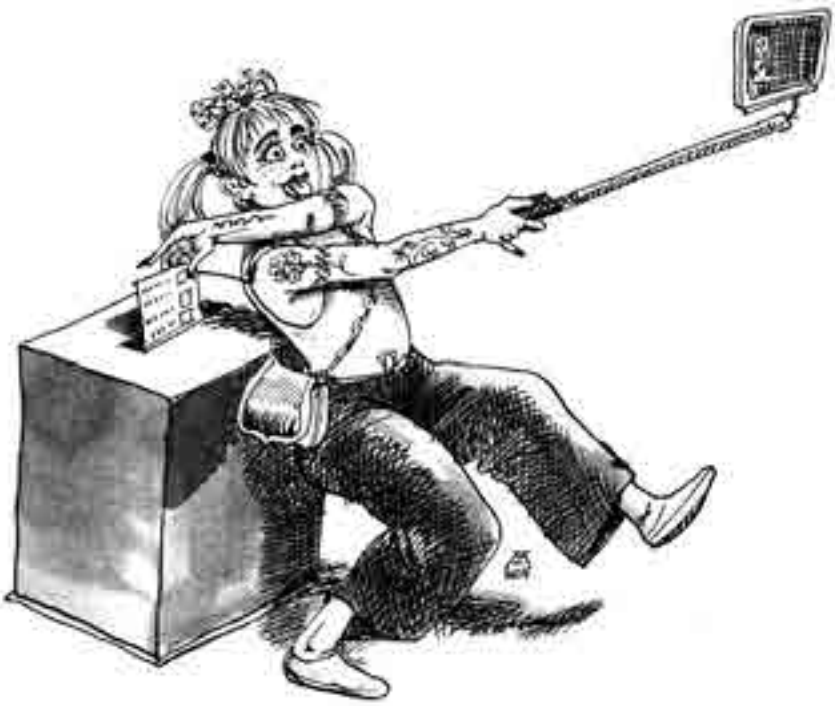

refreshed in October 2022 by Sławomir Mentzen, a young and charismatic leader pumping out TikTok videos about their niche, libertarian-style economic policies. They argued that migrants from the EU asylum system and Ukraine strain the country's economy, while accusing the ruling party of bowing down to Brussels and being too forgiving towards Kyiv.

The issue of economic policies comes up often in discussions. Most initial voters are captured by these takes, not knowing anything about the party's opinion regarding women's rights or migrants. In 2019, Mentzen allegedly summed up his infamous "Mentzen Five" rule: "No to Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU." While it might sound like something straight out of some radical internet forum, Mentzen still managed to grab young voters' attention.

It is also often noted that Mentzen has a "bro culture" personality, as his videos are attention-grabbing and relatable for younger voters. Indeed, Mentzen has leveraged social media far more effectively than his competitors. Furthermore, it is argued that, being largely ignored by major media outlets, Confederation had to find alternative ways to communicate with their supporters.

The far-right party effectively targeted young voters, but how did this influence the election results? Just before the 2023 parliamentary elections, I spoke with my Polish friend who was heading back to their hometown to vote. When I asked who

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they were voting for, they simply replied, "Grzegorz Braun". Braun has been one of the most controversial figures in Polish politics, known for his anti-Semitic and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric among other things. The answer that I received surprised me because my friend belongs to both a sexual and religious minority in Poland. Despite the party's anti-LGBT stance, my friend chose to vote for them, expressing frustration with "old politicians not offering solutions to young people". This anecdote might be an outlier, but it still reflects young people's dissatisfaction with the establishment.

In the end, the 2023 parliamentary election exit polls demonstrated that about 16 per cent of people aged between 18 and 29 voted for Confederation. However, the main opposition party got twice as much, and other parties received a similar ratio. The exit polls also showed that almost ten per cent of men voted for them compared to four per cent of women. However, the far-right party received only 7.2 per cent of the vote in the elections, falling short of pre-election expectations. One could argue that the voters outgrew their "Confederation moment", yet these numbers still point towards a different trend within the younger generation.

Far right is on the rise, but where exactly?

There is no doubt that far-right parties across Europe are gaining traction, especially among young voters. In France, 33 per cent of the 18 to 35 age group supported Marine Le Pen's National Rally, which features 28-year-old TikTok sensation Jordan Bardella, who is known for his controversial views. However, despite the first round success, the New Popular Front (NFP), a leftist alliance, won 182 seats in France's National Assembly, the most of any group but not enough for a majority. Macron's centrist alliance secured 163 seats, while Marine Le Pen's far-right party and its allies took 143 seats. The results indicate a strong voter preference to prevent the far-right from gaining power, even if it means a hung parliament.

Polls also show that 48 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 and 38 per cent of voters aged 25 to 34 support the left wing, with Le Pen's far-right party trailing behind. Similarly, in Germany, the AfD is projected to secure over 20 per cent of votes, with substantial backing from young people. Young people also helped Geert Wilders win the recent election in the Netherlands, while in Italy Giorgia Meloni's right-wing party also saw significant youth support. It can be said that this issue is complex and affected by many factors, but one thing is clear – like every generation before them, younger voters feel their needs are not being addressed in the current political landscape. In response, they are increasingly turning to more "edgy" political options to express their dissatisfaction.

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Recent studies have highlighted a growing divide within the younger generation itself. An article by John Burn-Murdoch in the *Financial Times* shows a wider gender gap in political ideologies. Generally speaking, generational divides have been prominent, for example between Baby Boomers and Gen X. Now a similar trend is emerging between young men and women – young men are increasingly drawn towards radical ideas, while young women are increasingly more progressive. This trend has been prominent in the example of Polish voters above, with similar patterns emerging in the United States and Germany. The article also highlights the extreme case of South Korea, where men and women increasingly disagree on political ideologies. It also points not only to potential electoral consequences, but also to broader societal issues.

The author argues that this gap was widened due to the emergence of the #MeToo movement, which prompted younger women to speak more freely about misogyny and the hardships they face. However, there are larger issues at play, including the impact of social media and its role on people's mental health. Excessive screen time and the explosion of polarizing social media content has been linked to deteriorating mental health in young men, who often gravitate towards radical-right ideas.

Due to this isolation and excessive online presence, vulnerabilities such as lacking purpose are often exploited by online personalities, such as Andrew Tate (who is currently facing trial for trafficking and rape charges in Romania) and Jordan Peterson, who have a lot in common with far-right parties. While validating fears and presenting themselves as role models, they also identify enemies – be they immigrants or minorities – towards which this disappointment can be directed. Populist political parties across Europe exploit this sentiment, where we have seen immigration being portrayed as the root cause of various societal issues.

Could this mean that younger people are becoming more radical than progressive? Generational research by the Brookings Institution demonstrates that experiences during people's young/formative years have a lasting impact on their political views and attitudes. Their views get stronger through the years through ideological ties and partisan loyalties, and studies show that different groups share political views depending on their generation. If Millennials were impacted by the wars in the Middle East, for this new generation, it will be immigration or culture wars, hence leading to strong opinions on these issues.

Same study by the Brookings Institution further shows that when voters grow up during the leadership of a party which is viewed as successful, they are more likely to stick to that party and vote for them as they age. It works the same with the unsuccessful parties – young people are less likely to vote for a party which has low approval ratings. These studies in the US show that if young voters grew up during Trump's presidency, they are more likely to vote Democrat, and this sentiment is

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more likely to stick. This is no different from other generations. What is different is that younger people are more likely to voice their opinions loudly and confidently.

This was demonstrated clearly in Georgia on March 7th 2023. A chaotic protest was triggered by the passage of the "foreign agents law" (which has since then returned). This law was characterized by its anti-democratic nature and was often criticized by civil society and the European Union, which Georgia aspires to join. Having attended many protests in Tbilisi myself, I know that they usually happen peacefully, until law enforcement cracks down on the protesters. However, this time it was different. Participants in the protests were getting noticeably angry – there were photos of flipped police cars posted online, protesters blocking the main avenue, and spray paint on the parliament building. There was even a case where Molotov cocktails were thrown (but this since has been linked to government manipulation). These protests led to the bill being dropped, only to be reintroduced a year later in 2024 – this time the demonstrations did not have an impact, and the crackdown was much more brutal than the year before.

Nevertheless, these protests ultimately demonstrated that young people were ready to defend the country's democratic path. Numerous media outlets dubbed them Georgia's progressive "TikTok Generation" and the Georgian "Gen Z", hoping that they would bring change in the country's extremely polarized political landscape. However, a study published after the 2023 protests showed that while young Georgians have positive views towards EU membership and the rule of law, they are more likely to have a negative attitude towards sexual minorities, for example.

There is another catch. Despite their voice, young voters make up only about 20 per cent of the Georgian population. This coupled with a low turnout makes it difficult to predict what kind of impact they might have in the upcoming October parliamentary elections.

The relationship between politics and young voters as a "threat to democracy" remains complex. The real issue seems to be low voter turnout and a general unwillingness to vote, coupled with widespread dissatisfaction with politics among the younger generations. Despite this, true democracy requires that all voices be heard. There is a noticeable trend of radicalization among some younger voters and this should be addressed. Further research should explore not only the causes of this radicalization but also the ways to address the concerns of these younger voters to ensure a truly democratic process. EE

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How Viktor Orbán is going global

DOMINIK HÉJJ

Within hours of assuming the presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán paid a visit to Ukraine, Russia, China and the United States. In Orbán's own words these meetings were a part of a "peace mission" that he had initiated to bring peace back to Europe and the world as soon as possible.

The phrase "Make Hungary Great Again," or in Hungarian "*ismét naggyá teszi Magyarországot*," from a passage in the Preamble (National Avowal of Faith) of the Hungarian Constitution, enacted in April 2011, has become the motto of the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the European Union. From July 1st 2024 until the end of this year, "Make Europe Great Again" is the official slogan of the council's rotating presidency.

As a near-exact copy of Donald Trump's campaign slogan from 2020, this motto is indeed a reflection of the relationship between the two politicians, who adhere to similar values although living on two different sides of the Atlantic. By stating that "Europe needs to be made great again," Hungary's current prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has only further confirmed his already open support for Trump in the ongoing presidential race in the United States. Treating Trump as his preferred candidate, Orbán visited Trump during his "peace mission".

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A "peace" mission

Within hours of assuming the council presidency, the Hungarian prime minister paid a visit to both Ukraine and Russia (on July 2nd and July 5th, respectively). Then, on July 8th, he travelled to China and then finally reached the US, where in Washington DC he attended the NATO summit. Among other things, this event celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Alliance. During his stay in the US, Orbán continued his diplomatic tour, carrying out meetings with politicians such as Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whom he met on July 10th, and finally Trump, with whom Orbán talked on July 11th.

In Orbán's own words these meetings were a part of a "peace mission" that he had initiated to bring peace back to Europe and the world as soon as possible. Those of us with a good memory will yet remember that Orbán had already tried a "peace mission" before. This is, at least, what he called his visit to Moscow on February 1st 2022, that is 23 days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On that day, Orbán met with Vladimir Putin. According to Hungarian investigative journalists with the *Direkt36* portal, this visit was meant to reassure the Hungarian prime minister that an escalation of the conflict would not take place.

Orbán documented his meeting with Trump on his social media by posting a joint photo which he captioned: "Donald Trump. President of peace." He also posted a brief summary of their discussions: "Talking to President Trump about peace. Good news of the day – he will solve it!"

This rhetoric in which Orbán equates Trump with peace is nothing new. Their previous meeting took place in March 2024. Orbán summed it up by posting: "Hungary needs peace! The name of peace – Donald Trump." This image of Trump's power and importance in the official Hungarian narrative has been present since day one of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Already in February 2022 the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs, Péter Szijjártó, claimed that if there had been no change in the US president there would have been no war. In other words, the war started as a result of the current US President Joe Biden. In October 2022 Szijjártó shared this opinion with the viewers of the far-right cable channel, One America News Network (OANN). There, he stated that "If Donald Trump had won the election in November 2020, in my opinion, there would not have been a war."

> Orbán's first "peace mission" was a visit to Moscow on February 1st 2022 – 23 days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Both the Hungarian authorities and media have remained unequivocally hostile to the Biden administration since the outset. In fact, to call their rhetoric "hostile" is to put it mildly. It is probably more accurate to say that the language used by

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Hungary's pro-government media when referencing Biden, or members of his administration, is closer to what one can read in the official narrative of the Kremlin. Thus, while examining the coverage of the pro-government media, which in Hungary's case is about 80 per cent of all media outlets, we can see copy and paste expressions and statements that have already been made by US right-wing journalists and commentators.

Take Joe Biden's visit to Kyiv in February 2023. Similar to the Fox News coverage of the US president's visit, the Hungarian media interpreted it as a cover-up of the affair involving his son, Hunter Biden. The meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was also interpreted as a part of Biden's election campaign. Lastly, Hungarian commentators would ensure their audiences knew that it was the Americans who had dragged Europe into the war and are now trying to keep the conflict going. As the argument goes, it is Washington which is behind any escalation in the conflict.

On whose behalf?

According to a June 2024 survey by the Pew Research Center on global views of the US, Hungary (and Turkey) are the only European states in which a higher percentage of respondents have a more positive view of Donald Trump (37 per cent) than Joe Biden (28 per cent). In most countries the results were the opposite (in favour of Biden). This perception that Donald Trump would be a better US president from Hungary's point of view has been seen in the country for quite some time. In November 2023, a survey by the REAL-PR93 pollster was published in the pro-government daily *Magyar Nemzet*, which showed that 47 per cent of Hungarians believe that a Donald Trump victory would be the better outcome in the US elections. However, when we look more at the preferences of the respondents who claim to be voters of the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition, we see 72 per cent of support for Trump. There is no doubt that the outright support and admiration that Hungarian politicians and their supporters have for Trump flatters the former president. On July 19th 2024, Trump even boasted about this fact: "I'm not bragging, but Orbán said that Russia and China are afraid of me." This Hungarian fascination with Trump is all the more curious given that under his presidency (2016–2020) there were no major achievements in relations between both states.

> Viktor Orbán was the first European leader who endorsed Donald Trump in his run for the US presidency in July 2016.

The moment the European Union distanced itself from Orbán and his "peace mission", emphasizing that the Hungarian prime minister had no mandate to nego-

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tiate anything on the EU's behalf, the question that therefore arose was on whose behalf was Orbán acting? Despite his massive ambitions, Orbán has no credibility to present himself as an independent actor in the current war.

An educated guess would infer that to some extent Orbán was acting in coordination with the Trump team. The "peace tour" which he undertook resembled what one could call "serving a platter with ready solutions". The only requirement for these solutions is that Trump must win the presidential election. Through this series of trips and meetings with key politicians of the states involved in the war, Orbán presented himself as a messenger who had visited the most important capitals. He would then report on these visits, and what he had taken from them, to Trump. Let us also not forget that Orbán was the first European leader who endorsed Trump in his run for the US presidency in July 2016. Since then, the Hungarian prime minister has invariably remained Trump's most ardent European supporter.

Biden's fault?

When it comes to Russia's war on Ukraine, Donald Trump is certain that he would be in a position to solve it quickly. In an interview on August 12th with Elon Musk on X (formerly Twitter), a platform which is now owned and controlled by Musk, Trump stated that since he had been on good terms with Putin during his first term, he hoped to get along with him again. Trump also reiterated that the war would not have happened if he had been president. In other words, the outbreak of the war was Biden's fault. Indeed, Trump blamed Biden for having provoked Putin into an invasion after he had said that the door was open for Ukraine to join NATO.

Trump's opinion about the war was exactly the same as what Orbán said in March 2022 in an interview he gave to the Hungarian weekly *Mandiner*. There Orbán stated that when it comes to Ukraine, Russia had made two demands: a guarantee of Ukraine's neutrality and that Ukraine should not join NATO. He then indicated that since Moscow received no assurances that these demands will be met, Putin had no choice but to enforce them via the invasion.

Today, Orbán's "peace solution" is not a proposal on equal terms. On the contrary, it is a call for Ukraine to capitulate. While in Kyiv Orbán requested that Zelenskyy consider a ceasefire, yet he presented no such offer to Putin during his visit to Moscow. Instead, he stated that he was looking at the possibility of starting peace negotiations for which both sides are not yet ready.

A great deal has already been written and said about Orbán's "peace tour". However, to fully understand what the Hungarian prime minister wants to achieve requires more than a hasty analysis. It calls for deeper digging and an attempt at

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understanding his intentions, which are not always so obvious. A common assumption is that Orbán is an experienced politician who acts rationally and based on a well-thought-out strategy. Therefore, to assume that Orbán set out on his "peace mission" to support or please Trump would deprive him of agency and independence. It also reflects the otherwise correct fact that in Hungary Kamala Harris is not considered capable of winning the US presidency.

Global ambitions

At the moment, US-Hungarian relations are probably at their worst since the early 1990s. Orbán's support for Trump, should the former president lose the elections, could turn into a huge problem for the prime minister. However, it may also be difficult to believe that relations between the two states will stay at such a low level as they are now.

It is likely that Orbán will want to promote his image as the self-proclaimed "leader of Europe" also during the Hungarian presidency. If he achieves some success in this regard, it may be a result of the fact that there is little knowledge of the responsibilities of the council presidency. In truth, given the plethora of European institutions with similar names, the European Council, the Council of the European Union, and the Council of Europe, as well as the low awareness of their responsibilities, even among a European audience, it is not entirely surprising that the Hungarian prime minister decided to carry out a campaign that could help him improve his image in the international arena. "From day one we have been advo-

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cating peace. That is why we have launched a peace mission. Peace will not happen by itself, you have to work for it," Orbán wrote.

Since 2022 Orbán has been repeating, like a mantra, that the European Union seeks confrontation, not peace. This explains his decision to become the representative of the community, who alone will bring peace back to the European continent. Orbán made sure that Putin was aware of his aspiration. During their last meeting he told the Russian leader that "Hungary took over the rotating presidency of the EU on July 1st, and I must inform the president that the number of countries that can talk to the two sides of the war is slowly melting away. Slowly Hungary is becoming the only country in Europe that can talk to anyone. And I would like to take advantage of this situation to discuss a few issues with you…"

By contrast, his conclusion from the trip he made to China, as he posted on X, was completely different. There, Orbán wrote: "Apart from the warring parties, the decision on when the Russian-Ukrainian war will end depends on the decision of three world powers: the United States, the European Union and China. That is why I came to Beijing after my meetings with the warring parties."

This role of the "sole supporter of peace" is not meant to only serve Orbán in Europe. In fact, it shows that he has global ambitions. His foreign minister put this best on Facebook when he wrote that "The global majority wants peace and completely fails to understand why Europe does not have a peace strategy, fails to understand why Europe copies America. It is no coincidence that this global majority is watching with sympathy, interest and appreciation for the efforts of the Hungarian peacekeeping mission that Hungary is continuing."

Orbán's role as the "sole supporter of peace" shows that he has global ambitions beyond the European audience.

Thus, Budapest now bets on those countries which, unlike Europe, do not see the US as a guarantor of peace, but rather as an aggressor and initiator of international turmoil. Consider the personal relationship that Orbán has with Pope Francis. It is not faith that connects them, as Orbán is not even a Catholic, but a Calvinist. Yet they both associate the US, and not Russia, with imperialism and colonialism.

So far Orbán seems to not have been affected by the criticisms that European leaders have expressed regarding his "peace mission". This is despite the fact that one of the biggest atrocities of this war happened during that time – the Russian attack on the children's hospital in Kyiv. However, even this war crime did not stop the Hungarian minister for European affairs, János Boka, from writing the following statement: "The rocket attack against the Kyiv children's clinic shows that peace is needed as soon as possible." Yet, just like other members of the Hungarian government, Boka did not dare say anything about the perpetrator of the attack.

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Historical redemption

Hungary is still a member of the EU and NATO, still attracting investors, and developing relations with China – nothing has changed here. Orbán plans to go even further, with ambitions to become a global player. It is impossible to define his aspirations precisely. One can assume that perhaps he would like to head an important international organization – such as the UN – one day.

However, something else is discernible in Orbán's peace mission and global game in general. This is something that exists at the intersection between global and domestic politics. This is about the reversal of Hungary's history. Hungary was among the aggressor states of the two world wars of the 20th century and it suffered harsh consequences as a result. After the First World War, for example, under the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost about 70 per cent of its previous territory and 60 per cent of its population. To this day, despite the passage of more than 100 years, this trauma continues to have an effect on the Hungarian psyche. After the Second World War, in turn, the so-called "Little Trianon" treaty was signed.

Playing for "peace" allows a paradigm shift, embedding Hungary in the emerging new international order – not on the side of the losers. The logic is simple. Hungary claims that Russia cannot be defeated. So by not supporting the war, in Budapest's view, it is not among those (the West, Ukraine) whose efforts will come to naught. By removing themselves from the ranks of the losers, a new national identity myth will be built. If it succeeds, Orbán can count on a most distinguished mention in Hungarian historiography. This myth is not only about being on the side of the winners, but also about achieving the status of a neutral state. In Hungary, especially after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, a type of "Austrian complex" has emerged. The Republic of Austria obtained neutral state status in 1955. Similar steps were taken during the Hungarian uprising that broke out in Hungary in October 1956. However, Hungary's neutrality lasted only a few dozen hours and then was paid for in the blood of insurgents due to the Soviet invasion.

With his policy, Orbán actually wants to "Make Hungary Great Again." He wants to regain for Hungary its rightful place in the geopolitical jigsaw puzzle and break out of the unfair (in Budapest's view) limitations on its potential that were imposed in 1920. EE

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The French far right and Putin's Russia

A recent and surprising love affair

CYRILLE BRET

The French far-right party and its leader, Marine Le Pen, have been engaged in a strategy designed to assume power and take over the presidency after Emmanuel Macron. To do this, the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen rebranded the party, renewed her team and promoted new and young faces. But did it change its posture on foreign policy? What is today the place of Russia in the political agenda of the National Rally?

It has been more than a decade since French far-right political movements developed a real fascination with Russia and a vocal admiration for its leader, Vladimir Putin. Considering the long and complex history of the clubs, parties, sects, journals and political groups of this political trend, this love affair is quite recent. And it is far from natural. The traditionally dominant far-right party, the Front National, always viewed the Russian Federation as the heir to the Soviet Union. The deeply rooted anti-communist hatred of the French far right made the rapprochement with Russia highly unlikely and utterly paradoxical. How did France's main far-right party become the semi-official supporter of Russia in Europe, whereas its Italian or Austrian counterparts (Fratelli d'Italia and the FPÖ) joined the European *mainstream* on Russia? And what is now the renamed National Rally's position on Russia?

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Domestic first

In the 1990s Boris Yeltsin's chaotic, decaying and westernizing Russia was of little interest to the main French far-right institutional party, the Front National. The founder and historic leader of the party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, had always been focused on domestic affairs such as the fight against migration, the resistance to communism and the unification of the innumerable radical groups that were undermining his leadership. Back then, the fascination with Russia was of no ideological value and of no electoral importance. The blue collar voters of the Le Pen family had no interest whatsoever in Russia and the pundits of the radical-right clubs, like Le Club de l'Horloge, were more keen on developing bonds with their German, Dutch and Italian counterparts. The Russian authorities were still often named "Soviets" and the grassroots politicians had no idea of developments to the East.

> The far-right's fascination with Russia developed gradually and manifested itself with vigour in the 2010s.

Things evolved gradually with the electoral breakthrough of the party in 2002. After a lifetime of political marginality, its boss, Jean-Marie Le Pen, made it to the second round of the presidential election, the arch-political event of French institutional life. This success in the polls (16 per cent of the vote) changed his status from pariah to challenger to the mainstream parties. Foreign policy was now a mandatory element of any manifesto in the sense that the party could not remain purely national. It had to state its positions on the affairs of the world.

The fascination with Russia developed gradually and – at first – discreetly during the 2000s and manifested itself with vigour in the 2010s. Several far-right think tanks, journals and intellectuals started to advertise Russia's campaign against Islamic terrorism at home, in the Northern Caucasus and abroad. This was especially true when Russia started its military operation in Syria in 2015. At a time when liberal values had spread across the enlarged European Union, they also branded Russia as the patron of European traditional values: Christianity, family and authority. Only then did Russia lose its "post-communist flavour" among the French far right. Prominent MPs such as Thierry Mariani, went back and forth between Paris and Moscow in order to secure direct links to the Kremlin.

Political shifts

Russian networks in France played an important role throughout these processes. Through various foundations, they invited far-right opinion leaders to visit Russia.

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Starting in 2017 the TV channel Russia Today (RT) began hosting frequent interviews with French far-right figures, while the Sputnik agency promoted several of them in their reports. In the French parliament, several MPs, developed political, financial and personal bonds with Russian and Kremlin circles. The party officially received financial support from a Kremlin-backed bank based in the Czech Republic.

For the public, the pro-Russian agenda of the French far right came to light in 2014, when the Socialist president, François Hollande, promoted European sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the country's role in the wider war in Ukraine. Far-right MPs, columnists and think tankers campaigned against the sanctions and rallied MPs in the traditional right parties. This represented a real shift in the political scene. Until then, the party heirs of De Gaulle (Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy) had been advocating for solid bonds with Russia in the name of the global power balance. Starting from 2014 onwards, support for Russian foreign policy became a distinctive feature of the far right. The Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine was a decisive moment for political debate in France as well. All of the mainstream institutional parties, in power or in opposition, socialists or liberal, classical or emerging, advocated for the sanctions strategy against Russia. They also supported the sovereignty of Ukraine and developed a defiant approach to Putin. The Front National remained the only party voicing endorsement of Russian foreign policy eventhough Russia was playing tricks in the former African colonies of France.

What is today the place of Russia in the political agenda of the National Rally? The party and its leader, Marine Le Pen, are engaged in a strategy to assume power and the presidency of the Republic after Emmanuel Macron. The daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen rebranded the party; renewed her team; promoted new and young faces such as Florian Philippot and Jordan Bardella; expelled the radical colonialist elements; officially (at last) condemned antisemitism and racism; trained dozens of MPs; developed bonds in Hungary with Viktor Orbán, in Italy with Lega and Giorgia Meloni, and in Austria with the FPÖ; and created a new parliamentary group in the European Parliament. Yet Russia still remains a tricky issue within this strategy.

> In 2024 the French far-right is still entangled in an ambiguous (to say the least) relationship with Russia.

In 2022, during the presidential race, Le Pen rallied 21 per cent of the voters and defied the incumbent, Macron, in the second round. In the decisive TV debate before the second round, Russia was immediately brought up by Macron to question the independence of Le Pen towards Putin. On foreign policy, Le Pen appeared unprepared and at odds with the European strategy on Russia. After the defeat of Le Pen and the re-election

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of Macron, word spread in the National Rally: support for Russia is an obstacle on the road to power for the far-right leader.

In 2024 the French far-right party and its leader are still entangled in an ambiguous (to say the least) relationship with Russia. On the one hand, a new generation of political leaders continues to dissociate themselves with the pro-Russian line of the 2010s. In June 2024, for example, while campaigning for the European Parliament and then for the National Assembly, Jordan Bardella, the clear successor to Le Pen, clearly condemned (at last) the invasion of Ukraine and the new annexations by Russia. Yet, on the other hand, the far-right leader keeps whispering that Putin is to be supported in his tactics against NATO and the US. The love affair continues… *mezza voce.* ~~EE~~

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What's wrong with Telegram?

MAKSYM POPOVYCH

Telegram is a growing digital platform that is being used in the region and around the world. Yet, out of all major social media companies, it remains the least transparent in its content moderation and curation practices. The platform makes vocal commitments to protecting user privacy but practice shows otherwise.

Russia and Ukraine share few things in common when it comes to their respective social media environments. Following the start of the full-scale invasion, Russia banned the use of Meta's platforms – Instagram and Facebook – in addition to the wholesale blocking of various domestic and foreign media outlets. Ukraine, for its part, blocked the Russian social network Vkontakte long before the invasion. The use of the Ukrainian language in content creation has skyrocketed in the past two years. Both the surge of new content makers and the switch from previously Russian-speaking influencers to Ukrainian in their blogs have arguably had the most significant effect on demarcating the Ukrainian social media space from that of Russia.

Yet, there is one platform that not only remains immensely popular in both states at war but also continues to grow in importance as a primary source of information: Telegram. According to a 2023 poll, a whopping 71.3 per cent of Ukrainians obtained their news from Telegram, the top figure among social media. There are at least 17 Ukrainian Telegram channels with over one million subscribers – and five of them have over two million subscribers – a number, which is growing exponentially year-to-year.

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What makes Telegram different?

Telegram has a curious way of curating content for users. Unlike the feeds on Facebook or X, a Telegram user sees content in channels, divided into private and public ones. The exact demarcation between the two types is confusing, as the so-called private groups can have up to 200,000 members and can be made publicly viewable. In reality, the most popular channels resemble full-fledged media outlets in terms of revenue or the amount of content they produce. In Ukraine, the platform played a crucial role in the first few months of the full-scale invasion, when it enabled quick access to information as the security situation in a given place changed by the hour.

Since then, Telegram has expanded its user base exponentially and has largely overtaken the role of other platforms as a transmitter of the government's public communications. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's team runs a channel with over 750,000 subscribers and an average of four to five original posts per day. Official warnings of Russian missiles targeting Ukraine are also disseminated on Telegram.

> The most popular Telegram channels resemble full-fledged media outlets in terms of revenue or the amount of content they produce.

In Russia, Telegram is actively used both by the aggressive warmongers and payroll propagandists on one side and those channels and users who are known as "liberal" and anti-government dissenters on the other. This second group includes many exiled media figures and bloggers. In a country where the world's biggest platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, and dozens, if not hundreds, of legacy media outlets, both foreign and domestic, were banned or blocked within weeks of the start of the full-scale invasion, the decision not to block Telegram is surely motivated by the government's desire to use the social network to its advantage.

So, what exactly is wrong with Telegram? Many problems are common to other digital platforms, including a lack of transparency surrounding algorithms when it comes to content curation. Other issues include the moderation and automation of these processes at the expense of user control, often blocking the content they would want to see. However, at least three categories of issues can be singled out as more acute on Telegram:

1. The proliferation of content that amounts to propaganda for war and incitement to violence, discrimination and hostility;
2. Coordination and communication for manifestly illegal activities;
3. The potentially fatal consequences of declaring top-notch anonymity protection without protecting it in practice.

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Propagating propaganda

To return to our geographical focus and the first point on problematic content, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Telegram has become a favourite stage for Russian propagandists. Indeed, it may be the Kremlin's favourite tool save the Ostankino TV tower in Moscow. The pro-war segment of the platform includes RT channels and infamous state TV personalities, such as Margarita Simonyan and Vladimir Solovyov, but also the so-called Z-bloggers, a curious phenomenon of "war influencers" who post the most extreme content. The two groups – "legacy" propagandists and Z-bloggers – sometimes simulate a diversity of views and disagreement among themselves, but in reality they form an interconnected network for spreading speech that is prohibited under international law: propaganda for war and incitement to violence.

This is supplemented by rampant disinformation, doxing, manipulative content and smear campaigns. Telegram's hands-off approach regarding this type of content is particularly clear when contrasted with the approaches of other digital platforms: YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. YouTube, in particular, is an interesting case, as it has blocked Russian state-funded media following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, it remained accessible in Russia. This disproves the argument that action against Kremlin-backed content will necessarily lead to a complete ban of the platform in Russia. YouTube, just like Telegram, has simply become too big and too integral to Russia's domestic information space.

Among the most notorious Z-bloggers, who are all loyal netizens of Telegram, is the now imprisoned ex-FSB officer Igor Girkin (better known as Strelkov), who had participated in the hostilities in eastern Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion and had been the "minister of defence" of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. On his channel, which has nearly half a million subscribers, Girkin has regularly argued for a more brutal use of military force against Ukraine, both in terms of the scale of the weapons used and the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of new soldiers. His rhetoric progressively became too belligerent even for the current Russian regime. For example, he accused Moscow of being too restrained in its methods of aggressive war against Ukraine. There is little doubt that an array of his posts amount to direct incitement to violence against Ukrainians and propaganda for war, the types of expression that are prohibited by international law.

To fully grasp the impact of the inciting content produced by Z-bloggers, it is important to understand the context in which they are made. Against the backdrop of barbaric violence against Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war, many statements can be seen as encouraging a more brutal conduct of hostilities and, thus, an increased risk of further war crimes and grave violations of internation-

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al humanitarian law. Yurii Kotenok, a "war influencer" who also positions himself as a war correspondent and finds favour with the critics of the Russian military and political leadership, does not shy away from the following statements on his channel: "Even cancer can be cured, but 'Ukrainianism" – never! … It's a type of Satanism that can only be destroyed with one thing – fire! All-consuming fire that will cleanse this filth."

Other, more sophisticated, pro-war channels have emerged on the platform. One example is "War on Fakes" which, in true postmodern fashion, positions itself as a debunker of false information around the war. What the channel is actually doing is using a combination of disinformation, manipulative content and out-of-context information to present itself as the embodiment of an "independent fact-checker". The biggest challenge comes from the fact that channels like "War on Fakes" form a network, where they cross-reference images, videos and "quotes" posted on several other platforms as the "source" for "debunking" and "independent" content.

Different shades of criminality

The second problem with Telegram is that its use in Russia goes beyond simple warmongering or calls to nuke Ukraine. The platform has become a cog in specific operations that have clear kinetic effects. One of these is the recruitment of soldiers, including for private military companies. Telegram claims that it blocks "terrorist bots and channels" but it is unclear where they draw the line between their definition of "terrorism" and organizations like the Wagner Group. This group has successfully recruited mercenaries from both Russia and abroad through Telegram groups to participate in the war in Ukraine. The official Wagner channel is alive and well on the platform and invites new recruits directly in the account description.

Telegram has also found favour with Kremlin-backed hacktivists, who use channels and groups on the platform for the coordination of their cyber-attacks against Ukraine. Since February 2022, OSINT investigators have noted a progressive increase in Russian hacktivist activity, including openly crowd-sourced attacks on official information sources and public-facing services. These aim to at least temporarily disrupt endpoints or networks. Telegram is used to disseminate ready-made toolkits to scale up the attack and then report on its success. The virtual attacks, which can be instrumental to Russia's warfare on the ground in Ukraine, gain particular popularity among Telegram users through their gamification. Monetary prizes are offered to encourage participation in mass cyber-attacks.

Solntsepek is among the most notorious Kremlin-linked cyber groups, running an open channel on the platform. In December 2023, they claimed responsibility

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(on Telegram) for a successful cyber-attack on Kyivstar, a key Ukrainian telecommunications company. Their Telegram feed consists of an endless list of doxed profiles of Ukrainian military personnel, with each post ending with the phrase "Project Solntesepek – We Will Burn Them to Ashes".

Truly anonymous?

The third big problem with Telegram is the network's spurious claims about the exceptional anonymity its users enjoy. Following a series of data leak scandals involving other digital platforms, the average netizen has started to take their online privacy more seriously, and many look for alternative, more secured social networks. Telegram certainly capitalized on this consumer demand. Its minimalist website announces self-assuredly that it is "more secure than mass market messengers like WhatsApp and Line". They go on to say that the platform caters to those who are "more paranoid than your regular user" and make claims about top-notch end-to-end encryption that leaves no trace on their servers and supports self-destructing messages.

It is difficult to reconcile these strong, enticing assurances with the purge against administrators of anonymous Telegram channels that has swept Russia over the past two years. Similarly, in another East European dictatorship, Belarusian human rights activists have cautioned the public about the numerous ways in which Alyaksandr Lukashenka's services effectively identify the personal data of anti-government Telegram users. This affects even anonymous profiles and is done, for example, by retrieving the metadata of the files that the user has shared.

The Russian MP Andrei Svintsov, the deputy head of the parliamentary committee on information policy, information technology and telecommunications, openly stated in a media interview that special services "have all the necessary instruments" to determine the authorship of posts in "anonymous" Telegram channels and even "catch" administrators who have left Russia. Top law enforcement officials do not shy away from explaining publicly what OSINT tools, developed and already marketed by the Russian IT sector, are used by the government to determine the identity of Telegram users.

Given Telegram's assertion of superior anonymity, there are two possible logical conclusions: either Telegram is wrong about its impenetrable protections, or it is cooperating with the Russian authorities. Either option should ring a giant bell for its users and particularly Russians, both those who remained in the country and the exiled. But the second scenario of at least some degree of cooperation between Pavel Durov's team and the authorities in Moscow, as claimed by Ukrainian intel-

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Photo: Poetra.RH / Shutterstock

Telegram CEO and Founder Pavel Durov in the background. Durov was arrested at the airport in Paris in August 2024 on charges related to Telegram's lack of moderation. Ukrainian officials go even further, claiming that Durov cooperates directly with the Russian government.

ligence, would mean devastating risks for broad categories of the platform's users. Meanwhile, Telegram denies any such accusations and maintains proudly that, so far, they "have disclosed 0 bytes of user data to third parties, including governments".

Who is responsible?

One might still pose the question as to why it would be expected that Telegram, a private business, would monitor content that may violate international human rights law? Is that not the job of governments? In that sense, is Telegram's loose content moderation not something good, a return to a freer internet of yore, where extreme viewpoints are allowed to exist?

This argumentation is manipulative. The issue is that the absence of moderation on the platform is a myth. Telegram does moderate content and actively removes problematic speech, including at the request of governments. But it does so in a very non-transparent and arbitrary manner, which is motivated more by a desire to remain in certain markets than out of any concern for human rights protection. For example, in 2022, Telegram quickly complied with court orders to remove content in Brazil after being blocked in the country, which has grown to become an important market for the company. The platform also makes independent decisions to block content or users. These measures are manifestly inconsistent and without clear justification.

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Earlier this year, Telegram blocked chat bots run by the Ukrainian intelligence services that reported on the whereabouts of Russian troops, artillery and weapon systems in the country. The company subsequently recognized its mistake and unblocked the chats, but its public explanation of the faulty moderation measure has left users guessing about the rules of permissible content.

It is increasingly recognized that digital platforms share not only a moral responsibility in upholding the human rights of their users but are required to take proactive measures to meet specific obligations, particularly in relation to the rights to freedom of expression and privacy. This is not a theoretical discussion but a shift that has already given rise to the regulation of digital platforms and services in the EU. Telegram continues to claim that it does not qualify as a "very large digital platform" under the definition of EU regulations, which allows it to escape more stringent legislative requirements as to the protection of users' rights. This has already prompted the European Commission to investigate Telegram's user base in the European Union and verify the company's internal methodologies.

At the very least, Telegram must make its content curation and moderation rules publicly available and clearly written in the local languages of all markets where it operates. The platform should apply its own community standards in a consistent manner, based on human rights principles and with a sufficient investment of resources for the localized review of flagged content. It should give users more control over the content they wish to see on the platform. Content moderation should follow the well-tested conditions for restricting free speech: legality, legitimate aim, necessity and proportionality, rather than be based on considerations of market power or user engagement.

The platform should actively resist government orders that violate a user's right to privacy and freedom of expression. Pavel Durov and his team should be open and transparent with their users about security risks, and avoid making sweeping statements about impermeable anonymity shields if they cannot effectively protect users from de-anonymization. Finally, it would be very encouraging to see Telegram publish regular reports on the reasons, types and extent of moderation measures applied to different categories of content. This would allow users to understand what content is allowed on the platform and how it is removed, banned or de-monetized.

It seems that the Ukrainian government, or at least different factions within it, have more recently arrived at a more nuanced love-hate relationship with the platform. The Ukrainian Intelligence Service warned the public in an unequivocal statement that Telegram poses "a number of risks for Ukraine's information security". They added that these risks stem from the setup of the platform itself, rather than from specific users or channels. Ukrainian officials now openly say that Pavel Du-

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rov, the platform's mysterious founder, a native of Russia who was recently arrested in France for not moderating dangerous content, is cooperating with the Russian government. So far, these concerns have culminated in a draft law, which sets a number of conditions on all digital platforms but is undoubtedly aimed at Telegram. Failure to comply with the new requirements could result in the platform being banned in Ukraine.

Thoughtful approaches and personal choices

In a modern information environment, online intermediaries, such as Telegram, serve as de facto gateways for users to exercise their right to freedom of expression and information. In certain places, such as Ukraine's occupied territories, Telegram may be one of the few available means of uncensored information, which makes it an important safeguard of individual safety and possibly even one's lifeline. Wholesale bans on digital platforms are virtually impossible to reconcile with human rights principles and should be avoided as disproportionate measures that will also violate the free speech rights of millions of users, who have nothing to do with the concerns described in this article. However, Ukrainian officials are right on the point of transparency and consistent application of Telegram's community standards, especially insofar as it concerns content that is deemed "illegal" or "harmful". Ukraine should stop threatening to block the platform altogether but it should absolutely advocate for more transparent and secure rules and controls for Ukrainian users.

On its own end, Telegram, just like all other digital platforms, should become practically committed to protecting free speech and privacy as values. User engagement as a selling point for the platform's business model must take a back seat when it comes into conflict with fundamental rights.

On an individual level, each Telegram user, especially those in a war-affected area, authoritarian country, or vulnerable information environment, should make an informed personal decision about their level of engagement with the platform. He or she should not only reassess his or her ethical or moral approaches to social media use, but also understand the security risks that their activity on Telegram may pose to themselves and others. EE

Maksym Popovych is a human rights lawyer from Ukraine. He specializes in freedom of expression and media freedom issues, including responses to "information threats" such as propaganda for war, hate speech, incitement to violence, and manipulation of information.

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MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

The European Solidarity Centre turns 10

In August 2024, the European Solidarity Centre (ECS) celebrated its 10-year anniversary in the building at the symbolic address of 1 Solidarity Square. On August 14th 2014, the idea of creating a place dedicated to Solidarność/Solidarity got materialized, the word became flesh. Since then the ECS building has already become a permanent part of the landscape of Gdańsk – the City of Freedom and Solidarity.

The ECS has captured the hearts and minds not only of the people of Gdańsk, but also of a global audience eager to engage in discussions about major geopolitical developments in the international arena. ECS has found a permanent place on the map of the most important institutions in the world which influence, inspire and simply make us reflect on the state of democracy, freedom, human rights and the readiness for international solidarity.

The idea for the centre was first conceived in the 1990s, by Gdańsk's late mayor, Paweł Adamowicz. Years of discussions followed, shaping the idea of the institution, its building, and the permanent exhibition, all aimed at creating an international hub for dialogue. Construction finally began in 2010. The spirit of the place, the heroes of past events, and the people of Gdańsk all played key roles in refining the centre's vision, which would pay tribute to the Solidarity movement of August 1980.

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Starting with the open-air exhibition "Roads to Freedom" at the shipyards and which was first shown in the 1990s, the city then organized temporary exhibitions devoted to Solidarity. Later the founding act of 2005 and the establishment of the ECS as a cultural institution took place in 2007 with the start of construction in 2010 and the commissioning of the building four years later. Today, ECS is a brilliantly conceived, designed and vibrant centre. It houses an archive, a library, a media centre, conference and workshop rooms, and a winter garden. In addition to providing spaces for exhibitions and dialogue it offers rooms for educational activities, discussions and peaceful resolutions of disputes.

Yet the European Solidarity Centre is more than a building or the sum of its individual elements – it is a form of intellectual harmony. The mission of the institution is to derive from the visitors' experiences and inputs, for it is not only those who come here that learn about history, but they too quite often have a story to tell. What makes ECS great indeed are the people and their testimonies. It is a unique community. A few years ago, when the Polish government, at that time led by the Law and Justice party, drastically reduced the funding for the operation of the ECS, it was the members of this community who rushed out in solidarity and collected almost 6,000,000 Polish zlotys (1.4 million euros) to save what they consider their institution.

Basil Kerski, ECS director, thanked this community that gathered around the ECS with following words: "Every year we host around one million people here – visitors to our exhibitions, participants of our events, children and young people taking educational classes here, activists, as well as the Ukrainian and Belarusian diaspora... We enjoy the loyal friendship of former democratic oppositionists and shipyard workers, donors, volunteers, guides, people of culture. We thank you all for co-creating the ECS and sharing its values."

It started in Gdansk: 1939/1980

"In our city the two anniversaries of the outbreak of the Second World War and August 1980 have for many years been combined under the joint name of Solidarity and Freedom Day. Gdańsk remains its special place in history books as it is here that the first shots fired from the battleship Schleswig Holstein started the Second World War, a conflict which over its course claimed millions of lives in Europe and beyond. But it was also here

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at the Gdańsk shipyard, then bearing the name of Vladimir Lenin, that the dismantling of the totalitarian system began," said Aleksandra Dulkiewicz the Mayor of Gdańsk.

The Westerplatte peninsula is a special place, not only for Poles but for the whole international community. It is a symbol of the start of the Second World War and its first battle. Before the war, a Military Transit Depot operated on Westerplatte. On September 1st 1939, Nazi Germany attacked the peninsula with shelling from the battleship Schleswig-Holstein, thus starting the Second World War. The Westerplatte crew defended itself for as long as seven days, although its task was to defend for 12 hours only. The defenders were alone, encircled by a very well-armed German force. It was attacked from the land, air and sea. The defence was commanded by Major Henryk Sucharski.

For the last four years, the city of Gdańsk was "absent" from Westerplatte due to the so-called "special law," which transferred control of the historic site from the city to the national government, then led by Law and Justice party. The pretext for this transfer was the government's plan to build the Museum of Westerplatte and the War of 1939. As a result of a dispute that emerged between the city and the government, Gdańsk – one of the first organizers of the commemorations that mark the anniversaries of the outbreak of the Second World War (on September 1st at 4:45 a.m.) – lost its ability to actively shape and influence the commemorations. With last year's elections and

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change of power in Poland, the earlier well-established tradition returned. This return was free from any triumphalism and based on an agreement between different parties. We wanted Westerplatte to once again unite all Poles and be an object of national pride and reflection rather than a topic of dispute. We welcomed the presence of representatives of the highest state authorities: Szymon Hołownia, the speaker of the parliament; Prime Minister Donald Tusk; and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz.

However, what we wanted the most was the largest possible presence of the public: residents, veterans, scouts, young

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people, everyone wants to cherish the memory of the heroic defenders of Westerplatte. The date of this year's anniversary, which corresponded with the last weekend of summer holidays in Poland, was certainly favourable to our cause. Yet, we would like to think that it was thanks to this re-opened format that this year's festivities were attended by such crowds, the likes of which the Westerplatte peninsula did not see in the past four years.

The story of Westerplatte carries two very important lessons. The first one points to the need to recognise the importance of international unity and solidarity in the face of threats. The second one has a real physical form. Many vistors to Westerplatte associate it with the huge Monument to the Defenders of the Coast and the giant "No More War!" inscription. Certainly, this call has lost none of its relevance. Yet, the current reality calls for its further elaboration. When calling for peace, one must be prepared to be able to fight for it, to just stand up for freedom, democracy and independence. Thus, the Latin phrase "*si vis pacem, para bellum*" (if you want peace, prepare for war) remains as relevant today as ever before.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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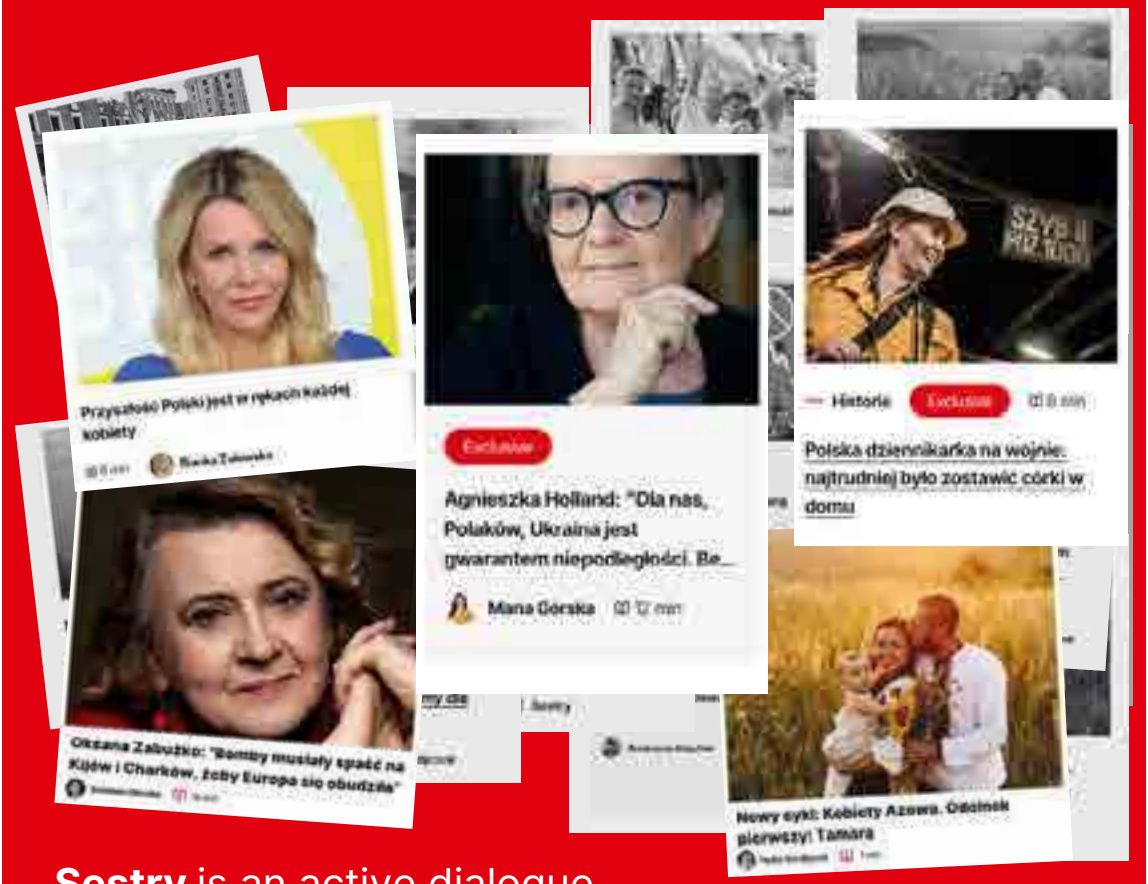

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The shift to cyber power

TATIA MOSIDZE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has involved the most extensive use of offensive cyber operations by one state against another in history. It is now obvious that blurring the lines between competition, crisis and war in cyberspace requires continuity in cyber defence. As a result, national cybersecurity must be one of the state's top priorities in terms of policy focus and budget allocation.

Forces that influence the world order are constantly evolving, and therefore, the global security landscape has become even more dynamic. For decades, the power dynamics of global balance were different to those today. Those with an economic advantage had the upper hand and dictated the rules to the rest of the world. Soon after, the emphasis moved towards military might, particularly during the Cold War. Of course, the economy is also the backbone here, as the development of weapons requires a strong and stable economy.

At the same time, there is no denying that military might plays a crucial role in today's world as well. However, in recent years, there has been a dramatic change in the global security landscape and along with technological competition and trade wars there is now a shift from traditional military power to cyber power. If the previous world was that of a nuclear arms race, we are today in a technological "rat race", where those who bring more innovation will be the ones dictating the rules to others.

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Cyberspace and power

With the advancement of technology, countries are increasingly focusing on building their cyber capabilities to gain an edge in global affairs. Needless to say, cyber-attacks can be just as devastating, if not more so, than traditional military attacks, making cybersecurity a top priority for many nations. The world has already seen events from Stuxnet, a computer worm that was originally aimed at Iran's nuclear facilities and has since mutated and spread to other industrial and energy-producing facilities, to recent cyber-warfare in modern conflicts. With this increasing demand and as everything becomes more interconnected online, the ability to defend against cyber threats has become essential to maintaining a country's security and influence on the world stage.

While economic and military strength remain important factors in global politics, the ability to adapt and excel in the cyber domain is becoming increasingly crucial for maintaining power and influence. The emphasis on technological superiority and cyber capabilities may ultimately outweigh traditional economic and military advantages in the shaping of global politics. Cyberspace's low costs, ease of access, anonymity, vulnerability, asymmetry and other features have led to the phenomenon of power distribution. For example, a small group of hackers can disrupt the operation of a large enterprise through cyber-attacks and demonstrate how power can be wielded through digital technology. In addition, nation states can use cyber capabilities to influence elections in other countries (as allegedly Russia did in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States), highlighting the potential for asymmetric power in cyberspace.

> The emphasis on cyber capabilities may ultimately outweigh traditional economic and military advantages in geopolitics.

The concept of the cyber component becoming more and more of a key pillar in national security strategies underlines its growing influence at the local, regional and international level. For example, the Office of the US Director of National Intelligence (DNI) listed cyber threats, including the development of weapons of mass destruction, as the most significant global threat to the United States. Additionally, the US Defense Department has identified cyber threats as one of the greatest challenges facing the military. US President Joe Biden acknowledged the difficulties of returning too quickly to past practices and emphasized the need for a new approach in both foreign and national security policy, as the security landscape is rapidly changing.

We can see the changing dynamic in the US's national cybersecurity strategy from last year alongside that of the defence ministry. Both strategies emphasize

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the importance of partnership and collaboration: "Build Enduring Advantages in Cyberspace – The department will pursue institutional reforms to create advantages that will last for decades … ensure the availability of timely and actionable intelligence to support cyberspace operations, as well as investigate the intersection of emerging technologies and cybersecurity capabilities."

In today's world one of the biggest threats after WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction), chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear threats, has a technological character. Now cyber capabilities are shaping a country's strength starting from national security and ending with economy.

A wake-up call

The intense and comprehensive war taking place as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made all this clear. It is the most extensive and ongoing use of offensive cyber operations by one state against another in history. It is now obvious that blurring the lines between competition, crisis and war in cyberspace requires continuity in cyber defence. As a result, national cybersecurity must be one of the state's top priorities in terms of policy focus and budget allocation. For example, in the case of the war in Ukraine, which still threatens the global security order, from the very beginning Russia has used cyber operations to disrupt critical infrastructure, such as power grids and government networks, causing widespread chaos and instability. This demonstrates the need for robust cyber defence measures to protect against such attacks and ensure national security in the digital age. A borderless domain makes it harder to be proactive, and this is one of the main reasons why a power shift is happening from nuclear weapons to cyber power. If "X" state wants to be powerful, influential and a globally dominant player then it must have advantages in cyberspace. A country's security largely depends on the reliability and security of its cyber infrastructure. Therefore, cyber-attacks can harm the country's international relations, economy, security and diplomacy. For example, in February 2021, Russian hackers attacked the Ukrainian government database and attempted to share information from a programme that installed malware on computers that downloaded data.

In a separate incident in May 2021, a North Korean hacker group conducted a cyber-espionage campaign targeting key South Korean officials. These cyber-attacks disrupted government activities and undermined relations between the two countries. These events highlight the importance of cybersecurity measures, including high-level understanding and international cooperation, to protect national interests.

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Immediately following the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom refined or strengthened the restructuring of their militaries' cyber assets, not only for military operations but also to ensure that peacetime military elements are reinforced for continuous national cyber defence. This war served as a wake-up call for the international community to refresh their cyber arsenal.

Cyber beyond military

National cyber defence is dependent on effective partnerships between governments and the private sector, as well as alliances with countries with similar priorities. While it is important to enhance cyber-military assets in response to the Russian aggression, focusing solely on military operations may neglect other crucial aspects of national cyber defence, such as infrastructure protection and civilian cybersecurity. Furthermore, Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine and the whole *modus operandi* behind it have highlighted the importance of technology companies as geopolitical actors, given their decisive interventions in the conflict.

Several cyber exercises were carried out during the war in Ukraine, indicating that military power, which has been the traditional weapon of conflict until now, will set the stage for intense cyber capabilities and new ways of modern warfare. In February 2023, France hosted ORION 23, where French and international cyber experts simulated a scenario of a cyber-attack disrupting critical infrastructure, showcasing the potential impact of cyber-warfare on modern conflicts. Around the same time, the British Army oversaw Defence Cyber Marvel 2, Western Europe's largest cyber-military exercise during which the organization tested their cyber capabilities in response to a fictional state-sponsored cyber-attack, highlighting the growing importance of cybersecurity in national defence strategies.

> Access to the internet and online communication should be internationally recognized as a fundamental human right and freedom.

General Paul Nakasone, the head of US Cyber Command, confirmed for the first time that the US has carried out offensive cyber operations in support of Ukraine. Various US units, including US Navy SEALs units, were officially deployed and involved in the war to increase Ukraine's cyber capabilities. In addition to providing real-time assistance (repelling cyber incidents), they also trained local cyber specialists.

It is critical that access to the internet and communications be included as an internationally recognized fundamental human right and freedom, and that this

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be a prerequisite for a new form of humanitarian intervention. Ukrainian media outlets were targeted in an attempt to crack down on state media and facilitate Russian propaganda. A prime example of this would be the spread of false information about Ukrainian government officials to undermine trust in state media.

Another example would be the use of cyber-attacks to disrupt the work of Ukrainian media outlets and prevent them from publishing accurate information. Russia targets insurance and healthcare organizations and aims to collect information on Ukrainian citizens to "support" business networks and prospective information. One detailed example is when security databases are breached and hackers steal Ukrainians' personal information, which would then be used to target them in disinformation campaigns. Another example would be the penetration of health organizations to collect information about the health of the Ukrainian population in order to create false plans about the problems of health consumption in Ukraine.

New tools, new responses

The case of Ukraine demonstrates the involvement of active cyber intervention, as attacks on energy, communications, mass media, and the private sector were openly displayed. There were also attacks targeted specifically at civilians. These attacks have had a direct impact on citizens, beginning with Telegram and progressing to other popular communication tools. These operations aim to limit access, hack accounts and infect devices.

At least 23 alleged Russian cyber-terrorist groups have been identified. All of them have carried out attacks against both the private and public sectors alongside offensive military operations. The most commonly identified groups include Gamaredon (related to the Russian FSB), Sandworm (GRU), and "independent hacktivists" who are actually state-controlled criminals.

> New threats require new mechanisms, ones that not only respond to challenges at the tactical and operational levels, but also on the strategic level.

The situation in Ukraine highlights the need for an effective humanitarian intervention in the realm of cyber. This is due to the need to isolate threats, not only for the safety of the target country's population but also for international security. This becomes even more imperative as other countries are now also facing attacks, such as Poland or the Baltic states. It is clear that Russian groups such as Armageddon are now directing attacks against other countries as well.

Today, cyber means having the potential to outperform traditional combat weapons in terms of effectiveness, coverage, availability and resonance. Furthermore, as

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artificial intelligence technology quickly advances, authoritarian states and criminal organizations will gain access to even more sophisticated and powerful capabilities in a completely new domain upon which citizens, businesses and states rely.

At this point, new threats require new mechanisms, ones that not only respond to challenges at the tactical and operational levels, but also on the strategic level. It is crucial for governments and organizations to continuously adapt and enhance their cybersecurity capabilities to stay ahead of evolving threats in the digital age. In the context of international relations, this will also allow for a more effective, timely and adequate response. EE

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Economic frontlines

Bracing for a possible Trump return

CASSIA SCOTT-JONES

November could see former US President Donald Trump return to the White House. His rather unpredictable approach to foreign policy could subsequently leave an even greater impact on the world than it did in his first term. This is due to various new conflicts like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with both Kyiv and Moscow preparing for Trump's potential victory.

Over the last month, Democratic nominee Kamala Harris has upended the presidential race in the United States by opening a small lead over Donald Trump in national polls. However, historical experience suggests early leads are often overturned and the upcoming presidential debates may prove decisive. With Trump still very much in the race, policymakers in Russia and Ukraine are bracing for what could be a seismic shift in US foreign policy. Trump may believe that starving Ukraine of aid will force it to the negotiating table and compel a ceasefire. However, his vow to end the war in 24 hours has been dismissed by Kyiv as unrealistic and by Moscow as dangerous. With the future of the war looking murkier than ever, how are Russia and Ukraine set to fare on the economic front?

Less aggressive approach?

Trump has often expressed a desire for a more conciliatory approach towards Russia, especially when compared to other adversarial countries like Iran and China. Days before his inauguration, Trump indicated his openness to lifting sanctions,

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stating, "If you get along and if Russia is really helping us, why would anybody have sanctions if somebody's doing some really great things?" Trump also broke with convention during the 2018 Helsinki Summit, when he appeared to side with the Russian government in denying election interference despite the findings of his own intelligence officials.

Despite these statements, Trump did authorize sanctions in response to Russia's election meddling and its military operations in Ukraine. However, the enforcement of these policies left much to be desired. For instance, the administration missed deadlines for issuing reports and designating entities to be sanctioned under the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act". This pattern, concurrent with a reluctance to criticise Putin, gave the impression that sanctions were more of a formality than a genuine attempt to apply pressure. In this case, history could very well repeat itself.

The existing sanctions regime is unlikely to be lifted but Trump could prove reluctant to implement new measures and strengthen enforcement. In the face of an unprecedented sanctions regime, Russia's economy has proven resilient. The Russian economy has not only failed to collapse as many had hoped but economic growth has surpassed many of the countries that imposed the sanctions.

Russia's evasion of sanctions has been a notable point of frustration for western policymakers, particularly in relation to the poor performance of the G7 oil price cap. When the G7 imposed this in September 2022, it initially put a stranglehold on Russian oil revenues by capping the price of Russian crude at 60 US dollars per barrel. The cap had a dramatic impact on Russian oil and gas revenues, which fell by 47 per cent in the first six months of 2023 compared with the same period in 2022. However, the impact was ultimately short-lived as evasion tactics and enforcement lapses allowed revenues to roughly recover to their pre-cap level.

The Russian economy has not only failed to collapse but economic growth has surpassed many of the countries which imposed the sanctions.

Russia's extensive efforts to reorient its supply chains create an evolving challenge that requires western allies to be equally adaptive. This situation can be likened to a cat-and-mouse game, where it is crucial to continuously update and close loopholes to maintain pressure on the targeted country.

It is uncertain whether Trump will be willing to maintain an indefinite pursuit of matching circumvention with countermeasures, especially if doing so requires any diplomatic heavy lifting or new investment. Indeed, strengthening compliance with the oil price cap would require increasing personnel dedicated to sanctions enforcement; utilizing advanced technologies to detect anomalies in supply chains; and additional funding for departments

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implementing export controls. Trump is also likely to be wary of the inflationary risks tied to tightening sanctions on tankers carrying Russian oil. The restrictions on Russia's state-owned shipping fleet, Sovcomflot, provide a useful case study in understanding the prevailing approach to sanctions. Sovcomflot is integral to the seaborne export of Russian crude oil, and yet only 20 of its 120 oil tankers have been sanctioned so far. This loophole has been left open due to concerns that Russia will seek revenge by holding back its oil supply with an adverse impact on prices. High oil prices have featured heavily in Trump's campaign alongside a vow to end inflation. It is likely that an overarching focus on the short-term performance of the US economy will see closing loopholes in the current sanctions regime sink even lower down the strategic agenda.

Severe limitations

Trump's approach to energy policy is likely to involve a combination of deregulating the US oil industry and encouraging higher production, as evidenced by his calls for the US to "drill, baby, drill". By ramping up production, a Trump presidency could bring down prices. Although Russia's fiscal deficits are currently small (-0.5 per cent of GDP in June) and thus easily financed through the domestic debt market, weaker oil revenues would put strain on Russia's budget, which is being stretched by unprecedented military spending. The Kremlin already has been forced to impose a tax overhaul this year and the magnitude of defence spending will almost certainly compel further income tax hikes if oil prices fall below expectations. In this climate, China and India serve as Russia's buyers, not its allies and these countries will be more than willing to pull the rug out from under Russia if it does not continue to offer attractive pricing.

> By ramping up domestic oil production, a Trump presidency could bring down prices globally.

Fundamental structural issues within Russia's economy, including acute labour shortages, dependence on public investment, and the crumbling national infrastructure, will continue to pose severe challenges that a shift in US policy cannot remedy. Russia's national infrastructure has been rotting under Putin's rule. In 2021, the Russian senator Andrei Shevchenko warned that the cost of necessary repairs to infrastructure had surpassed four trillion roubles (2.3 per cent of the 2023 GDP).

Russia is now being pulled in multiple directions, seeking to concurrently manage the costs of military operations in Ukraine, the reconstruction of devastated occupied regions, and the restoration of its own infrastructure. It is becom-

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ing clear that something must give way, and it seems that Moscow's ageing power, wastewater, and transport infrastructure, as well as the much-needed development of rural areas which could enhance quality of life and economic productivity, will bear the brunt.

There also is no foreseeable way out of Russia's labour market crisis – with vacancy overhang touching almost every industry. The issue of Russia's demographic decline falls into the often overlooked "opportunity costs" of the war. The wave of people leaving Russia since February 2022 marked the most significant exodus in the past three decades and a recent study by The Bell, an independent Russian news outlet, found that 650,000 Russians still live abroad. This human capital challenge is paralleled by technological setback. Moscow currently circumvents sanctions designed to restrict technological access by importing unrestricted dual-use items and relying more heavily on its own production. However, these alternatives are frequently of poorer quality, and will likely stifle productivity gains.

On the war front, contracts with countries like North Korea and Iran have substituted domestic limitations in ammunition production. However, resource constraints will become more pronounced over time. Of course, the long-term erosion of Russia's combat power will matter little if Ukrainian forces suffer greater degradation due to cutbacks in US aid. How does Ukraine stand to cope with a second Trump presidency?

Challenges ahead for Ukraine

Trump's "America First" policy advocates for channelling spending towards domestic issues, such as the border crisis, over international engagements. This perspective has informed harsh criticism of spending on Ukraine, casting a long shadow over the future of US support. Trump's personal relationship with Ukraine has also been highly contentious since the 2019 phone call with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which led to his first impeachment. Accused of pressuring Zelenskyy to investigate Joe Biden, Trump's animosity towards Ukraine deepened. This was only made worse by Paul Manafort's involvement with Ukrainian pro-Russian figures and the "Black Ledger" of secret payments. Trump's remarks about ending the war in Ukraine and conceding parts of the country to Moscow suggest a drastic shift in US policy that threatens to undermine Ukraine's defence and economic stability.

Ukraine's 2025–27 budget declaration reveals the stress that it is already under. Ukraine is targeting fiscal consolidation but deficits remain very large: equal to 18.2 per cent of GDP in 2025, 10.3 per cent in 2026, and 6.7 per cent in 2027. Much of this burden will need to be covered by loans from allies. In August, Ukraine's

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Photo: Phil Mistry / Shutterstock

Donald Trump once again is seeking to be in the White House in Washington, DC. Many fear a revamped Trump presidency would take a more conciliatory approach towards Russia in its war against Ukraine.

Ministry of Finance announced that it needs 35 billion dollars in external financing for 2025 alone. Defence will dominate the budget during this period, averaging 50 per cent of all expenditures – illustrative of the enormous cost of a long war.

Social spending, including support for veterans, education, healthcare, youth and sports, and culture, will all be significantly cut. The government is also planning to fix the subsistence minimum and minimum wages. As social benefits and pensions will not rise in line with inflation, those who rely on these payments will experience a decline in their real income. This will unfold in a country where roughly 29 per cent of the population now live in poverty.

European aid and the arrival of a 50 billion US dollar loan financed through interest generated on frozen Russian assets will help, but the impact of a US retreat would still be felt. From January 2022 to April 2024, the US provided 27 per cent of the financial aid Ukraine received. Even with the implementation of this harsh austerity programme, delays in the flow of US aid would force Ukraine to burn through the loans at its disposal, compelling yet another painful re-evaluation of spending.

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Since 2022, Ukraine has managed to avoid the severe inflation and dramatic currency depreciation typically experienced by wartime economies. Inflation peaked at 26.6 per cent in December 2022, which compares to 200 per cent in Syria in 2013 and 313,000,000 per cent in Serbia during the Yugoslav Wars. This has been achieved through various internationally funded strategies, including spending an average of 2.4 billion US dollars per month in 2023 defending the hryvnia, Ukraine's currency.

In a worst-case scenario, compensating for the gap left in the budget could necessitate a return to the dangerous monetary financing used in 2022. Monetary financing carries the risk of hyperinflation because, if relied upon for too long, it can overload the economy with liquidity. Indeed, the national bank is already undertaking an unorthodox monetary policy to contain excess liquidity in the banking system. The needs of the army are intertwined with the state's survival and thus will not be sacrificed. To avoid heavy dependence on monetary financing, Ukraine could be forced to delay or cut public wages and pensions. Concurrently, it is likely that the national bank would need to scale down its interventions in the FX market, resulting in currency depreciation that would further erode purchasing power.

Delays in the flow of US aid increase the exposure of Ukrainian infrastructure and civilians to missile attacks.

Ukraine's European partners will try to avoid an extreme scenario like this, but the intensification of financial pressures on households will be very difficult to avoid. By exacerbating the ongoing humanitarian crisis, interruptions in the flow of US aid have the potential to amplify the refugee crisis as more Ukrainians seek safety and stability abroad. Past experiences have shown that delays in the flow of US aid increase the exposure of Ukrainian infrastructure and civilians to missile attacks, even far behind the frontlines. An analysis by the *Wall Street Journal* of daily data from the Ukrainian Air Force Command found that Ukraine intercepted only 46 per cent of Russian missiles during the six-month congressional deadlock, which ended in April 2024. In the previous six months, Ukraine had successfully intercepted 73 per cent of missiles.

Room for optimism?

While a Trump administration would almost certainly initially pursue cutbacks in aid, Trump could be pushed to rethink his position on aiding Kyiv if the Ukrainian front started to collapse. Trump's narrative has always hinged on the assertion that Russia would not have dared to invade Ukraine under his watch. Trump now

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appears to believe that by starving Ukraine of aid he can force Kyiv to the negotiating table and force a ceasefire deal. Paradoxically, by weakening Ukraine, Trump is likely to reinforce Russia's long-held view that it can win the war by outlasting the West in a prolonged war of attrition.

The continuation of the war and the potential for Russia to seize large parts of territory without adequate support for Ukraine would create a scenario too perilous for many to ignore. This pressure will come from various quarters, including hawkish Republicans, the opposition and a considerable portion of the electorate. Historical precedents also indicate Trump's willingness to make compromises on Ukraine. Republicans in Congress were willing to approve aid to Ukraine after a six-month blockage put the Ukrainian frontline in a desperate position. This deal was reached when Trump himself proposed revising the package to structure economic support as forgivable loans rather than grants.

Recent developments in the diplomatic sphere also suggest that Trump will, at the very least, be willing to continue a dialogue with Ukraine. In July, Trump and Zelenskyy had a phone conversation that both parties characterized as constructive. Ultimately, the optics of failing to contain Russian advances would undermine Trump's argument of stronger deterrence under his leadership. Aid may come on worse terms, and there could very well be less of it, but historical flexibility suggests Trump's position could shift on the need to uphold political narratives of the US as a strong, dominant power in the world.

In sum, Russia's war in Ukraine stands on the brink of a significant upheaval. Despite promises of a rapid resolution to the war, the path to peace is likely to remain elusive. A shift in US foreign policy is likely to worsen an already difficult economic and humanitarian situation in Ukraine. This is true even if there are grounds to believe that Trump could rethink his position further down the line. In any case, Moscow will, at least temporarily, have the military and economic upper hand. EE

Cassia Scott-Jones is an independent economist covering the Russian war in Ukraine and a Country Risk analyst for Fitch Solutions. Her expertise is on policy issues related to aid and sanctions.

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Teachers, de-Ukrainianization and agitprop in Ukraine's occupied territory

MICHAEL GENTILE AND EUGENIA KUZNETSOVA

While Ukrainian society generally acknowledges the forthcoming difficulties related to the reintegration of the generation having grown up under Russian occupation, there is little research which explicitly focuses on schooling in these areas. Early in 2022, we interviewed university students and experts under condition of anonymity who had experience in the educational systems of the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics". They provide valuable accounts of their memories of schooling and add insightful personal reflection and analysis.

Presuming a Ukrainian victory, when the Russian war against Ukraine comes to an end, Ukraine will face the daunting task of reintegrating the territories currently occupied by Russia. For Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, this means undoing a decade's damage on these regions' economies, but especially on their social fabrics. Elsewhere, Moscow's strategy has been to fast-forward the de-Ukrainianization of the occupied territories, epitomized by the vulgar slogan that "Kherson will be Russian forever." In addition to the damage caused by Mos-

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cow and its proxies, reintegration will have to confront decades of ideological nihilism and political machine culture. While both rooted in Soviet paternalist politics, post-independence regional power brokers – first under the auspices of the Communist Party, then the Party of Regions, and finally its various post-Maidan incarnations – never came to terms with these problems.

Moscow's strategy has been to fast-forward the de-Ukrainianization of the occupied territories.

On the contrary, they frequently sought to extract political capital from the floating mythologies surrounding Lenin, the "Great Patriotic War" (the Soviet narrative for the Second World War) or the local blood-tainted icons of communism. In fact, as Ivan Posylnyi observed recently, until 2014, "the glorifying Soviet narrative about Donbas was not erased and no alternative approach to redefining Donbas was suggested in Ukrainian public and education discourses." With the public space saturated by Soviet war monuments and other communist paraphernalia, the "people's republics" found fertile ground for their neo-Soviet rhetorical repertoire.

Military-patriotic education

In the case of Crimea and parts of the Donbas, a generation of children and young adults have been socialized into believing that Ukraine is a bastion of fascism and a threat to their security. Central to this perverse socialization effort is schooling, particularly once the "Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics" (LDPR) had finalized the introduction of the Russian school curriculum. In addition to the forceful replacement of Ukrainian as the primary language of instruction with Russian, the main vehicle of Russification is the subject matter covered within history, geography and the social sciences, whenever applicable. On top of this, as Håvard Bækken noted in a recent article, the republics experimented with various types of courses that aimed at strengthening (or even creating) a stronger sense of Donbas' "national" identity. This had been toned down significantly by 2019, when a "Russian turn" in educational policy became evident. Bækken's work explores the contents of extra-curricular military-patriotic education in the LDPR, focusing on national identity-building in the region. It reveals uncertainty surrounding Russia's intentions vis-à-vis the region and how this resulted in inconsistent policy within this area. This comes with one exception: the identification of Ukraine as the quintessential Other, rather than the West, which Russian propaganda identifies as the country's opponent hell-bent on destroying the Fatherland.

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While Ukrainian society generally acknowledges the forthcoming difficulties related to the reintegration of the generation having grown up under Russian occupation, there is precious little research that explicitly focuses on schooling in the LDPR, not least because of the lack of access to the region for fieldwork. However, the little there is offers important insights, with two recent articles – one by Jaroslava Barbieri and one by Ivan Posylnyi – worth special mention in addition to the aforementioned contribution by Bækken.

In 2023, Barbieri analysed LDPR online paperwork to establish the goals of the "patriotic education programmes". These effectively functioned as a basis for the pseudo-republics' *sui generis* nation-building. Her work demonstrates that these programmes' goals were to inculcate students with the belief that the LDPR belong(ed) to a Russian civilizational space (i.e. *Russkiy Mir*). They were also designed to promote militarism and present Ukrainian identity as alien and hostile, as well as foster the separatist authorities' domestic legitimacy, including their goal of integration with and eventual annexation by Russia. For this purpose, Barbieri noted that "the adoption of Russian educational standards and the exclusive use of Russian and 'republican' history textbooks has served the de facto authorities' efforts to craft a new national myth that portrays them as paladins of peace against an aggressive Ukraine."

The post-2014 Russification of the occupied Donbas relied on being anchored in local myths.

Posylnyi, a Luhansk native now based in Warsaw, describes the evolution of one of the two major mythical narratives pushed by Russia and the LDPR – the Great Patriotic War with the other narrative being *Russkiy Mir* – in a Luhansk school based on an analysis of its extracurricular activities as promoted via the school's Vkontakte online community. While the increase in references to the Great Patriotic War over time is dramatic, what particularly stood out is how a local narrative relating to the Donbas-based Young Guard* is mobilized to create a local/domestic link to the historical storyline, while also somewhat breaking with the Russian narrative of the Red Army as the great liberator. While this may have changed following the LDPR's official annexation by Russia, it is nevertheless worth noting that the post-2014 Russification of the occupied Donbas relied on being anchored in local myths. These were principally those surrounding the Young Guard, symbolizing defiance and resistance, and the Soviet miner-cum-propaganda-

* *Molodaia Gvardiia* or Young Guard was a partisan organization active in the Krasnodon (Luhansk Oblast) region while it was under German occupation in 1942–43. Its members accomplished several successful acts of sabotage but the organization's history and impact are disputed.

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poster-boy Alexey Stakhanov, symbolizing the Donbas' culture of spectacularly hard work.

A view from the inside

The overall picture which emerges from Bækken, Barbieri and Posilnyi's work is clear. Education in the occupied regions is subject to a gargantuan, though often inconsistent, propaganda effort that doubtless pollutes the hearts and minds of the young generation. However, gaining a better grasp of what this means requires learning from those who have experienced the LDPR education system from the inside. With the field only being accessible to Russian scholars, and possibly also to some western Kremlin sycophant academics, the only realistic option is to explore it through leaks.

One such leak was facilitated by the "Donbas-Ukraina" programme, a government initiative aimed at facilitating acceptance into Ukrainian higher education for high school graduates from the occupied areas of the Donbas, as well as government-controlled frontline and grey zone settlements. While the number of students who took part (and still take part) in this programme is relatively limited, and even considering that those who do are likely less favourably disposed toward the authorities of the (then) LDPR, this group nevertheless represents a rare source of insider information about the transition of the educational system in the Donbas towards that of a strongly authoritarian (or even totalitarian) society. Importantly, it is through the experiences of members of this group that we are also able to understand that the transition is uneven, and that certain conditions leave space for the individual agency of teachers, some assuming extreme personal risks in the process.

> Education in the occupied regions is subject to a gargantuan, though often inconsistent, propaganda effort.

Early in 2022, right before Russia's full-scale invasion, we interviewed a sample of seven university students and two experts under condition of strict anonymity. The interviews were in-depth, some even lasting several hours, and they were *not* recorded. In the following, we use fictitious names, and our account will be somewhat vague to avoid indirect disclosure of the participants' identity. Four students were interviewed in Mariupol, whereas three more were interviewed using different online applications. A second interview with one of the four students interviewed in Mariupol was conducted in the summer of 2023 in a Ukrainian government-controlled city. The students had experienced the LDPR educational system at different levels,

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ranging from fourth grade to secondary school graduation, including vocational schools (*kolledzh*). All offered valuable accounts of their memories of schooling in the LDPR, adding insightful personal reflection and analysis.

We present the results of our interview study by breaking them down into four themes: language; the role of teachers; changes to the curriculum; and propaganda, symbols and celebrations. However, the boundaries between these themes are fuzzy, and in many instances our material belongs, in fact, to more than one.

Language

The Ukrainian language was seen as a threat to be eradicated. Kateryna notes that Russian immediately replaced Ukrainian wherever it was the prior language of instruction. Textbooks in Ukrainian were banned, including in subjects unrelated to language or identity, such as chemistry. The same applied to textbooks in foreign languages. Teachers were no longer permitted to find additional teaching materials online, such as online exercises or video tutorials, which was common practice during earlier years. Valentyna, one of our expert sources, describes the approach as "Year 1937", evoking Stalin's purges and the accompanying extreme suspicion towards any activity involving foreign languages. A new course called "Languages of Donbas" was introduced to replace the Ukrainian-language lessons. Soon enough, this course gave way to "native language", avoiding direct mention of Russian. This echoes the early Soviet practice of gradually replacing the native language with Russian. In a Kharkiv school diploma from 1934 consulted by one of the authors, for example, the diploma as such was still printed in Ukrainian, but "Russian" was added later by hand next to "native language". Of course, this was instead of Ukrainian, which would have been more obvious.

Textbooks in Ukrainian were banned, including in subjects unrelated to language or identity, such as chemistry.

Despite this, Kateryna continues, the Ukrainian language did not vanish completely. At her *kolledzh* (In Ukraine, a *kolledzh* is a secondary level educational institution for students starting from ninth grade, around 15 years old), one weekly 45-minute lesson was devoted to Ukrainian language and literature. And yet, there was an unmistakable downward trend for Ukrainian. Oleksiy reports that his two weekly lessons soon became one, then one every other week, until finally disappearing in 2020.

In general, using the Ukrainian language was seen as a sign of disloyalty towards the LDPR. When universities switched to distance learning due to COVID-19

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quarantine rules, some of the participants of the Donbas-Ukraina programme returned to their homes in the occupied territories to continue their studies online. While at home, Valentyna explains, some were reluctant to speak Ukrainian during online interactions, fearing being overheard by their neighbours. Usually, these students' mentors either advised them against speaking Ukrainian, accepting communication in Russian, or allowed them to complete their tasks in written form.

The role of teachers

Both students and school principals faced two notable organizational problems in addition to the evident disruption caused by security issues, especially in settlements located near the front line. These were the lack of textbooks and printed course material during the year or two it took for the Russian textbooks to arrive; and the lack of teachers resulting from internal displacement. The teachers who chose to stay had to operate in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, exacerbated by the fact they had not been given any clear instructions or revised teaching programmes. As a result, most teachers became very cautious whenever they referred to any textbook or existing programme. At first, absent any viable alternative, some teachers continued relying on the Ukrainian programme, while avoiding any mention of the textbooks supporting it.

Many teachers fled or quit, causing an ever-increasing shortage of staff. Kateryna recalls how the teacher of one subject was required to teach several unrelated subjects, stressing that there were general problems with the quality of the teaching. This created new obstacles for those contemplating further education in government-controlled areas, as it raised ever-greater hurdles in view of the entrance exams required by the Ukrainian programme for students from the occupied territories.

The level of propaganda within teaching depended heavily on the teachers themselves. According to Oleksiy, some tried to adapt to the situation by being as neutral as possible, whereas others simply skirted all potentially "political" topics. Daria mentions a geography teacher who, after listening to a student's opinion about the 2008 Russian invasion in Georgia that was not in line with Russian propaganda, appeared to agree with the student, but did not engage in any further discussion. The same teacher also declared that some topics could not be discussed because the way they were viewed was "a matter of opinion". Several of our participants note that some teachers left the impression that Russia had invaded Ukraine, without initiating any discussion on the matter, hinting that they probably supported Ukraine rather than the LDPR or Russia.

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Kateryna, who finished school in the DPR and who later also worked at a school, mentions how some teachers refused to spread propaganda. These teachers would report having covered topics related to concepts like "Ukrainian fascism," when in reality they had not. Teachers holding pro-Russian sympathies were far easier to identify, as they were happier to disclose and propagate their views. Some students disagreed with the teachers, but they usually did not speak out.

Over time the teaching system transitioned from chaos to greater rigidity, mimicking the Russian school system.

Over time it became more difficult for the teachers to adapt to the situation. The teaching system and the programme transitioned from chaos (and therefore flexibility) to greater rigidity, mimicking the Russian school system. Moreover, at the beginning of the war and of the Russian occupation, some teachers expected things to return to normal within the near future, allowing themselves a greater degree of openness. Over time, such openness evaporated. Fearful or demoralized, some teachers decided to flee, leaving an even more complicated situation behind them.

Changes to the curriculum

Valentyna notes that the textbooks on the "History of Ukraine" course – as well as the general school subject itself – were destroyed during the first years of the occupation. Instead, schools introduced "patriotic education" (*patrioticheskoye vospitaniye*) and later *Yunarmia* activities. For Valentyna, this second point was the most concerning, as it meant, for example, that minors, even children, were being taught things like how to place and defuse land mines. The *Yunarmia*, it should be noted, is a "military patriotic club/organization" which technically organizes extracurricular activities. However, our informant implied that participation in such activities was less-than-voluntary. Alongside "patriotism", religion was raised to prominence in schools, and Russian Orthodox Church cabinets appeared inside schools to strengthen what is known as "religious education" (*religioznoye vospitanie*).

Marta's picture is superficially different but identical in substance. In her experience, the "History of Ukraine" was immediately replaced by "History of the Fatherland" (*Istoria otechestva*) or by "History of the Native Land" (*Istoria rodnogo kraya*). Some students nevertheless reported that the teachers continued using Ukrainian textbooks at first, right up until the arrival of the Russian textbooks. However, the later books were not adapted to the circumstances of the DPR and Ukraine was almost absent in them. Kateryna noted how the History of the Father-

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land course turned out to be a course on the history of Russia, where nothing was said about Ukraine or about her oblast. Oleksiy's impression was similar: Ukrainian history was ignored completely, both within the subjects of "Foreign History" and in History of the Fatherland. The text from Moscow, he explained, started from the Tsarist era and focused on Russia.

Kateryna emphasized that the Russian programme was introduced without any adaptations to the local context, which is why the students were unable to relate to it as it "didn't have anything to do with us". Moreover, there was no course on the history of Donbas, so the teachers had to improvise. Such improvisation occasionally elicited immense acts of civic courage: Daria mentioned how her history teacher would take the students to the library to consult Ukrainian sources in secret. Ultimately, however, this teacher chose to leave Donetsk.

Things were seemingly worse within the vocational post-secondary education cycle. Kateryna, who attended a pedagogical *kolledzh*, described the undergraduate course in history as pure indoctrination, and her words deserve being quoted at length: "We hardly ever talked about history, and constantly ended up talking about [Vladimir] Putin. The history teacher had a portrait of Putin in her office. [When we didn't talk about Putin] for the most part we discussed the 20th and 21st centuries. We constantly talked about Russia, Ukraine didn't exist at all, no mention of it was being made whatsoever. Russia is great, and nothing else was being said."

The uncertainty perceived by the teachers was so high that some even preferred avoiding topics that had official approval.

Accordingly, Kateryna remembers how the teacher, praising Putin, frequently repeated the phrase "you are so lucky to have been born in these times." When it comes to the course's contents, she remarked that the Holocaust was discussed, but not a word was said about the Holodomor, the GULAG or about Stalin's purges. Stalin was "just good, a good character in history". In fact, by the time of interview, she had still never heard about the GULAG.

Anastasiya's impression was similar, "the history teacher tried to avoid any potentially sensitive topics, … we did not discuss the Second World War or the Holocaust in detail." This is rather surprising given that the Great Patriotic War stands out as the founding myth of contemporary Russia. In other words, the uncertainty perceived by the teachers was so high that at least some even preferred avoiding topics that had official approval.

For Kateryna, the *kolledzh*'s history teachers were clearly the most politicized ones, mainly because of the students' age: "One teacher told us that the West is only about moral and intellectual cultural destruction." Unlike the teachers at school,

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who according to both Kateryna and Anastasia leaned towards a more neutral or evasive stance, *kolledzh* teachers shared their [pro-Russian] political opinions freely, expecting some kind of response from the students, who were mostly interested in avoiding any such discussion.

Propaganda and de-Ukrainianization also polluted other courses. Geography would appear to be crucial, and in fact, the Ukrainian geography textbooks were swept away. After some time a new textbook developed in the LDPR was introduced. Marta and Kateryna both remember this new textbook as both descriptive and entirely focused on the Donbas region. However, it is worth noting that while descriptive and Donbas-centred, the new textbooks for eighth and ninth graders – whose contents were not that new after all – are the schoolbook equivalent of "sitting on the fence". Seen from the LDPR perspective, they include some surprising blunders. For example, the 2015 edition of *Social and Economic Geography of the Donetsk Region* [*Sotsial'naya i Ekonomicheskaya Geografiya Donetskogo Kraya*], approved by the "Ministry of Education and Science of the Donetsk People's Republic", includes a small map of Ukraine which correctly places both Crimea and the LPR and DPR within Ukrainian territory.

Daria and Oleksiy identified the subject of "legal studies" as an important vehicle for indoctrination. The subject was similarly descriptive, and was limited to presenting DPR and Russian legislation, as well as the DPR's new "constitution". Daria added that the teacher was forced to read out the DPR news (including the news from the military front), once a week for about five to seven minutes. This merges into our final theme of propaganda, symbols and celebrations.

Propaganda, symbols and celebrations

Ukrainian symbols and heraldry vanished immediately after the occupation. Marta and Oleksiy remember how schools had two flags on their facades: those of the DPR and Russia, with the second only appearing in 2018. Kateryna's experience, on the other hand, is that the Russian flag was reserved for special occasions, but that the text of the DPR anthem and portraits of DPR military and political leaders hung in the school's hallway. She recalled that when Alexander Zakharchenko (the "head" of the DPR) was killed, a full "hour of the class" was spent on discussing the event, not to mention the fact that the start of the school year was delayed by one week (Zakharchenko was killed at the end of August 2018, right before the September 1st school year opening). Oleksiy also remembers how many offices at his *kolledzh* were decorated with portraits of Denis Pushilin (Zakharchenko's successor).

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In public spaces, Russia appeared gradually. Kateryna recalls how some people started hanging Russian flags from their balconies, but that it did not happen immediately. Marta remembers seeing portraits of the DPR leaders scattered across her city, as well as some of their quotations on banners, but mainly during festivities. Daria remembers how graffiti about Novorossiya blanketed the walls of her city, but that they soon faded away together with the geopolitical project inspiring them. Overall, she notes, the focus clearly shifted towards Russia a few years into the occupation: "More and more small things were added to make you feel that you were part of Russia [rather than of Novorossiya, the Donbas or the DPR]."

School activities devoted Victory Day included concerts and songs, poetry, posters, as well as various discussions.

In the DPR, a militaristic hero cult developed alongside a cult of personality surrounding, first and foremost, Alexander Zakharchenko, but also certain military commanders, particularly "Motorola" [Arsen Pavlov] and "Givi" [Mikhail Tolstykh]. Overall, Daria explains, the changes in the visual landscape were not as evident in 2014–15, when the state was just at the beginning of its development. Instead, they came later, when state symbols and heraldry gradually occupied more space.

Several of our informants mentioned that Victory Day (May 9th) was the most celebrated holiday both at school and in the public space. The obsession with May 9th started in 2015. Among the school activities devoted to Victory Day were concerts with songs and poetry, making posters, as well as various meetings. The prevailing rhetoric echoes parallel developments in Russia, where the Great Patriotic War victory cult, nowadays also known as *pobedobesie* [Victory Frenzy], has re-established itself as the main cornerstone in the identity policy of the Russian state. At schools, special activities were held, including, as Kateryna recalls, Victory Hour (*Urok Pobedy*), which focused on discussing "Ukrainian fascism".

Daria mentions that her school organized special competitions devoted to the Great Patriotic War, while Marta emphasized how her school put together "GPW museums". Veterans of the ongoing war against Ukraine were also invited to schools to talk about the war, linking it to current and, especially, past events. This is in line with what Bækken calls "war merging" – the act of creating symbolic and ideological links between unrelated conflicts.

Victory Day was not the only propagandistic highlight on the calendar. On May 11th, for example, students celebrated "referendum day" by commemorating the illegal and farcical public consultation on the independence of the LDPR. Another big celebration was September 8th, the day of the liberation of Donbas from Nazi Germany. Even New Year celebrations were used for propaganda purposes: Dar-

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ia mentioned how the pupils in her class were forced to write letters to soldiers at the front, sending them season's greetings (she "trolled" them by writing "please come home" in Ukrainian).

All these symbol-laden holidays were also celebrated in public places: *biudzhetniki* (public sector workers) were forced to take part in official celebrations and parades, the way they were during Soviet times. In Oleksiy's experience, "passportization" was explicitly promoted and encouraged at school. Apart from the straightforward spreading of propaganda at schools, the local Russian-controlled administrations took steps that more or less forced people into applying for a DPR passport at first. These were soon to be followed by the requirement to obtain a Russian passport.

Public sector workers were forced to take part in official celebrations and parades, the way they were during Soviet times.

Specifically, in order to be issued a school or *kolledzh* diploma that would be recognized in Russia, one had to present a Russian passport instead of one belonging to the LDPR. Ukrainian passport bearers were strongly penalized. For example, in 2021, on New Year's Eve, and later on during weekends, the night-time curfew was lifted only for those able to present a LDPR or Russian passport. Moreover, certain bank services and public sector jobs were reserved for Russian citizens.

Lessons for reintegration

In our article, we discussed the lived experiences of the first (and hopefully last) generation having grown up with a DPR schooling, and the situation in the LPR was likely similar. Our interview materials suggest certain tendencies. First, the chronology of the transition seems to have been experienced similarly by most of our participants: de-Ukrainianization first, followed by Russification at a later stage. In retrospect, what appears to have been a conscious policy – or perhaps rule by trial-and-error – clearly prepared the ground for Russia's subsequent actions.

Nevertheless, while the political changes may have seemed immediate and dramatic, they did not filter down to the educational sphere right away. Teachers who were not displaced tended to sit on the fence, and even the DPR "ministry of education" was slow at introducing changes to the syllabus. In short, it seems like the whole idea of the DPR was not being taken seriously in the first place. Instead of nation-building, its main raison d'être was to facilitate the unmaking of Ukrainian civic and cultural identity in the Donbas – and Russian annexation. This is consistent with the words of a former leading DPR rebel interviewed by one of the

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authors before its clear pivot towards integration with Russia: "We weren't interested in the DPR, all we wanted was to join Russia."

Second, and related to the above, imported alternative "knowledge" from Russia tended to be perceived as foreign and irrelevant. In the Russian curriculum, the Donbas was more or less absent, and Ukraine non-existent.

Third, as expected, schools became a key target of propaganda. However, given the uncertainties about the future, teachers tended to avoid politically charged topics outside of the formal settings of official celebrations, e.g. Victory Day. Even so, older adolescents and teenagers were exposed to stronger doses of propaganda, often with clear militaristic characteristics.

How can this lived history of education in the DPR be interpreted in light of the region's future reintegration into Ukraine? Our interviews suggest that the first five years of the occupation, during which the DPR emphasized the uniqueness of the Donbas to support its "self-determination" argument, were less damaging than the following five, during which Moscow's policy left little space for Donbas regionalism. Instead, the region is now being presented as the "heart of Russia", echoing a well-known propaganda poster from the 1920s. EE

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Pivotal elections

Georgia goes all in

NINO LEZHAVA

Georgians overwhelmingly support NATO and EU membership and deserve a government that aligns with their aspirations. The West requires reliable partners in the South Caucasus and access to critical checkpoints in connectivity and trade. The current decline in relations between Tbilisi and the West can only be seen as a victory for Russia and China. The elections in October 2024 will provide one last chance for the country and its democratic perspectives.

Georgia is a small country with unique geopolitical importance to Russia, China and the West. Its regional and international positioning is heavily determined by the role of connecting Europe and Asia through the Black Sea. In this light, Russia's war in Ukraine has profoundly affected the shift in Georgia's foreign trajectory and democratic backsliding. Rearrangement of global trade routes and connectivity, fragmentation on the western flank, and emerging authoritarian powers pushed the government in Tbilisi to jump to conclusions and go "all in". Applying a multi-vector foreign policy, through positioning with Russia and naming China a strategic partner, raised concerns within and outside the country. Neither the overwhelming majority of Georgians nor the West desire to distance themselves from each other, especially in this critical period for the liberal democracies.

Is it a miscalculation or a deliberate move to leave Georgia facing the South Caucasian turmoil alone? The answer to this question became clear with the adoption of the law on "Transparency of Foreign Influence", also known as the "foreign agents law", echoing the practice of authoritarian governance in Russia since 2012.

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Pandora's box

As Georgia's foreign agents law fully contradicts the European Union's core values and norms, Brussels and Washington have tirelessly warned Tbilisi of the negative impact that passing such a law will have on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path. As a result, the Georgian government has essentially opened up a Pandora's box. Moreover, the law is in opposition to the fundamental obligations found in Article 78 of Georgia's constitution, which supports the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. It declares that "The constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."

Unfortunately, no one listened to either the warnings of the western partners or to the massive demonstrations by tens of thousands of Georgians. The government proceeded with the law. The ability to silence critical voices, independent activists, media outlets, civil society, and individuals has been centralized within the government for the sake of the so-called transparency. Now, any non-governmental organization, as well as print, online and broadcast media outlet that receives more than 20 per cent of its annual revenue from a foreign source must register with the justice ministry as an "organization serving the interests of a foreign power". Registration in the database provided for by the law began on August 1st. Failure to comply will result in a fine of 25,000 Georgian lari (over 8,000 euros).

The situation worsened when the authors of the foreign agents law began employing "Wolf Warrior diplomacy", a tactic tested by Beijing. This was a stark contrast to previous relations between the West and the former shining star of the Eastern Partnership and NATO cooperation. Disinformation and anti-western propaganda, along with aggressive and confrontational statements from Georgian high officials towards the US and its allies, became routine. While standing next to the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah in Iran, the pro-Russian political elite portrayed Georgia's only strategic partner as the representative of the non-existent "Global War Party". For the sake of electoral campaigns, they brainwash conservative voters and please the Kremlin.

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the West has supported Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity through international political platforms and unwavering financial support for democratic development. Given the geopolitical threats, Russian occupation, and limited financial resources, the country relies heavily on the West for funding its defence and security sector. Subsequently, suspending external support will critically damage Georgia's resilience. It would not be naïve to say that Georgia's centre of gravity lies beyond its borders, spanning both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and 32 years of strategic partnership

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with the US and the EU. Yet, any cooperation counts on the principles of reciprocity, trust and loyalty. This is especially true regarding asymmetric partnerships, in which the stronger counterparts defend smaller states from trouble. However, there is a threshold and the West has been pushed to the limits. It has recently been using sticks instead of carrots to deter unfolding pro-Russian scenarios, which temporarily prevailed in Tbilisi.

Strategic partnership at stake

After three decades of exemplary cooperation, Georgia's relationship with the United States has become seriously strained. For the first time in the history of the strategic partnership, the US imposed travel sanctions on individuals, undermining democracy in Georgia after the adoption of the foreign influence law. The situation worsened when Tbilisi ignored Washington's requests and blamed the "US in wanting to open up the second front against Russia in Georgia".

"The Georgian government's anti-democratic actions and false statements are incompatible with membership norms in the EU and NATO," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in July 2024. He announced the end of a comprehensive review of US-Georgia relations, resulting in Washington pausing 95 million US dollars in assistance to the government of Georgia. During 32 years of partnership, the US has invested 6.2 billion dollars in Georgia, which helped strengthen the country's economy and democratic institutions. Americans helped equip and train Georgia's defence forces and coast guard. Yet, following the passage of the controversial law, the US indefinitely postponed the "Noble Partner" joint military exercises, which have been conducted annually since 2016. The exercises were used to demonstrate Georgia's reputation as a reliable partner and emphasize strategic trust and cooperation between Washington and Tbilisi.

The US has also contributed to building schools and hospitals, as well as training teachers, civil servants and medical professionals. Unlike Beijing, Washington has invested in Georgia's energy infrastructure, bringing jobs to people, improving local development policies and supporting internally displaced persons. The US also remains committed to the Georgian people and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Despite cutting financial assistance to state institutions, it continues to fund programmes and activities that benefit the people of Georgia by strengthening democracy, the rule of law, independent media and economic development. In essence, Washington has aspired to teach Georgia how to fish for a lifetime, while the Georgian political elite has preferred to throw the country into an occasional trap. For example, by granting the strategic port of Anaklia to the Chinese.

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Photo: EvaL Miko / Shutterstock

EU and Georgian flags on a Tbilisi wall with the inscription "We are EUROPE". Despite the popular support for EU and NATO membership, the Georgian government has shown no willingness to alter its anti-western rhetoric.

Impact on Georgia's EU candidacy

Brussels's first tangible response affected Georgia's candidate status by halting the country's accession process and freezing 30 million euros in aid to the Georgian military alongside their participation in EU-led operations. Although Georgia received EU candidate status in December 2023, the EU has not launched accession talks.

Between 2019 and 2024, the EU allocated 517 million euros to Georgian ministries, which is 11 times more than the 46.1 million euros provided to civil society organizations. Nonetheless, Brussels had to counter disinformation spread by the authors of the foreign agents law regarding malign intentions and a lack of transparency in the EU's aid. Thus, Brussels made it clear that Georgia will not progress on its EU path unless its government changes course. This key message is directed at the Georgian electorate, who will vote in the October 2024 parliamentary elections.

The EU is also considering the future suspension of financial aid, amounting to approximately 85 million euros per year, and a possible ban on visa-free travel to the EU for Georgians. Some members of the European Parliament have even called for sanctions against the government in Tbilisi and particularly the MPs who voted in favour of the law.

Following the EU's decisions, individual member states have begun reviewing bilateral cooperation with Georgia. Germany, France and Denmark announced the

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suspension of bilateral aid for Georgia's military and governmental institutions. Following the US, Germany withdrew from a joint military exercise with Georgia and cancelled a judicial conference planned in Tbilisi. In response to the false allegations that "France does not provide direct budget funding for Georgia", Paris decided to reallocate its financial resources to support Georgian civil society and media instead of the state institutions, having invested 945 million euros in various sectors of Georgia since 2012. Denmark, meanwhile, halted its four-year military aid programme to Georgia, totalling 71.5 million Danish krone (9.5 million euros).

Current developments have raised serious concerns about the future trajectory of NATO-Georgia relations as well. In 2008 NATO promised eventual membership to Georgia. This commitment has been consistently reiterated in every summit declaration. However, for the first time since then, the Alliance avoided mentioning Georgia's NATO aspirations in the Washington summit communiqué, reflecting growing discontent with the Georgian government's increasingly antagonistic actions toward the West and its, at times, friendly stance towards Russia.

The battle for survival

Two months before perhaps the most game-changing parliamentary elections in the history of Georgia, polarization inside the country has grown and the onset of adverse outcomes has commenced. Unfortunately, after more than a decade of fighting, Georgia is still on the verge of losing progress in its democratic developments, risking the future of new generations born after the fall of the Soviet Union in an independent and European country.

Massive rallies, led by millennials and Gen Z, highlighted the divide between people and the government and a clear deficiency in supply and demand. However, their decisions still affected the overall image and interests of Georgia as a nation. While western partners strive to awaken the Georgian electorate and marginalize pro-Russian scenarios, Georgia's private sector reflects the butterfly effect of the crises as seen through the drop in the value of Georgian banks listed on the London Stock Exchange.

Meanwhile, the Georgian government shows no willingness to alter its anti-western rhetoric, revealing intentions to stay in power for the next 12 years. This has further spread concerns over the risks of conducting genuine democratic competition. Recent polls indicate that support for Georgia's EU and NATO membership has increased within the country's society. Over 85 per cent of the population backs Georgia's EU membership. However, the polls have yet to be translated into votes. Undoubtedly, the only solution to this situation lies in a change of power and

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getting Georgia back on the western track. In this light, the upcoming elections have been widely portrayed as a referendum on Georgia's future. Yet, the process must be institutionalized. The democratic development of Georgia requires a peaceful change in the government through elections and in its aftermath extensive reforms.

Several opposition parties have already indicated plans to unite around a pro-European platform. Georgia's president, Salome Zourabichvili, who vetoed the foreign agents bill but was overruled by the parliament, has appealed to Georgia's Constitutional Court to overturn the law as it violates constitutional obligations for greater Euro-Atlantic integration. The timeframe for this appeal is unclear.

Georgians, who have a centuries-long warrior tradition, recognize that this autumn's election is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to break the cycle. If NATO, the EU and the West turn their backs on Georgia, the country will find itself alone against Russia, which occupies 20 per cent of its territory, as well as China, which is gradually taking over critical infrastructure and the economy. Georgia's strategic location amplifies these risks, especially amid Russia's war in Ukraine and its accelerated build-up of the naval military base in Abkhazia. Georgia desperately requires western aid and support for its defence. Suspending external assistance will critically impact its resilience.

The current decline in relations between Tbilisi and the West can only be seen as a victory for Russia and China and a major loss for Georgia and the West. Georgians overwhelmingly support NATO and EU membership and deserve a government that aligns with their aspirations. The West also requires reliable partners in the South Caucasus and access to critical checkpoints in connectivity and trade. October 2024 will provide a once-in-a-lifetime chance for the country and its democratic perspectives. The stakes are incredibly high, and the commitment from both Georgians and their western allies must be resolute. At this critical juncture, a free-spirited society should not be left isolated. The West needs to provide unwavering support to ensure that Georgia can seize this moment and secure a democratic future. Otherwise, the results may be unsettling for everyone caring about the stability and democratic development of the entire South Caucasus region. It is a game of *Va Banque*, and Georgians have gone all in. EE

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EU referendum in Moldova

An easy target for Kremlin propagandists?

MIHAIL NESTERIUC

Moldova has been preparing not only for presidential elections this autumn, but also a nationwide referendum on the country's European Union membership. Opponents of the pro-EU ruling party claim this tactic is illegal and will cause irreversible harm to the society. Moldova's president, Maia Sandu, meanwhile is hoping to capitalize on Moldova's EU path to help score a victory for her second term.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova, another ex-Soviet country, has been described by several propagandists associated with the Kremlin as the next target of possible "liberation". Moldova had been blamed by them for discriminating against and offending Russian speakers, even those from the left bank of the Dniester River, or Transnistria, the region now controlled by the Russian army.

Historically speaking, Moldova has fallen prey to several empires. As a consequence, the society is accustomed to the fact that one imperial administration changes with another and thus the government is not to be trusted because it is put in place by foreigners. Society is also divided because different parts of it support one or another geopolitical player. In other words, social cohesion is something unknown to Moldovans, unfortunately. Even in the 30 years of its independence, neither the country's ruling political class nor its intellectual elite have been

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able to propose an attractive identity model that would appeal to all citizens, regardless of ethnicity or origin. In recent years, however, more and more experts in Moldovan civil society are inclined to believe that the European integration of the country could be a solution to empower social cohesion.

A referendum and an election

In December 2023, after the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova, the country's president, Maia Sandu, launched an initiative to hold a referendum on European integration in autumn 2024, so that the whole country could say clearly which path it would like to choose. As a result, the voice of citizens would be decisive. In the same speech, the president expressed her intention to run for another term as head of state.

Some political analysts have said that in this way Sandu would try to get a higher score in the autumn elections, associating the EU referendum with her presidential candidacy. Surprisingly, at the time of the launch of the EU referendum initiative by Sandu, Article 184 of the Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova did not allow the holding of parliamentary, presidential or general local elections at the same time as a referendum, but only 60 days before or after. The problem was "resolved" by an amendment proposed by Veronica Rosca, an MP from PAS (Action and Solidarity Party, for which Sandu ran for president). This implied that the Electoral Code could be amended to allow a referendum and a national poll to be held on the same day.

> Social cohesion is something unknown to Moldovans, even 30 years after gaining its independence.

Most representatives of the extra-parliamentary parties, who participated in the consultations on the idea of the referendum, did not agree that it should take place on the same day as the presidential election. After the consultations, they stated that the presidential vote was a competition that would divide the parties, while the European course should instead unite the pro-European parties and become a national idea. Some noted that all European countries that are now EU members held this referendum exactly after the negotiation procedure and that there is no EU member country which has held it prior to the negotiations. The EU Ambassador to Moldova Janis Mazeiks did not rule out the possibility of a new referendum after the conclusion of accession negotiations. Cristina Gerasimov, Moldova's deputy prime minister for European integration, admitted that EU structures had never recommended or asked Moldova to hold a referendum on European integration. Yet, last Febru-

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ary, parliament's Speaker Igor Grosu said that the referendum on Moldova's EU vector would be constitutional.

The lack of unity around the idea of an EU referendum outside the pro-European parties is obvious. This cannot help but attract pro-Kremlin "predators" who want to see in their potential victim only weakness. Several pro-Kremlin parties have shown their scepticism and disgust. The leader of the Socialist Party, Igor Dodon, urged citizens not to participate, fearing that if they did they would help validate the referendum, which aims to cede part of Moldova's sovereignty to Brussels. Speaking in Moscow, the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor said he and his supporters in Chisinau "will win" in the referendum and pro-European forces "will lose", assuming that the majority of citizens will vote against European integration in the referendum.

Disinformation campaigns

Pro-Kremlin politicians have an entire disinformation machine behind them created in Russia, which will do everything possible to discourage Moldovans from participating in the referendum. Recently, *Politico*, in an article about Moldova, wrote that the country is resisting a barrage of disinformation, cyber-attacks and political corruption supported by the Kremlin, and in particular highlighted the growing role of disinformation fuelled by artificial intelligence. Deepfakes will be the new weapon used to destroy the image of pro-European politicians or EU institutions in the rich arsenal of information warfare, but not the main one. Hostile narratives will always lie at the core.

> Deepfakes are the new weapon used to destroy the image of pro-European politicians or EU institutions.

Bogdan Țîrdea, a member of the Moldovan parliament on behalf of the Socialist Party, in a broadcast of "Mezhdu tem" on the Russian TV channel *Zvezda* suggested: "With the help of the referendum, they will try to change the constitution, insert an article on European integration into the constitution and, as a result, make the corresponding changes in the criminal code. Those parties and those politicians who oppose European integration will either be dissolved or imprisoned."

Thus emerged a narrative that European integration will be imposed in a dictatorial manner. At the same time, Țîrdea, in his Telegram channel, shared more speculation of his about the impact of the referendum on Moldova's constitution: "After the referendum for European integration, the authorities openly propose to introduce in the constitution the thesis that European treaties and fundamental laws are binding for Moldova. And this will lead to the adoption of a pile of laws that

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will shock fellow citizens: same-sex marriage, land laws and many other things." In this case the main narrative is that the EU is promoting the LGBTQ+ movement and the sub-narrative is that Moldovans do not support European integration.

Nothing beats the accusations of Țîrdea more than the constitutions of Ukraine and Georgia. In both cases, the European integration of these countries is mentioned, but even more, they both also discuss Euro-Atlantic integration. In other words, this means future NATO membership. At the same time, neither Ukraine nor Georgia recognize same-sex marriages. There is also little to no evidence of these other laws that would "shock" fellow citizens, as well as the binding nature of various European laws.

Dmitrii Ciubasenco, a journalist who promotes pro-Kremlin rhetoric, is equally concerned about the fate of the Moldovan constitution. He argues that the fact that the EU referendum will be constitutional means that Moldova will have a state ideology, which is contrary to the constitution. This will be followed by the introduction of articles in the criminal code on liability for denying and opposing the course of European integration as a form of violating the constitution.

Here the attempt to scare citizens with possible punishment for their opinions is evident, which again we do not find in any form in neighbouring countries such as Ukraine and Georgia. Moreover, considering the case of Georgia and the introduction of the foreign agent law there, it is visible how fragile the constitution of a pro-European country can be, even with clear changes regarding European integration present in it.

Emotions and fears

Marina Tauber, another MP from the disbanded ȘOR Party, says that Sandu decided to hold this referendum because the Europeans are no longer pouring money into Moldova, as if the government is running around the EU with its hands out. The referendum, according to Tauber, would be aimed at attracting EU money to Moldova, with Sandu fighting not for the country but the EU's interests. Here we find the hostile narrative that the pro-European government is begging for money from the EU for its own interests.

As we might see however, the European financial support of Moldova is dependent on larger strategies of the EU, which are determined by geopolitical factors and do not depend on the Moldovan government's possible "blackmail". The EU's indicative bilateral allocation to Moldova for the period 2021–24 is 260 million euros (65 million per year). Since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Moldova has been tackling significant challenges, including large numbers of ref-

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ugees, inflation, threats to its energy supplies, violations of its airspace, as well as a multitude of hybrid actions such as disinformation and cyber-attacks. The EU has already mobilized 1.2 billion euros to help Moldova in facing these crises since the autumn of 2021.

Gagauzia is another strategic square on the chessboard of the information battle in Moldova, but it is already occupied by pro-Kremlin pawns. Any attempt to liberate it will be easily neutralized by Moscow strategists. In the 2023 local elections the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) party did not have a single pro-European candidate in the Gagauz region. Mihail Vlah, the cousin of former Gagauz Bashkan (governor) Irina Vlah, and now deputy Bashkan of Gagauzia, said in a local TV show that the Gagauz people have no desire to participate in the referendum because Europe does not support the Gagauz, and that European institutions do not communicate with Gagauz local authorities. Such messages are part of the narrative that the EU is a discriminatory, or in some cases even a neo-fascist community. The truth is that in the EU all peoples and ethnic groups live in good understanding and freely respect their traditions. At the very beginning of the EU Treaty it says that EU members are "DESIRING to deepen the solidarity between their peoples while respecting their history, their culture and their traditions".

Gagauzia is another strategic square on the chessboard of the information battle in Moldova.

In April, the StopFals.md portal reported about a forgery spread especially in the Gagauz region, where flyers were distributed claiming that the referendum on Moldova's accession to the European Union is illegal and the plebiscite cannot have legal force. According to StopFals.md sources, they were distributed on March 24th, during the visit to the region of the leader of the Party of Communists, Vladimir Voronin, the former president of the country. It should be recalled that on April 16th, the constitutional court gave a positive response to the PAS initiative on the pro-EU referendum, which had previously been approved by the parliament.

Mihai Avasiloaie, the editor in chief at StopFals.md, highlights the extensive misinformation campaign against the EU integration referendum, noting that it is fuelled by both local and pro-Russian forces. "There is an attempt to demonize the idea of integration into the European Union through falsehoods, manipulations, and speculations that primarily target people's emotions and fears," Avasiloaie states. Common disinformation narratives include claims that EU integration will devastate Moldova's economy, drastically increase utility costs, force the legalization of same-sex marriages and lead to an influx of immigrants. These ideas are being promoted by various local political entities and pro-Russian media,

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aiming to reduce the referendum's support and diminish the popularity of EU integration among Moldovan citizens.

Evolving hybrid tactics

As Moldova approaches the pivotal referendum on European Union integration, numerous European politicians have visited the country to show their support and solidarity. Among them was Paweł Kowal, chair of the Polish parliament's foreign affairs committee and a former member of the European Parliament. I had the opportunity to speak with Kowal about the disinformation campaigns surrounding the referendum and the broader implications for Moldova's future. Kowal draws parallels between the disinformation tactics used in Moldova and those used in other former Soviet and post-Warsaw Pact countries. He observes that many believe they are resistant to Russian disinformation due to their historical understanding of Russian propaganda.

However, Kowal warns that the tactics have evolved: "For example, in the case of Moldova, they will use arguments against European integration by linking it to the war factor. They will try to associate the war with the current president of Moldova and the European integration, which is a completely new tactic." He also notes that religious arguments and the portrayal of Soviet/Russian traditions as spiritual and religious are now part of the disinformation arsenal, alongside the narrative of a perpetually crisis-ridden West.

Andrei Curăraru, a security expert from the WatchDog.MD think tank, discusses the national-level narratives being used to undermine the EU referendum. He points out that opposition forces are framing the referendum as an anti-ruling party vote rather than a pro-European one. "The ruling party's score and ratings are falling, and this may also influence the referendum results," Curăraru notes, adding that support for EU integration currently exceeds support for the ruling party.

> Opposition forces are framing the referendum as a vote against the ruling party rather than a pro-European one.

Curăraru also addresses scepticism about the EU's intentions, with opponents claiming Moldova will never fully integrate and will only be exploited for its resources. He counters this by highlighting the EU's offers, such as gradual integration and the immediate attraction of direct investment into Moldova.

In the Gagauzia region, the disinformation efforts are complemented by hybrid warfare tactics, such as corruption. "For example, we have seen promises of cheaper natural gas offered preferentially to the region, export preferences to Rus-

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sia, especially in the agricultural sector, and the offer of aid through MIR cards for socially vulnerable people, estimated at 25,000 in the region," Curăraru explains. Additionally, narratives around ethnic conflict and discrimination against Russian speakers are being amplified. This includes reactionary responses to legal actions involving Irina Vlah, which are framed to provoke nationalist sentiments and depict widespread ethnic conflict.

On June 13th, the governments of the United States, along with Canada and the United Kingdom, warned of attempts by the Kremlin and its agents to influence the outcome of the 2024 autumn presidential election in Moldova, which will be held on the same day as the referendum. In a joint statement, the three governments claim that destabilization is being prepared in the context of this autumn's election, including disinformation, criminal and covert activities, and corruption to undermine the sovereignty and democratic processes in Moldova.

Thus, the pro-Kremlin forces are taking both the presidential elections and the EU referendum very seriously. The question of whether this will be an easy target remains open, and the answer depends on the actions of the government and civil society, which if they work together, and not selfishly on the part of the ruling party, can bring some fruitful results for the European course of a very fragile and developing country. EE

This article was written in the framework of the Ratiu Forum Journalism Mentorship Programme under the guidance of Adam Reichardt, as a professional mentor.

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Between pro-Russian rhetoric and pragmatic cooperation with Ukraine

JAKUB ŁOGINOW

Between 30 and 40 per cent of Slovaks have positive feelings towards Russia, which makes Slovak society one of the most pro-Russian in Europe. And yet, pro-Russian Slovaks do not want to leave either NATO or the EU. This simultaneous support for Russia and western alliances is a phenomenon that demands a deeper look.

At this year's NATO summit in Washington DC, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico sent, not for the first time, a radically pro-Russian message to his voters. In a video posted on Facebook he said that Ukraine's NATO membership was unacceptable and "a guarantee of a third world war".

Fico's pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric resembles that of the Hungarian prime minister – Viktor Orbán. Yet this is where the similarities between the two prime ministers and their countries end. Unlike Hungary, which consistently blocks European Union and NATO aid to Ukraine, Slovakia (and this is true for both Fico and President Peter Pellegrini who represents the same political camp) easily agree with Brussels and Washington's pro-Ukrainian policies. Thus, the Slovak commentators who were observing the summit pointed out that Fico's Facebook video came right after the Slovak delegation had joined other members of the Alliance in the declaration stating that Ukraine's NATO membership trajectory was irreversible. To outsiders and those less familiar with Slovak politics, such a situation may be incomprehensible. However, those who know Fico and his party,

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SMER, recognize that this tactic was used before, especially during the two previous terms when SMER was in power: from 2006 to 2010 and then from 2012 to 2020.

A pro-Russian society that likes NATO and the EU

Indeed, Fico and other SMER politicians are known for their clear and strong anti-Ukrainian positions. They say no to Ukraine's NATO and EU membership and stress Slovakia's friendship with Russia. Expectedly, such narratives cannot but provoke anger and fierce opposition among liberal and pro-western groups. Yet again, just like during the NATO summit, Slovakia never causes any problems and votes in Ukraine's favour, both in the EU and NATO. All decisions made by these organizations are accepted by the government in Bratislava, which pursues close cooperation with Washington DC and Berlin alike. Why such double standards? What are the political gains of this game?

The answer is very simple: a large part of Slovak society has pro-Russian views. Public opinion polls show that between 30 and 40 per cent of Slovaks (mainly living in small towns and villages and outside of Bratislava) have positive feelings towards Russia (and Putin). This level of support was recorded even after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine in February 2022. Thus, looking at these polls one might come to the conclusion that Slovak society is one of the most pro-Russian in Europe. As such it resembles only two other societies: Bulgaria and Serbia.

Paradoxically, pro-Russian Slovaks do not want to leave either NATO or the EU. Even more, they have enthusiastically joined the eurozone and adopted the euro as their national currency, which is considered the highest level of a state's EU integration. In this way, Slovakia is an outlier in the V4 Group, where membership in the eurozone is strongly opposed by the other members: Poland, Czechia and Hungary. Therefore, Slovakia's simultaneous support for Russia and western alliances is a phenomenon that calls for a solid explanation.

In the spirit of pan-Slavism

Historically speaking, unlike its neighbours (Czechs, Poles, Austrians and Hungarians) Slovaks do not have a long tradition of statehood. Actually, they had no tradition of statehood until the 20th century. This was mainly because for almost one thousand years, that is until 1918, the territory of what now constitutes Slovakia belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary. Initially independent, the Hungarian state later became a part of the multinational Habsburg monarchy and from 1867

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the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a multinational and multilingual country, Hungary at first did not control all developments on its territory. Among them was the Slovak language, which was spoken in the mountainous regions of today's Slovakia. At the same time, the language used by people living in Bratislava, Košice and Spiš was German.

The situation changed in the 19th century, when Budapest's language policy became more restrictive. Known as forced "Magyarization", the new assimilation policy overlapped with the process of Slovak nation-building and the codification of the Slovak language. This allowed for the Slovak national culture to start developing, a process which has continued ever since.

Between 30 and 40 per cent of Slovaks, mainly living in small towns, have positive feelings towards Russia (and Putin).

These changes took place in an atmosphere of Slovak-Hungarian conflict, which pushed Slovak leaders to seek help elsewhere. They found it at the imperial court in Vienna and distant Moscow. More importantly, as a Slavic nation in the multinational Austro-Hungary, they also established contacts with other Slavs living in the empire, especially Czechs and Serbs. As a result, the process of Slovak nation-building was taking place in the spirit of strong pan-Slavism, a philosophy which assumes a sense of unity between all Slavic nations. Among them, the Russians are considered to be the greatest and enjoy the highest esteem.

Unlike Poles, who had the experience of direct contacts with the Russian state and Russians, Slovaks had no such experiences and therefore no conflicts. For this reason, they idealized distant Russia and saw Moscow as a potential ally. Poles, their neighbour, were at that time admirers of France, and especially its leader Napoleon Bonaparte. In him they saw an inspiration in the struggle against oppressors and imperial powers, especially Russia. Soon Poles started to also look with favour at the United States, which they recognized as a symbol of freedom for all oppressed peoples. The national cultures that have developed in Slovakia and in Poland since then reflect these historical preferences. Two centuries on, Polish children are taught about the admiration that their national poet, Adam Mickiewicz, felt towards Napoleon's France. At the same time, Slovak kids read Ľudovít Štúr and other authors who positively and emotionally depicted Russia.

A bridgehead for Moscow

As important as these historical sentiments are, they are not the only explanation for Slovaks' sentiments towards Russia. It is worth mentioning here Slovakia's political life in the 1990s and especially the activities of the then prime minister

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Historically speaking, Slovaks do not have a long tradition of statehood. Actually, they had no tradition of statehood until the 20th century. This was mainly because for almost one thousand years the territory of what now constitutes Slovakia belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary.

and pro-Russian politician – Vladimír Mečiar. When in power, Mečiar created a semi-oligarchic system similar to the one that Leonid Kuchma built in Ukraine. It was based on obscure connections with secret services in other former communist states and most importantly – Russian business.

The now demonized 1990s were actually the golden years for the budding Russian oligarchy, with many Russians coming to Slovakia. Some of them have stayed there permanently. Under Putin, little Slovakia turned into a perfect bridgehead for Moscow to test various activities, which can now be seen on a large scale across Europe and which are part of Russia's hybrid warfare. They included the financing of pro-Russian and pan-Slavic associations and magazines, as well as pro-Russian authors and essayists, not to mention numerous trolls on the Slovak internet. In fact, in Slovakia troll factories started operating around 2010. This was much earlier than in other states. In Poland or Germany, for example, such activities became visible only in 2014, in parallel with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. For Russia it was much easier to start its expansion into Europe from small Slovakia,

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which additionally showed historically grounded sympathies towards Russian culture. This is in comparison to Poland, which is much larger and more anti-Russian.

Full of contradictions

Fico can be disliked but his political talent cannot be denied. He is an accomplished politician and a skilled player who has survived more than one crisis. Neither inflexible nor a novice, Fico has been in politics for a long time. He was first elected to parliament in 1992 and first became prime minister in 2006. Altogether, he has held this second position three times already, having to quit twice.

If there is one word to describe Fico it is "populist". He founded the party SMER – Social Democracy, which from the outset has positioned itself as a "third way" party, distancing itself from traditional ideological divisions. Despite the name and some elements of social policies in its programme, SMER, which in Slovak means direction, often acts as a conservative force, at times even resembling the extreme right. In this way it is similar to Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), which has recently lost power.

Like other populist parties, SMER is hostile to immigrants and refugees. It also criticizes the principles of western liberal democracies. Nonetheless, SMER cannot be seen as a Slovak equivalent of the German AfD, Hungarian Jobbik or Austrian FPÖ. It is not an extreme right party, even if its rhetoric might suggest otherwise. When in power from 2006 to 2010 and from 2012 to 2020, SMER pursued a very balanced economic and foreign policy. It was under Fico that Slovakia became a Schengen country in 2007 and joined the eurozone in 2009.

SMER is largely made up of businessmen, not to say oligarchs, who function perfectly well in the globalized economy, which they criticize. Paradoxes and contradictions are the essence of the party's work. The same can be said about its political sister – Hlas, a political party founded by Pellegrini after he left SMER.

Robert Fico is an accomplished politician and a skilled player who has survived more than one crisis.

In this light, the double standards towards Russia and Ukraine come as no surprise. In fact, similar contradictions can be found in other spheres of Slovak public life. However, in this regard Slovakia is not alone. It follows other countries with large populist parties, such as Czechia and its ANO party founded by Andrei Babiš – Czechia's former prime minister. SMER's pro-Russian position is more of a reflection of the pro-Russian attitude of the earlier mentioned 30 to 40 per cent of Slovak society than anything else. Truth be told, the majority of those Slovaks

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who are the loudest in saying how good life is in Russia, and how bad it is in the West, have never been to Russia. They also do not plan to go there.

Interestingly, even before 2022 when it was possible for Slovaks to travel to Russia, they were doing it less often than the traditionally Russophobic Poles. Their neighbours were taking advantage of the relatively liberal border traffic regulations which allowed them visa-free travel to Kaliningrad.

Also, the anti-Ukrainian position of many Slovaks is often limited to hateful comments on the internet. Slovakia remains home to a large number of migrants from Ukraine (over 100,000) who live there now, while in 2022 their number was even larger – with over 350,000 refugees. Neighbourly relations between the two societies can be assessed as quite positive, with Ukrainians admitting that they feel safe in Slovakia. That is why it was not surprising that after Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a large number of Ukrainian refugees chose to flee to Slovakia, which they reached through the Zakarpattia region. Once they crossed the border with Slovakia, Ukrainian refugees received assistance and were offered the chance to stay in people's homes.

The same can be said about the borderland between Slovakia's Zemplín region in the east of the country and Ukraine's Zakarpattia. When compared with the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, this area seems almost ideal: it is conflict-free and people are friendly to each other. In Poland, and especially in the areas that are close to the border, the attitude towards Ukrainians is heavily affected by historical grievances, as the political conflict over historical memory continues to affect relations between the two states. Slovaks also often travel to Ukraine, especially to Uzhhorod. The traffic at the border is small, which means the waiting time to cross the border is also very short.

Some room for common ground

On April 6th 2024, Slovaks elected their next president. The main candidates were Ivan Korčok and Peter Pellegrini. Throughout the campaign one of the main topics was the national attitude towards Russia and Ukraine. While Korčok was more pro-Ukrainian, Pellegrini criticized Slovakia's support for Ukraine. The same anti-Ukrainian rhetoric was heard from Pellegrini's supporters – Fico and politicians from SMER.

Less than a week after the election, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric once again stirred up strong emotions. On April 11th there was a joint meeting of the Slovak and Ukrainian governments in Michalovce, a town in eastern Slovakia's Lower Zemlin region. It was reported that the meeting of the ministers took place in a very friendly at-

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mosphere, with Ukraine receiving almost everything it had requested, including joint transport and energy, as well as humanitarian aid. The continuation of Slovakia's military support to Ukraine, although on a rather commercial basis, was also secured. During the meeting, Fico also issued an important declaration, stating that Ukraine should join the European Union as soon as possible. He committed that he and his government would support this process, including the rapid start of accession negotiations. These promises were kept and in the following months Slovakia's representatives in the EU voted in favour of Ukraine. They supported EU negotiations with Ukraine and granting it EU aid. Therefore, Slovakia's position was quite different from that of its neighbour, Hungary.

Slovakia's military support to Ukraine continues under Fico, albeit on a rather commercial basis.

This pro-Ukrainian turn was not yet to be a permanent change and as such to be taken for granted. Since April 11th 2024, Fico has continued to support Ukraine during official international meetings, while he domestically blocked some pro-Ukrainian activities and did not alter his pro-Russian rhetoric. Most illustratively, Slovakia did not join the Czech ammunition initiative which was led by President Petr Pavel and aimed to supply Ukraine with what it needed most. In reaction to the prime minister's decision, Slovak civil society organized a fundraiser (municiapreukrajinu.sk) to become in this way a part of the Czech initiative, which is something that Fico also publicly criticized.

Among the decisions made at the Michalovce meeting was the building of an energy bridge between Slovakia and Ukraine. This project will allow for the supply of energy from Slovakia's nuclear power plants to Ukraine. In the current situation, when Ukraine is suffering from continued Russian attacks on its critical infrastructure and many of its power plants have already been severely damaged, this energy project is no less important for Kyiv than military aid.

There are also other transportation projects planned between Ukraine and Slovakia. For the moment they include a motorway between Košice to Uzhhorod; a new pedestrian border control terminal at the Uzhhorod border crossing; and a new railway line from Slovakia to Uzhhorod. Slovakia already has one railway line, with a narrow gauge, which operates between Mukachevo in Zakarpattia and Košice, and trains between the two cities run a few times a day. Adding to that, Fico and the Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal agreed on the launching of a direct railway route from Slovakia to Lviv.

There is no doubt that the implementation of these transport projects will benefit the railway industry. More than anything else, they will benefit the above-mentioned eastern parts of Slovakia, which now suffer, both economically and socially,

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due to their peripheral location. Thus, Slovak cooperation with the neighbouring Zakarpattia region in Ukraine and the prospect of Ukraine's EU membership are seen as offering the same opportunity to Slovakia as its own EU accession had been to eastern parts of Austria in 2004. Before then, the region of Burgenland and Lower Austria were among the poorest in the EU. Their situation was even compared to that of the former East German lands. It was only after the EU accession of Czechia and Slovakia that cities such as Hainburg an der Donau began to rapidly develop, and continue to do so until this day. EE

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Russian aggression echoes Serbian aims regarding Kosovo

DORAJET IMERI

From the perspective of Kosovo, the aggression exerted by Russia against Ukraine is seen similarly as the acts committed by Serbia. The aim of both is territorial expansion. While Russia is trying to maintain its influence, Serbia aims to create what is called the "Serbian world". Both call for greater autonomy for local citizens to justify their aggressive aims.

Kosovo and Serbia cannot agree on a sustainable political solution. The conflict between these two countries is deeply rooted and has not been resolved even after tense negotiations in Vienna in 2006–07. These negotiations produced a document known as the Ahtisaari Plan. Kosovo then declared its statehood in 2008 based on this agreement but Serbia did not accept it. At the same time, other powers had different positions on the newly declared state, turning it into an area where geopolitical strategic interests clashed. The United States and most western countries recognized the new state but Russia and others had different stances, even seeing it as a pretext for their actions in their so-called spheres of influence. This has subsequently made the situation even more complex. Meanwhile, Russia aims to keep challenging Kosovo's statehood.

Yet, Kosovo is not the only possible crisis hotspot in the Western Balkans and beyond. Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Middle East are on this list, while tensions may continue to escalate further. On the other hand, stability in these regions is

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crucial for the West, especially in Kosovo. This is true even if this stability resembles a new status quo as it seems there is still no possibility of finding a sustainable political solution between Kosovo and Serbia. This was reflected in a rushed agreement in Brussels in 2023 and an annex agreement for implementation in Ohrid, North Macedonia, which remains to be implemented.

Reactions to the Russian war

Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the situation in the Western Balkans had been tense. Many expected that Moscow's war in Ukraine would lead to some spillover in the region, especially in countries with ethnic tensions. The main concern was how this conflict would impact the already tense relations between Kosovo and Serbia, pushing the parties to reposition themselves. The positions held by the states were long expected: Kosovo condemned any act of Russian aggression against Ukraine, like western states. Serbia on the other hand, which, even though pressured by the West, did not change its stance.

> Many had expected that Russia's war in Ukraine would lead to some spillover effect in the Western Balkans region.

Both countries sought to use the situation to build a new political position in their bilateral relations and with the European Union. For Kosovo, what Russia is doing in Ukraine is a reminder of what Serbia has been trying to achieve in Kosovo, especially in the northern part of the country. This observation is related to the overall perception of Serbia and its alliance with Russia, but is also related to the need to align with the West, which is the guarantor of Kosovo's fragile statehood.

Yet, the efforts by Kosovo to undermine Serbia's position did not find much support, and perhaps at times were even counterproductive, as Serbia is seen as a determining factor for stability in the region. This is especially clear regarding its potential to ignite new ethnic tensions in the Balkans. Serbia's "ability" is also linked to the relations it has pursued throughout history with Russia, which dates back centuries and is related also to Orthodox ties. However, there is also more recent history and particularly that surrounding NATO's intervention, hindering Kosovo's state-building, and later not recognizing Kosovo.

Since 2011 both countries have been engaged in a negotiation process to normalize their relations, which was thought to be the mechanism that would bring them closer to the EU. But it did not turn out that way, as the parties achieved little and the process remains ongoing while tensions are always possible. There is a real threat of ethnic conflict as this resurfaced shortly after the start of the Rus-

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sia's invasion. Given that supporters of the negotiations taking place in Brussels mainly focused on avoiding peripheral conflicts, Serbia and Kosovo did not face any pressure from the international community. This was despite the new relations that Serbia would pursue with Russia during the ongoing Ukraine conflict. So far, nothing has changed.

Is Serbia like Russia?

From the perspective of Kosovars, the aggression exerted by Russia against Ukraine is seen as similar to what Serbia has done against Kosovo. The aim of both is territorial expansion. Russia is trying to maintain its influence in the Black Sea and keep the Balkans region destabilized, while Serbia aims to create what is called the "Serbian world", which is a new version of the old myth of Greater Serbia. Both call for greater autonomy for local citizens to justify their aggressive aims. In Kosovo, the process of integrating the Serbian minority is progressing very slowly. This process is dependent on many factors related to the 1999 war but also to historical, psychological and political circumstances. Under the influence of Belgrade, parallel structures have been created as a measure of non-acceptance of the post-war political reality.

In 2013, Kosovo agreed with Serbia to establish an association of municipalities with a Serb majority, some of which were previously established in 2008 through the Ahtisaari Plan. Serbia did not accept this in whole but insisted on the implementation of some parts of it. This has deepened further the mistrust between Kosovo Serbs. This has also kept both countries from finding a political solution, which now seems even further away due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

> In Kosovo, the process of integrating the Serbian minority is progressing very slowly.

The government of Kosovo had started a campaign to strengthen its institutions in the northern part of the country, mainly inhabited by Serbs, which led to some anger in the area. Under Belgrade's influence, the local Serb communities resigned from all Kosovo institutions such as the police, local government, courts, etc. However, this did not happen in other parts of the country where there are also five other municipalities where Serbs are the majority. The non-compliance was indicative that northern Kosovo will remain the core of future tensions. Since 2022 there have been some dramatic developments there, especially regarding the registration of vehicles with Kosovo licence plates which Serbs have refused to do so; holding elections to fill vacant positions; and also creating a new local govern-

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ment. The local Serbs refused to participate in the elections and this only added to the tensions. Having no other solution, Kosovo held elections in which only a few participated and which clearly did not produce real political legitimacy, despite the elections being entirely legal. The tension increased to the point where there had to be an increase in the presence of NATO troops as part of the KFOR mission.

Yet, many countries, including in the West, laid the blame for these tensions with Kosovo as being unable and unwilling to find a direct solution to the problem. The EU also took measures against Kosovo for what was deemed a lack of action to de-escalate the situation on the ground. Brussels also called for the start of drafting the statute for the association of municipalities with a Serb majority.

Rushed agreement

Other than the one signed in 2013, Serbia has not signed any other agreements with Kosovo through which the association of municipalities with a Serbian majority should be established. That agreement was not implemented due to a Kosovo constitutional court ruling which stated that the establishment of such an association would be unconstitutional. This turned the dispute into one of the most important political issues in the country. This problem also determines the relations Kosovo will have with the Serb minority and Serbia itself.

Kosovo's rejection of the association of Serbian communities also became the most sensitive political issue in the country, as it was signed by the parties in what is known as the normalization process of relations. Serbia did not recognize Kosovo, but through this signature, it seemed to be accepting the Pristina authorities as the only authorities in Kosovo. The fact that the document would be used by the constitutional court was seen as a silent recognition of Kosovo by Serbia. These were the official expectations of Pristina but the opposition vehemently opposed it. There were many protests while the parliament turned into a fierce political battle in which tear gas was even used in the streets.

For many years, this issue has remained a hindrance, and in 2018, the parties were interested in opening a new topic, that of territorial exchange. This idea created a lot of confusion on all levels, accompanied by various reactions for and against. There were also those who considered it to have unpredictable consequences, including a new conflict. The project aimed at exchanging territories based on ethnic lines, where the municipalities in the north of Kosovo, inhabited by local Serbs, could be exchanged for three municipalities in southern Serbia that are inhabited by ethnic Albanians. Of course, this idea failed, but the fact remained that the territory could be a key issue in how the problem could be solved. So the fact that

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Serbia aimed to claim the north of Kosovo made it seem clear that it was creating a plan to promote another status for this part of the territory of the Kosovar state, even if the exchange were to fail.

North Kosovo – between legality and effectiveness

When Kosovo declared its independence on February 17th 2008, groups of Serbian hooligans burned down the two main border points between Kosovo and Serbia in the north of the country, which had not been functioning normally for a long time. Kosovo's police action in 2011 to restore the functioning of these border points was met with fierce opposition from local Serbs who blocked roads, shot at police officers and created barricades on the roads for a long time. The main goal of the Serbs in northern Kosovo has been to create a separate status as preparation for secession from Kosovo. Any intervention by Pristina to restore order in the area would anger the local population as the structures they created, although parallel, were very powerful.

The main goal of Serbs in northern Kosovo has been to create a separate status as preparation for secession from Kosovo.

This has continued until now but with different scenarios. Yet the goal has remained the same: preventing the functioning of Kosovo's institutions in the northern part of the country.

In this regard, they refuse to participate in elections, do not accept the duties of the police and judiciary, and greatly impede the effective functioning of Kosovo. During the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, local Serbs protested, calling for a halt to the "systematic violence Kosovo is exerting on them". This seemed very similar to the calls of pro-Russian separatist groups in Ukraine. Feeling that Serbian influence is growing in the north of the country, and as the possibility of a separatist scenario increased, Kosovo's institutions were forced to increase the presence of special forces in the area. This move was negatively perceived by the international community, which viewed it as an act of intimidation against the Serbian population. Yet it was in September 2023 when there had been a clear act of terrorism against the Kosovo police, in which one person was killed and two others were injured. Unrest in northern Kosovo was only growing at that time.

Fortified in a monastery in Banjska, not far from the border with Serbia, forces in military uniforms led by Milan Radoičić waited for the right moment to carry out the attack. Radoičić is well known for his criminal acts but is also a leader of parallel structures and a high-ranking official of the main Serbian party in Kos-

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ovo. His connection with the Serbian president is direct. After the day-long operation, the Kosovo police neutralized some of the members of the terrorist group. Some escaped while others were arrested and held. This clear act of terrorism, besides being condemned by statements, was not accompanied by any consequences for Serbia, which likely supported this terrorist act in Kosovo. The aim was obvious: to create preconditions for a broader military intervention, just like Russia did against Ukraine, and to create a new reality based on the protective claims of minority rights.

Thankfully, the attempt failed. However, it does provide evidence of a serious situation that will mean the north of Kosovo will likely remain a crisis hotspot. Undoubtedly, Serbia will aim to intervene in the future to create the possibility of secession. Despite moderate political condemnation, no international actor held Serbia accountable for this act. Thus the question is how the international community will react if the situation once again gets worse. EE

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A crisis for which nobody is prepared

STEFAN MANDIC

A military intervention by Serbia into Kosovo would be the biggest upset to the political order in the Balkans since the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, with consequences that few have considered. Not only would such action do damage within Serbia, but neighbouring states and other powers could see similar repercussions as well. Even though such a scenario is not a certainty, these consequences must be considered.

The year 2008 is one that is singed into the mind of Serbs, both in Serbia and abroad. In February of that year, the Autonomous Province of Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia. To the outrage of Serbs across the world, a part of the country regarded as integral to the Serbian identity itself left with minimal resistance and effort being made by the Serbian government. Since then, the question of Kosovo remains one of the most important political issues both within Serbia and major nations involved in the political order of the Balkans. As a paramount concern in Serbian society, political parties across the ideological spectrum have offered a variety of proposed solutions. Appealing to international institutions, recruiting the backing of major powers, pushing for Serbia and Kosovo's admittance into the European Union, or simply considering Kosovo a lost cause are some commonly suggested solutions. However, one proposed solution has caused the most concern among both foreigners and Serbs alike.

Kosovo's separation from Serbia has provoked the strongest passion from a lot of activists and politicians from the nationalistic right of the country. Seeing Kosovo's independence as the country's greatest humiliation in recent times, they call

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for immediate and decisive action to bring the territory back into Serbia. Many of these parties and actors find one plan of action popular: the use of armed military force to intervene and bring Kosovo back into Serbia, regardless of the consequences that would follow. For them, no cost or loss that would follow would make such a military intervention not worth it, but unlike the idealistic sentiments they have, there would indeed be serious and dramatic consequences that would require more thought.

Diplomatic costs of intervention

A military intervention by Serbia into Kosovo would be the biggest upset to the political order in the Balkans since the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, with consequences that few have considered. Economic collapse, diplomatic isolation and even an intervention by NATO are all very possible crises that Serbia could face. Not only would these crises do damage within Serbia, but neighbouring states and other powers could see similar repercussions spill over as well. Even thoughw such

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a scenario is not a certainty, these consequences must be considered, as they would cause untold damage to not just Serbia, but the peace and stability of the region itself.

The most immediate consequence of a military intervention by Serbia would be diplomatic condemnation and isolation. The current geopolitical status quo, set up primarily in the aftermath of the demise of communism and the Yugoslav Wars, is one that is weary and resentful of war and revanchism. Domestic power sharing agreements, such as the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia and the Ohrid Agreement for North Macedonia; growing economic interdependence and globalization; and membership in alliances such as NATO all aim to reduce the threat of war and violent unrest. Almost every former Yugoslav state views a violation of this status quo as a serious detriment to their interests and even sovereignty. Influential powers outside the Balkans, such as the United States, United Kingdom, France and others, have publicly declared that their main foreign policy goals in the Balkans are to preserve liberal democratic "consociationalism" and to prevent war from breaking out once more. A military intervention into Kosovo would be viewed by all these states as a blatantly extreme violation of this status quo. What would follow would be very similar to what has been done with a variety of autocratic and militaristic states in the past.

The most immediate consequence of a military intervention by Serbia would be diplomatic condemnation and isolation.

If Serbia were to intervene, a collective diplomatic condemnation from a large roster of nations across the continent would be lobbied. Just as almost every nation in NATO and the EU condemned Russia for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a very similar effort would most likely unfold once more. States in the Balkans along with other nations invested in the region would view Serbia as an unreliable and even dangerous actor. No Balkan state would want to associate themselves with a state that views armed force as a favourable method in achieving foreign policy goals with neighbouring states, a sentiment reinforced by the whole peninsula's condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UN. Such neighbouring states, which would see the risk of such force being used against them, would begin distancing themselves, reduce cooperation, sever diplomatic relations, or even stand in direct opposition. Serbia would most likely find only a few allies on the continent and may even be viewed as a rogue pariah state. This would not be the first time, as a similar status of isolation and condemnation existed in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s under Milošević.

Not only would this leave Serbia in a contentious position, but the whole of former Yugoslavia as well. The continuous years of using diplomacy, negotiation, and mediation, which would be broken by such an intervention, would all be put into

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question. Tension, suspicion, distrust and even paranoia could become a common sight as an atmosphere of conflict would descend on the peninsula. States would find less inclination to invest in peace and diplomacy, rapidly remilitarize to guard themselves against a perceived armed threat, and perhaps even see military intervention as a possible route to settle their own foreign policy goals. The Balkans, one of the most socially and politically volatile places in Europe, where diplomacy and negotiation are needed the most, would find itself once again on the cusp of a major conflict.

Economic costs of intervention

Serbia, like so many other nations in the former Yugoslavia, has an economy that is rapidly globalizing. Gone are the days when Serbia's economy was beholden only to itself and a few neighbouring states. Today, Serbia's economy is heavily linked to nations and institutions across Eurasia and even the whole world. However, there is one economic area that Serbia is heavily reliant on more than anywhere else by almost every metric measurable: the West and the EU. Serbia's largest source of imports comes from EU states, its largest export destinations are EU states, and the EU provides billions of euros in aid and subsidies for projects within Serbia. A free trade agreement exists between the EU and Serbia. At the same time, Belgrade is a member of western trade organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank. Serbia's modern day economic policy is focused on integration and eventual membership with the EU. Yet, being heavily integrated with such an economic bloc requires that Serbia respect a variety of rules and values that the EU sets. A military intervention into Kosovo, on the other hand, would incur significant economic consequences that Serbia would find almost impossible to deal with in any positive way.

> Serbia's modern day economic policy is focused on integration and eventual membership with the EU.

Upon seeing the execution of such an intervention, major EU nations would immediately focus around using a very familiar method: economic sanctions. Both EU institutions and individual member states would pass new measures greatly constricting or criminalizing trade or any economic activity with entities or individuals within Serbia. The US and other states outside Europe would also follow suit in instituting economic sanctions and other punitive measures, possibly to a similar or even greater extent. Many private companies would also begin departing Serbia on their own volition as they would see the new business environment as too hostile and unpredictable. Almost every facet

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of economic life in Serbia would come under stress or rapidly deteriorate. GDP would decline; capital flight from departing companies would ensue; jobs would be lost; migration out of the country would accelerate; access to common consumer goods would become harder; a recession or an outright depression could unfold and so much more. In short, an economic disaster the likes of which was only seen during the late 1990s would take place within the country, wiping out almost two decades of economic growth and development. The scenes of shortages, hunger and unemployment, something that so many Serbs hope will remain a thing of the past, would once again return.

The military costs of intervention

Arguably one of the most visceral of the potential consequences of a Serbian military intervention would be a counter intervention by NATO and a renewed Albanian insurgency in Kosovo. Since the end of the Yugoslav Wars and Kosovo's independence in 2008, NATO has consistently reiterated its commitment to upholding the territorial integrity of a variety of states in the Balkans. If diplomatic and economic pressures against Serbia do not work, then NATO would consider conducting a military intervention of its own to uphold its commitment to Kosovo. Serbia is nowhere near capable of successfully defending itself against a combined coalition of NATO countries. Nothing less than a devastating onslaught would come to Serbia. During the intervention in 1999, NATO launched a sustained air campaign that targeted countless military and political targets across Serbia and anything the nation held in Kosovo. Destruction and the tragic loss of life would ensue for countless people across the country. Faced with the combined strength of a whole continent's worth of military force, Serbia would have no other choice but to sue for peace on NATO's terms. Another national loss and humiliation would then follow.

Other than foreign powers, the Albanians of Kosovo would most likely attempt to take up arms to counter attack Serbian forces. The Balkans have an extensive cultural and political heritage of asymmetric and partisan warfare, a heritage that the Albanians also share. In the 1990s Albanian separatists under the banner of the Kosovo Liberation Army waged an insurgency against Yugoslavia throughout the decade. Only with the end of hostilities in 1999 and the intervention of the NATO powers did insurgent groups like the KLA disband. However, many of their members and ideals persist among the Albanians of Kosovo. If Serbia would move back into Kosovo, then they would need to immediately prepare for an insurgency like that of the 1990s or worse. Fighting a counterinsurgency campaign is not

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easy, and a prolonged campaign against Albanian insurgents within Kosovo would certainly not end painlessly. With no major preparation or plan for a counterinsurgency, Serbian units in Kosovo would face considerable manpower and material losses to insurgency, something that would prompt serious backlash from the Serbian public. Many Serbs that are not so devoted to nationalism would see the losses sustained and would begin to question if such an intervention in Kosovo was worth the price paid.

A nationalistic fire to light the powder keg?

The consequences that have just been put forth are quite serious and plausible, but they are not a certainty. Like all plausible scenarios in geopolitics, such prospects, no matter how dramatic or devastating, must be planned for and considered. The West must recognize that there are political actors within Serbia that would go through with such an action and care must be exercised not to allow such a scenario, if it were to happen, to spill out of control and throw the whole region into conflict. In Serbia, there must be an even greater reflection on the consequences of a military intervention into Kosovo.

The people must ask questions that may be uncomfortable but are still worth asking. Are the material consequences worth it? Are the economic and diplomatic costs worth it? Are the potential number of human lives lost worth it? Serbs must stop and consider all that is in play and possible, lest there be a repeat of the great tragedy that took place in the 1990s. Serbia does not need another national catastrophe, and informed decision-making both among the leadership and wider population will help to turn such possible outcomes into mere scenarios. EE

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The Lithuanian Song Festival

100 years of tradition

OTTILIE TABBERER

Lithuania's song festival, *Dainų šventė*, celebrated its 100th anniversary in July this year. It stands as Lithuania's paramount cultural phenomenon, involving tens of thousands of Lithuanians and several diaspora choirs from around the world. Yet despite sharing similar festivals, the presence of choirs from the other Baltic countries is a rare sight to see.

An old woman blows kisses at the procession from her flat window. She is dressed in national costume and an array of amber beads. Among the crowds lining the streets, other elderly ladies in similar dress sit on benches, too frail to march the three kilometres from Vilnius's Cathedral Square to Vingis Park, the festival grounds, but keen to be part of the Lithuanian Song Festival parade.

I am with the Latvian choir, *Ziemelu Balsis*, whom I met in Estonia. We process in strict formation through the streets with the flags of Estonia and Latvia held five paces before us. I have been relegated to the back of the procession since I am not wearing a national costume, but my placement gives me full access to the cheering crowd. We greet wave upon wave of joyful faces, phone cameras, photographers, the colours yellow, green and red, outstretched hands, waving hands, dogs, handmade straw birds, banners and flags, and receive cheers from diaspora groups and shouts of thanks. Some from the crowd shout "*Latvija, Estija!*" and we shout "*Lietuva!*"

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back. We hold hands and sing traditional Latvian songs and the song of the Baltic Way, and I imagine the older faces in the crowd in their younger years waking up to Lithuania's independence alongside its sister states in the late 1980s. Although the choir members are old hands at song festivals in their own countries, it is the first time they have participated in an international song festival, and we attract a lot of attention. "As with any relationship that must be maintained," a fellow singer told me later, "our presence at this festival is very important. It's a signal of solidarity and support since that time, one of pushing diplomatic relations forward."

Flower crowns and national dress

During our procession we near a few balconies by the bridge to the park, and I see a Ukrainian flag. I shout "*Slava Ukraini*" and amidst the hurrahs and applause, the response of "*Herojam slava*" makes its way back to me. Solidarity flows beyond just the Baltic borders. Walking these three kilometres and being the object of jubilation and adoration, normal people cheering on normal people, highlighted for me, a song-festival-first-timer Brit, how fiercely the Lithuanian people value these festivals held every five years and how strong the appreciation runs through every generation.

A few hours earlier, I was sitting on a bus under a heap of flowers that I had bought at the market while the other women in the choir were gathering wild grasses and leaves from the verges. We then sat together to make flower crowns, an exclusively female affair, chatting under our Soviet-era accommodation blocks.

"Making these crowns makes me feel so feminine," one Latvian sighed. "This flower is called a *madara*, the one I'm named after." An Estonian confessed to never having made one before. "Latvians seem more in touch with nature, more practical," she claimed. The women in the group have been making these crowns with their grandmothers and mothers since they can remember. Some admit to looking down on those who buy instead of making them. Like the national costumes, even the flower crowns represent a specific regional identity. I commented how relaxed the Lithuanians seem about the dress code.

"Well in Latvia, we're a little more judgemental about national dress," someone laughed. "It has to be perfect."

More choir members turned up dressed in national costume, one typical of Hiiumaa, an Estonian island, another from Nīca, a western port of Latvia. "It used to be a rich trading hub," the wearer told me standing proud in all her jewellery and shining fabrics. She also pointed out how some of the folds hinted at Indian saris. There were national belt patterns with pagan sun symbols, ring-shaped metal

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brooches, linen collars, more chunky amber beads. I could not help but link the red woollen fabrics to Scottish tartan. One skirt belongs to someone's great grandmother, another was a shirt from H&M.

I told my companions about a Latvian academic whom I had met and was sceptical about the festivals, calling them glorified Soviet propaganda tools. My company was not impressed.

"That's absolute nonsense," my neighbour said while plaiting daisies and leaves around each other. "Whoever he is, can we strip him of his nationality?" She was only half-joking. Others had stopped their crown-making for a moment and were watching intently, while Gunita, the secretary of the Latvian president, laid it out plainly: "These festivals are exclusively linked to our fight for independence against totalitarian oppression." She continued, "they are crucial to the Balts not just historically, but as much today as for the future. They matter to every single one of us." I did not bring it up again.

Walking the three kilometres and being the object of jubilation highlighted how fiercely the Lithuanian people value these festivals.

The struggle for human dignity

The final concert of this year's Song Festival fell on Lithuania's Statehood Day, an annual public holiday celebrated on July 6th to commemorate King Mindaugus's coronation in 1253. It was also the festival's 100th anniversary with the theme this year being "May the Green Forest Grow," reflecting the region's reverence for nature. The song repertoire's subthemes were earth, sky, water and homeland.

Although the vast majority of Baltic citizens see their song festivals as a symbol of the struggle for human dignity and the political fight against the Soviet regime, some are sceptical. This is especially true regarding the Lithuanian festival. While Estonia and Latvia's song festival tradition goes back over 150 years, Lithuania's is younger and bloomed during the Soviet times, drawing inspiration from its Baltic neighbours and incorporating elements of Soviet amateur arts. The festivals were officially dedicated to the anniversary of Lithuania's incorporation into the Soviet Union and promoted as symbols of a flourishing socialist culture. They were a way to form a hybrid synthesis between national and collective Soviet identity, to forge an emotional attachment to an imposed ideal. The government banned pre-occupation anthems and sent composers and festival organizers to Siberia. Non-Soviet songs were seen as a threat.

But suppressing the freedom to act and speak created opportunities for opposition. As the song festival traditions grew in popularity and *glasnost* allowed more

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folk songs into the repertoire, subversive acts like unfurling pre-Soviet flags on stage mushroomed. The festivals became platforms to amplify the people's voices, to foster peaceful cultural resistance against Soviet ideology and Russification.

The Singing Revolutions began around 1987–1991 in Estonia and soon spread to Latvia and Lithuania. Although crucial in shaping the public political scene, they were not organized by political parties. Instead, they were grassroots-led and spontaneous. Since their nature was peaceful and benign, the then Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was not in much of a position to stop the singing which had caught so much international attention. When negotiations for independence turned ugly, songs still played a role in uniting and strengthening the unarmed masses.

In Lithuania the night of January 13th 1991 was a particularly painful one. Soviet military units opened fire and killed peaceful protestors who had encircled the parliament, the TV tower and other institutions of state significance. When the danger of death was very real, people sang and their songs became a shield against the horror. Vytautas Landsbergis, the then head of state and composer, made a speech that expresses the non-violent struggle well: "Suppress your anger, turn your backs to them, look at one another and not at the enemy. Look into the eyes of your next of kin, of your friend, and sing. It has helped us, has been helping us for centuries. Let us sing now… let us not rant or swear."

The Singing Revolutions began around 1987–1991 in Estonia and soon spread to Latvia and Lithuania.

So, we can be cynical like our Latvian academic, but the Soviet historical roots do exist. Yet one cannot ignore how deeply the significance of these years pervade the Song Festival tradition and shape Baltic unity. On that evening of July 6th 2024, this overwhelming strength of collective memory and pride was tangible. It continuously rippled down through the tiered rows of the 12,000 singers and out towards the almost 40,000-strong crowd. It flowed through linked arms, held hands, aching legs and tears. It rose up above the park's surrounding pine trees from the voices singing the opening song of the festival, *Tautiška giesmė*, the once-banned national hymn.

Blooming fences and blooming stones

At around nine in the evening bird song plays from the speakers. Swifts dip among EU and NATO flags flying above the stage's dome and we listen for the final note, the signal for the national anthem. The faint smell of grass and flowers wafts from my crown. Someone passes a bottle of brandy along our row. We sing.

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My choir are the few who need the lyrics and I feel the same twinge I have been feeling recently, that of being a complete outsider. I feel envious too.

During the last few days' rehearsals, the men from the choir behind us magnified this feeling. When they stood close holding shoulders and belted out the words by heart in a powerful bass, I observed a certain tribalism. The sopranos of the same choir, matching in purple velvet and smiles, are passionate like sisters. Each choir nurtured a sibling-like love for one other and their songs. We in *Ziemelu Balsis* may have learnt the very same songs, but we are moons away from how a Lithuanian feels when singing them. Who was I to chant patriotically and weep? The Chinese and Austrian singers to my right reminded me I am probably not alone in this feeling. Earlier that week the same Austrian had shown me his wedding ring, evidence of his one-month-old marriage to a Lithuanian alto at the end of the row.

It is getting dark and the audience melts into one black entity. The concert presenters speak to the Lithuanian president, Gitanas Nausėda, and some choir participants. "We call him the tall, good-looking man," the Lithuanian next to me whispers, "because that's all he's good for!"

A teenager in one interview stuns the crowd with her words. When asked about the importance of teenagers' participation, she ends her reply with "we are the ones who will defend the fatherland when it comes to it" – words you would never hear come out of a Western European's mouth.

We continue to sing patriotic songs about blooming fences and blooming stones, sunsets, mothers pining for their sons going to war. One of my favourites was a collection of songs from the western coastal region, a mixture of good luck chants for a fruitful catch. Then Linas Adomaitis, a Eurovision sweetheart since the 2000s, performs to a sea of phone torches. Ecstatic Mexican waves break out in the singers' ranks and chants of "*Lietuva!*" last for a couple of minutes. Four hours quickly pass and it is now midnight. The seeds from my crown start to shed and itch. We, along with the audience, end on "*Lietuva brangi*" (Dear Lithuania), another once-forbidden song. The final verse is fuelled with emotion and the conductor maximises the 12,000 voices in one rich, final pause. Our sound echoes out into the night and dies among the trees. One final deep breath, and the last words are absorbed into the audience. Applause.

Small countries must be smart

Months of rehearsals in Estonia, weeks of listening to the Alto II voice recordings on the tram in Poland, days and nights of rehearsals in the teeming rain in Vilnius are now over. I feel completely numb, sleep-deprived and in disbelief. A Brit

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from another choir comes over to take a selfie, "I've been here for over 20 years, enjoy your evening!" The colossal crowd thins, and eventually it's just our choir and a couple of others left in Vingis Park. Beer and snack stalls are still running and we gather on the dewy grass and go over the performance, say our goodbyes, take photos and try on each other's head gear. We then sing the repertoire all over again.

One of my favourites was a collection of songs from the western coastal region, a mixture of good luck chants for a fruitful catch.

I share my song book with a Belarusian who sings in the LRT Jaunimo choir. He was quick to tell me that he was learning Lithuanian and had joined this choir to meet people when starting his new life in Lithuania: "I needed friends, especially now, you know, I can't return to Belarus." It was poignant to think we had both joined choirs for the same motivations under very different circumstances.

We sing until the sky turns from black to blue. With the sun rising, us remaining few walk back through the park, over the bridge and see the city against the orange sunrise. I walk with Matiss, our conductor, and confess my envy of it all, how much I would love the UK to have such national unity and regular celebratory events.

"Small countries have to have these celebrations, this strength of national culture," he replies. "We must be smart, or we'll be absorbed by our neighbours." He goes on by saying that the Baltic governments have no choice but to pump huge investment into cultural institutions and events, simply to signal that they are "worth standing alone".

Matiss's wife, Marta, catches up with us and we start our goodbyes. She tells me of the empty feeling she gets after song festivals. "You've now been cleansed and must start anew on a foundation of positive values," she concludes. "This is what you must build on until the next festival. See you for rehearsals in September." NE

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The final concert of this year's Song Festival fell on Lithuania's Statehood Day, an annual public holiday celebrated on July 6th to commemorate King Mindaugus's coronation in 1253.

Photo: Ottilie Tabberer

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The Singing Revolutions began around 1987 – 1991 in Estonia and soon spread to Latvia and Lithuania. Although crucial in shaping the public political scene, they were not organized by political parties.

Photo: Ottilie Tabberer

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It was also the festival's 100th anniversary with the theme this year being "May the Green Forest Grow," reflecting the region's reverence for nature. The song repertoire's subthemes were earth, sky, water and homeland.

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Photo: Ottilie Tabberer

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One cannot ignore how the Song Festival tradition shapes Baltic unity. During the events, the overwhelming strength of collective memory and pride is tangible.

Photo: Arnoldas Vitkus / Shutterstock

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A legend of the Soviet underground rock scene continues to play

ELŻBIETA ŻAK

Boris Grebenshchikov's charisma and role in Soviet underground music were recognized worldwide. He was known for his distance from the Soviet reality. When asked today, Grebenshchikov, known as BG, claims that the popularity of his band, the famous Aquarium, came from the fact that it operated outside the established norms and challenged imposed standards.

"Russia is a terrorist state" is a popular slogan which we often see on social media and hear in public discourse. Understandably, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, almost everything related to Russia has become political and generates negative emotions. Many commentaries and analyses point to the differences between the political culture in the West and the dictatorial models which have developed in the East. Putin's Russia, now deemed neo-totalitarian, is a key example of this second model. Such bipolarity encourages an interpretation of reality through a spectrum in which, in Russia's case, violent state structures are found on one side while a passive, withdrawn society can be seen on the other. While a clear simplification, this dichotomy clearly omits the tension that exists between the authorities and the individual – a topic that has been traditionally addressed in Russian culture. Certainly, historical and social experiences determine the individual choices of those within Russian society, who are subordinate to power structures significantly different to those in the West. This is how we can also try to explain the different sense of personal freedom that we can observe within Russian

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society, which is known to distance itself from political activism, viewing this approach as another form of subordination to the authorities.

With all of the above being true, the current war in Ukraine and the continued aggression of the Russian authorities also against their own people, it seems very difficult not to blame this passive Russian society for the committed war crimes. For the same reason, the expectations that many people in the West express regarding Russian artists are understandable. They ultimately want them to take a strong anti-regime stance. Consciously or not, they agree with Edward Said, one of the founders of post-colonial studies, that culture and literature are neither innocent nor politically neutral.

A legendary rebel?

Following Vladimir Putin's start of his fifth term as the president of the Russian Federation, the legend of Russian underground rock and frontman of the cult band Aquarium, Boris Grebenshchikov, or BG, set off on a concert tour throughout Central and Eastern Europe. He played in Budapest, Bratislava, Kraków, Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn. On March 28th 2024, we had a short conversation before his concert in Kraków. I wanted to know whether as a Russian musician currently performing outside Russia he was somehow limited in his activities. I was curious whether he feels political pressure or any limitations that create a kind of bubble around him.

> BG had been seen as a rock rebel and legendary critic of the Soviet reality. He now openly denies any conscious activism.

To my surprise, BG's response was the following: "I do not see any bubbles around me. All I see is the sky, and the sky is the same above everyone."

At first, I could not read the intention of this statement. Was it a reflection of the artist's egoism? A sign of flirtatiousness? Or maybe a way of avoiding the question? Regardless of what it was, I was pushed to object immediately. My thinking clearly operates based on the schemes that are influenced by today's politics. Yet the more we talked, the more I saw how different our points of reference were. There is no doubt that our experiences of very different political and cultural traditions have shaped our expectations regarding the behaviour of self-conscious individuals and perspectives differently. This explains why BG, who for decades has been seen as a rock rebel and legendary critic of the Soviet reality, now openly denies any conscious activism.

"Your Soviet-era songs were written in Aesopian language…" I start.

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"No they were not!" BG responds.

"But you used metaphors?" I remind him.

"Trust me, I have never used any metaphors. Never in my life. I write as thoughts and words come to me. Even now at one of our concerts when someone asked us to play our old song from the 1980s, "Hold on to the roots" (Russian: *Держаться корней*), I thought that it sounded beautiful. Maybe it comes across a bit childish now, but, nonetheless, I agree with everything I wrote back then. Needless to say, we are now playing these songs with the same pleasure as we played them in the past." These words made me realize the internal and deep nature of BG's rebellion. It is a consequence of the path he has chosen, and is not just a momentary reaction of a committed socio-political activist.

Parallel reality

Grebenshchikov's charisma and role in the Soviet underground music scene were recognized worldwide. He was known for his distance from the Soviet reality. However, when asked today, BG claims that the popularity of his band, the famous Aquarium, came from the fact that it operated outside the established norms and challenged imposed standards. BG himself was defiant when it came to the Soviet authorities, treating the communist reality ironically and pointing out the regime's hypocrisy. With no other choice, he lived in a parallel reality. At the same time, he was attracting large numbers of people whose feelings towards the regime were the same.

In 1980, after a concert in Tbilisi, he was expelled from the Komsomol youth organization and lost his job at a university lab. He became a "social parasite" deprived of permanent residency, which was necessary to get a job in the communist state. As an outsider and with a great sense of humour, BG observed the backward Soviet reality. Today he even admits to having profited from that situation. Namely, the decisions at the top that deprived him of a job in fact saved him from the "chains of the Soviet system". With all career paths closed ahead of him, he became liberated. For a system opponent, an artistic path was an obvious choice. This is something BG did not need to explain through any declarations. His lack of compromises simply had a large impact on the younger generation.

"In a normal country when a band starts to play, it communicates directly with the audience," BG tells me. "In Soviet Russia, the situation was very different. Our choice was to play illegal concerts, which would gather people nonetheless, or join the official artistic scene and do everything the authorities wanted you to do. I could not do that. In 1972 I was once supposed to play some songs which could allow

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me to make money. But after 40 minutes, my body temperature rose to 41 degrees Celsius and I knew that it was the last time I would attempt something like that."

Today in multiple interviews, BG, now aged 71, stresses that as human beings we are born to be free and then through different life experiences we learn to make permanent choices.

Never a part of the Soviet life

In 1987 Sergei Solovyov directed *Assa* which later became a cult Soviet film. *Assa* was one of the movies that brought Russian underground rock music into the mainstream. It featured such famous bands as Kino, Bravo and BG's Aquarium. The film's plot focused on the clash between the freedom and individualism of the underground culture and the oppression and violence of the Soviet authorities.

"*Assa* was a voice of *perestroika*. A voice of the generation of the young, freedom-wanting Russians. Do you see some parallels between that situation and today? Does the reality which surrounds people now inspire them or constrain them?" I ask him.

"Our inspirations come from above. They come from the essence of life," he responds.

"But doesn't the contemporary context also affect people's viewpoints?"

"I can wear a dark suit or a light suit – this is the context, but the essence remains the same," BG answers.

"What you have just said is something that only a free person can say," I retort.

"People are as free as they want to be," he says.

"So if to compare what was inspiring you in the 1970s and 80s and what inspires you today, what would you say?" I finally ask him.

"It's quite funny and accurate at the same time that you mentioned *Assa* and that it has become a cult film. I actually did not notice that. I never watched *Assa* from the beginning to the end and saw only parts of it, when Sergei was making it."

"I was quite moved by it," I admit.

"I actually don't even understand what this film is about," he responds. "Surely, I don't understand it because I was never a part of the Soviet life. The Soviet life – in one way or another – was like a camp which was detached from the outside world. It had its own preferences, its own rules, fashion and music. I was lucky that the first book that I read in my life was written by Jules Verne. And that is why, since I was six, that is since I started reading, I felt that I was a citizen of the world, as it was described by Verne. I feel that I have been living in this world until today. At first, I was forced to live in the grey and poor Soviet Union, but the truth is it had as much joy as any other place, as long as you didn't close yourself to it. *Assa* was

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Photo: Anton Gvozdikov / Shutterstock

Boris Grebenshchikov and his group Aquarium perform in Moscow back in 2013. Grebenshchikov left Russia in 2019 and has been living in London since.

a film that meant a lot to a Soviet man, but I was not such a man. I was a man, but not a Soviet man. That is why I played music that was not aired on the radio. We listened to different music, we read different books."

An eye to eternity in the Soviet Union

I ask him about his understanding of freedom: "Is freedom a desire of an individual or are we born to be free?"

"We learn to be free," he responds. "We absorb the sense of freedom from our parents, education and with the help of all people with whom we happen to live."

"You were saying that Aquarium was not a band, but a lifestyle," I remind him.

"We created it in 1972 and that is what we stuck to. Aquarium was meant to be an eye to eternity in the Soviet Union."

"So how is it to influence people?" I ask honestly. "We all know that there are people who need such an eye but there are also people who see nothing or hear nothing. How do you create such groups of fans around you? Are people starting to see connections with each other because they need a particular type of music? Do they adopt it as something of their own? Something that helps them experience freedom and build their own world?"

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"Naturally, it has always been like this," BG responds ambiguously. "When we play on stage and people are coming to listen to us, or are listening to our music at home, it is for sure what they need and what they like. Or they want it because we offer them a different lifestyle, one that allows them to do everything and does not forbid anything. It creates new opportunities for them."

"And what about people who are scared? Have doubts? Lack strength?"

"This is what we are for," he responds. "When they lack strength we come in and say 'Hello!" to them. Suggesting that maybe they too would like to be encouraged to do things as much as they can. There are people who come to demonstrations and those who stay home. It's time we stopped waving our arms and tearing our hair out. It is better to be realistic and see what each of us can do to help people build something. We have many songs which can make people cry, but let us ask what does this crying lead us to? Can we do something to help people who have gotten tired of this crying? Now, we should sing songs not to make people cry but to give them strength to gather in this new setting and move on. Humanity will not get any better; it is already too diverse. It is made up of billions of individuals who are at different stages of development. But we can help individual human beings."

In autumn 2023 the BG+ group released a new mini album named *Bogrukinog*. It is composed of four songs. BG believes that smaller albums better respond to the needs of today's world. He continues to compose for the Russian-speaking audience and is convinced that his songs can help people who live in Russia and outside it build bridges at a time when it has been decided in Moscow that any bridges should be destroyed. For BG it is still crucial to show people that they have a choice and therefore are not forced to mindlessly follow the crowd.

BG continues to compose for the Russian-speaking audience both inside and out of Russia, hoping to bridge the communities.

"Today political views are very sharp," I argue. "In Europe we now have a culture of strong opinions. We have to position ourselves."

"I do not understand the words "have to"," he says. "I expressed my point of view on the second day of the war and that's it." In the immediate reaction to the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, Grebenshchikov produced a short video message that he shared on social media. In it he declared: "The people who unleashed this war have gone mad. They are a disgrace to Russia." Later on, he issued many anti-war statements and gave interviews in which he expressed his anti-war position to both Russian opposition media and the international press.

BG's newest songs, which are in the mini album, also offer a critical interpretation of reality and the clash that exists between an individual and the oppressive

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system that treats human beings as possessions, all to achieve its own goals. The message of his lyrics was complemented by the visual and video works of the St Petersburg-based artistic group "Witchcraft artists" (*Колдовские художники*), which creates satirical images of Putin and Putinism.

"So what about the last clips to the songs in your *Bogrukinog* album? Those with the satirical images of artists from St Petersburg?"

"I have never seen them. I have nothing to do with these clips," he says to me.

"Who makes them then?" I ask.

"People themselves!"

Indeed. Many of the songs written and played by BG start to take on a life of their own. The best example is "Do not stand over my soul, mom" (*Не стой над душой, мама*), which was the first song from the mini album that was sung at the concert in Kraków. Its powerful lyrics seemed to have a strong effect on the audience. Yet, when we check the internet, we can find many clips on YouTube (added by a user nicknamed @NePsiHuy). In this way, BG's works become a basis for a platform that is used by alternative Russian and other nationality artists, who use it to express their political views and feelings in a time of "unfreedom".

No longer waving the flag

BG has been living in the United Kingdom since 2019. To finance his music activities he paints and sells his art work. The legend wants his music to be professionally recorded with the participation of world class musicians. But this is not what intrigues me the most. I continue with questions about his life as the Soviet-era Aquarium frontman, and how it relates to his life today.

"And if we were to once again go back to the Soviet Union in the 1980s what was there that was irritating you the most?"

"Nothing was irritating me. Well, when you are sitting on a bench in a small park and some people come to you and beat you up, this act does not irritate you because all you want is to survive. When you are chased by the KGB you are also thinking about how to survive and you don't get irritated. This is how life is."

"So what is most important in your life today?" I ask him.

"First of all, let me say that there are many wars which humanity accepts and when you want to do something or when are trying to do something about it, you realize that nobody needs your work. People have already accepted that the war in Ukraine continues, as well as the war in Gaza and other places around the world."

"But there are people who are openly against these wars," I point out. "For example, there are musicians who go on tours and take a clear position and there are

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also those who stayed in Russia. There are different choices, different reactions, of course, but would you say that when it comes to the work of the artists the political context can help or hurt their activities?"

"If we are to use a concrete example, such as the Beatles, can we say that they ever showed their political standing?" BG responds. "They did not like Vietnam, that is true. Or the Rolling Stones? They were against everything, political or not. Political statements are made by those who like to make them. I know many people who were forced to leave Russia because they disagreed with the state. I left much earlier, in 2019, when it was easier to leave. I have lived in London since and I have been recording my music there. The people I play with are also there. That is why I no longer wave the flag. Everybody understands that war is evil. Everybody understands that terrorism is evil. The rest is falsehood and devilish machinations."

"How do people live in today's Russia?"

"Things are hard there. In Russia, practically speaking, things are now like they were back when we were starting our band when strong censorship was in place," BG admits. "But back in the 1970s things were in fact a bit easier. Now you can say something and get sent to prison. I don't know if there are any more rebels left in Russia. Yet, regardless of that, life is more important than political views. Of course, there are people who are heroes but there are also ordinary people who do not have such needs. They take care of their families and that is enough for them. But of course there are also people who cannot live like that and it is them who have left Russia. Our task is to help both of these groups."

For over 50 years now, BG has written texts and made music for "both of these groups". At the moment he has some new projects. He experiments both in music and with text. As a result, his works are still reflective and ironic. The best example is the song "A spiritual leader" (*Духовный лидер*), which premiered in Budapest and Kraków during BG's concert tour in March 2024. Yet the old Aquarium songs have not yet been forgotten. Many people who come to BG's concerts ask for their favourite old tunes.

"The essence of our conversation can be put into one simple statement: people steer their own lives. But many people ask: what can I do? This means that you were summoned to learn something. Life is for us to learn that the situation in which we are now is a test for us to learn something," he concludes. EE

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A bottom-up approach to the history of the region

An interview with Jacob Mikanowski, author of *Goodbye Eastern Europe. An intimate history of a divided land.*
Interviewers: Adam Reichardt and Nina Pániková

ADAM REICHARDT AND NINA PÁNIKOVÁ: We'd like to start by talking about how you came up with the idea to write the book. What were your motivations? What drew you to the region?

JACOB MIKANOWSKI: It was a kind of voyage to write the book. It took many years and developed pretty slowly. Part of it is my background. I'm Polish by family. I grew up speaking Polish. My parents are immigrants from Warsaw. I grew up in a Polish-Jewish family and lived in America, but then moved back for a few years to live with my grandparents in Warsaw. Then I went to grad school for history. I was actually supposed to study Soviet history. I studied Russian in college, actually partly because I spoke Polish, so I thought it would be easy. But I got less interested, I was always pulled back towards Eastern Europe, the Eastern Europe which is not a part of Soviet history. And I was doing that at a time when I think interest in Eastern Europe, in America at least, was at an all-time low, before 2014 and Russia's start of aggression against Ukraine. Then there was an absolute kind of nadir of popular and academic interest. So I was in graduate school and watching the ground vanishing under my feet in terms of jobs and interest. Yet, I was very passionate about this region. I thought what I was studying was incredibly interesting. And I thought what I had inherited with my family's story, two world wars, the Holocaust, spies, guns, it was incredibly interesting. And there was very little audience for it. So ultimately I was leaving grad school to be a journalist. As a kind of last look back at what I'd been working on, I wrote an essay in 2017 called "Goodbye, Eastern Europe", which was partly saying goodbye to the idea of East-

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ern Europe that was in the 1980s and 90s, when there was that high point of western interest. I actually had trouble publishing that essay, but it eventually came out and had a little bit of viral success, especially in Eastern Europe. I felt like it spoke to somebody. Then there was a slow process over five or six years of turning that essay into a fuller story.

Your book is called *Goodbye Eastern Europe*. I was wondering how did you decide about where to draw borders in such a region which is so vast, so different, but as you also go through the book, you find a lot of similarities. So why Eastern Europe? Especially despite the fact that you say at the beginning that there is no such thing…

It's true. It is such an amorphous idea. I think it is hard to find people who self-identify as Eastern European. It's something that you get ascribed to you once you leave. For me, some of it is related to emotion. There is this baggage that comes with being Eastern European outside the region, this cloud of stereotypes and misunderstanding that you can actually work with. That's how I start when I am teaching students. When someone teaches about Western Europe, students already have an idea, a mental image of France, of Spain, of Germany… But when you're teaching Eastern Europe, there is this void that you're filling. So my approach was a big tent one. Everything between Germany and Russia, and essentially Finland and Albania. There is of course a risk with this approach. We have about 20 modern day countries, more or less. But there are some advantages to this approach as well. I found incredible commonalities from Estonia down to Albania, which seem on paper to have nothing in common in terms of religion and background, or economic development. If you go from Moldova to the Czech Republic, there are actually some historical experiences or styles of experiences and parallels of social organization, parallels in history, parallels in politics. It's not a uniform region, but it's given its uniformity by its diversity. It is the most diverse part of Europe. And that diversity is woven very deeply into the social fabric. We actually lost a lot of that diversity over the 20th century. I also think its distinct from continental Russia or places in the world that are like it, the Caucasus is kind of like it, but it's quite unique within Europe, within European history. So it's that whole belt.

You mentioned the research, how long did it actually take you to conduct the research and write the book? In many of the places that you write about you actually visit and you take the readers there, and we feel like we are there with you when you describe the scenery, etc. So maybe you could talk a little bit about the process of the research.

It was a long process, because it started with my essay. And only then did I start travelling. I was already pretty familiar with the region, especially with Central Europe. I spent years in Poland, I had done some reporting in Hungary and wrote a lot on Czech literature. So

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I started travelling beyond those parts. I did a couple of long trips by train and bus. Usually I'd start in Poland because I have family in Warsaw. I'd visit them and then get on trains and go to Ukraine and then down through Romania and across the Balkans, or through Budapest into Serbia and up through Bosnia. I try to visit places, not just capital cities. In every country I try to visit at least some place big, some place medium, some place very small, and then go to places that are resonant with the themes in the book. Some of the places I found I had never heard of and discovered on site. I did a long research trip to Albania, which I fell in love with and found completely fascinating. I had such a good time researching the book. Of course a lot of the research was in the library, a lot of it was reading novels, and then reading fiction, and then reading history, and then back and forth. But the travel was absolutely invigorating, fascinating, occasionally uncomfortable, but usually terrific.

I also wanted to add that in the book you really chose to tell the stories of these places also through people, many of whom were not really well known. Sometimes it was an emperor or king, but really you chose poets, writers or some marginal politician. I imagine that this also took you a lot of time, to find these stories…

I try to do a bottom-up approach instead of a top-down one. I think that works especially well in Eastern Europe because up to the 20th century, there was a long period of imperial domination of most of the region being run by one of three empires. The political history is happening in places like Vienna or St Petersburg. And I try to find the stories that pull you a bit away from there. Eastern Europe itself is a story of imperial expansion, imperial retreat, with Empress Catherine or Emperor Peter you get this narrative told from the centre, from the imperial capital. To avoid that, I try to tell it from people, including famous writers, but a lot of people who are completely anonymous to history. How did I find them? A lot of reading. A lot of times fiction was where I started. Reading a lot of fiction and then looking for the historical real-life versions of it. For example, there are these great books by a German writer from Transylvania named Gregor von Rezzori. And you read them and he gets you into the world of 1920s Czernowitz. And I'm like, this seems real. There's this big football riot in the book. It seems to have a ring of truth to it. So I get into football history in early Romania. And it's this incredible world of ethnically segmented rivalries. These towns in Romania would have two Jewish teams, a Zionist and an anti-Zionist one; a Polish team; a Romanian team; a Hungarian team; and depending on where, even a Serbian team. And they would all dislike each other, but play in these tournaments in this wonderful world of contained ethnic rivalry that's simmering but in some ways peaceful, until it isn't. I did a lot of that. You go back and you find the real life stories out of the fiction. So it was a fun process.

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In the book you also tell the story through your family, which intersects with many of the interesting points in the region's history. Can you talk a bit more about your family and how that fits in this book? Also, were there things that you discovered while you were writing this book personally about your family?

I was actually a little conflicted in how to use my family history in the book, because I didn't want it to be a memoir or a family history. I wanted just a few moments of family history which illustrated bigger themes. I think I have a pretty interesting family history, which in some way is typical. Lots of people across Eastern Europe have family histories where there are divided loyalties, or they're divided by ethnicity or religion or political orientation. My family is Polish Jewish. Both my parents are half and half. I had Polish Jewish grandfathers who survived the war, one fighting with the Red Army in Belarus, one in Central Asia and then back with the Polish army attached to the Red Army. They had lost most of their relatives in the Holocaust and married Polish women, ethnically Polish, but with backgrounds from Lithuania and Hungary. I already knew a fair amount of my family history. I knew those grandparents, I grew up with them in Warsaw, and I heard the stories going back to the 1920s and earlier. But there was a lot I didn't know. A lot which was unsaid and unspoken at home. I found a lot out by pulling my grandfather's personnel files from the Institute of National Memory and learned from the things that he wrote about himself in 1945. There were also Holocaust archives, especially from the Warsaw Ghetto. I had a lot of relatives who were in the Warsaw Ghetto, who mostly just disappeared. We don't know what happened to them. But I discovered one aunt, Róża, who came up a few times in memoirs and in detail in that archive. And I found the story of her execution. Her last moments were witnessed by someone in a prison on Gęsia Street. And that's something that I discovered that my parents did not know, or that their parents did not know.

I wanted to ask about what conclusions you came up with following the research in terms of the importance of identity and language. I had marked here that in the section on nations you write that "the age of nationalism was a golden age of forgery," and then you go on and tell the interesting stories of how nations had to sometimes create backstories to help define themselves. Maybe you could share a few thoughts and reflections on this topic and this whole process of building the nation.

The story of nationalism is very important in Eastern Europe, and very connecting. There's a shared style of nationalism across Eastern Europe. It's quite distinct from Western European nationalism. It started as a cultural movement which turned into a political movement. And that pattern is almost everywhere in the region and goes back to the imperial history, circa 1800. Almost every square kilometre of Eastern Europe

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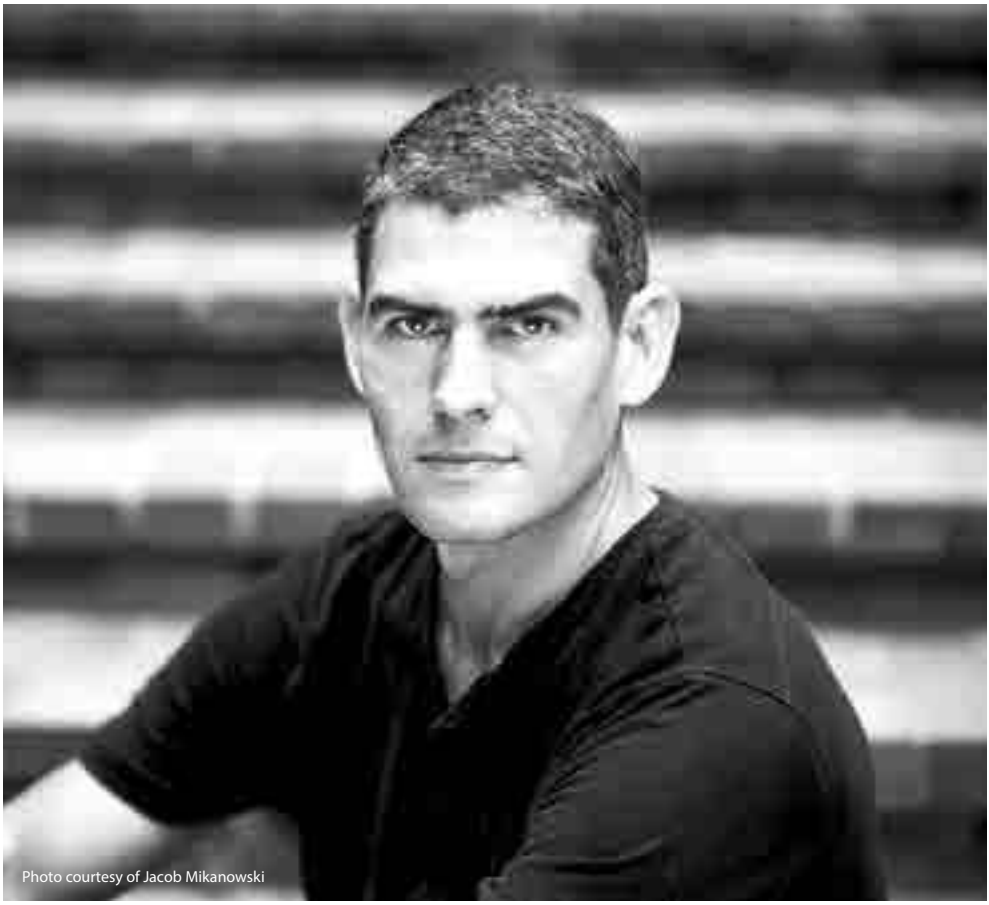
Photo courtesy of Jacob Mikanowski

was ruled by an empire, Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman or Prussian. And across the 19th century, some of that starts disintegrating, first in the Balkans. But you have a world of peoples inside empires. The way the nationalist movement develops, in the Czech case for example, is paradigmatic. It begins as a movement of reclaiming culture in a very language-specific way, with building up the vocabulary. Even though anyone who wanted to learn about science philosophy would read it in German or they'd read it in French or Latin, depending on where you were. Despite this, you have to first strengthen the language, expand the language and then you expand the culture, expand the music. Once you do that, you start stretching into the economy, creating Czech beer or Czech institutions to rival the German ones. In the Bohemian lands a Czech-German rivalry emerged. The Czechs actually forged a whole kind of medieval epic history. In the Baltics they created them out of cloth or from bricolage or the revival, it's a different process of finding narrative, finding language. And then after

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one, two or three generations, it turns into a political movement.

You mentioned all this beautiful diversity that you have seen in the region, especially at the end of the 19th century which finished with the two world wars. So I just would like to move us a little bit to the war that we are unfortunately experiencing in Europe right now. We are curious to hear from you and your take on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. You mention it a bit in the epilogue of the book, but do you see it as a continuation of the story that you've been writing?

I was in the last phases of the last revisions when the invasion started. And so I faced a real dilemma because the war had started, in some ways it started in 2014, but this new war started. I had to think, how does this fit into my story? I also didn't know where it was going. We remember those first weeks in February, the predictions were Ukraine will collapse, within weeks. And I was writing literally as it was happening, trying to determine how to balance the long view of a thousand years or a hundred years versus the short term of writing into an unknown future? I do think it's a continuation in some ways, especially because Russia sees it as a continuation. It's amazing to me how backwards looking Vladimir Putin's conception and justification is. It is so purely imperial; not Soviet, but a return to Catherine and to Peter and to the idea of specifically Russian empire building, of the brotherhood of the Russian people. These are ideas that were promulgated to explain Russian linguistic national hegemony in Ukraine. I think Putin very much looks at himself in the lineage of Russian empire making, that he's in the lineage specifically of Peter and Catherine, and that this is a way of reasserting their legacy and furnishing his own as a successor to that imperial lineage. But there's been 200 years of history since then, a whole world of national sovereignty and nation states and national cultures and independence and the breakup of the Soviet Union, and to just blow past that and imagine that you can return to the days of Potemkin and Catherine in Crimea is extraordinary. To see that historical conception, I think, is so false. Is it part of an Eastern European doom and gloom story? I hope not. But I worry that in some ways what I'm talking about in *Goodbye Eastern Europe* is that this concept of Eastern Europe is disintegrating. When I was writing it, especially in 2011 or 2014, prosperity was the thing. There was the enlargement of the European Union and the broader integration with Western Europe which has erased a lot of the diversity from previous centuries. But I think you have another Eastern Europe that is now under this shadow of frozen or active conflict. That is the Eastern Europe of the Bosnian conflict; or the frozen conflict of Transnistria and Moldova; and then you have Ukraine, a very active conflict. When I was in Republika Srpska, in the area near Croatia where there was heavy fighting in 1993, I travelled through burnt-out villages

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where trees are growing inside houses and everything is for sale. It is a conflict that happened 30 years ago, and has not yet healed. With Ukraine we have a lot of optimism, a lot of admiration for the strength shown in the conflict. But there is a lot of worry about when the rebuilding is going to happen. Will it happen? The shadow of a conflict can last generations, definitely decades. And we can see a split between two kinds of Eastern Europe emerging. One very western focused, and one that wants to be western focused but essentially has a ball and chain around its ankle. I hope that's not true, but that's my worry. EE

This interview is also available as a podcast episode for Talk Eastern Europe – visit www.talkeasterneurope.eu.

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What happened to Belarus's once-thriving tech-industry?

KSENIYA TARASEVICH

Before the anti-government protests that shook Belarus in 2020, a thriving tech-industry existed in the country. Recent events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine have shown that a plateau in output is all but assured for at least the next few years. Overall, it appears that the country has suffered from a severe brain drain as talented workers have fled the authoritarian state.

Belarus was once called the "Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe". From 2005 to 2016, exports of IT services and products grew 30 times over. The share of IT exports in Belarus's total exports of goods and services increased from 0.16 per cent to 3.25. In 2021 the IT sector was contributing almost a third of GDP growth. However, after the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, the situation changed dramatically. Thousands of specialists left the country, companies closed their businesses and a global crisis in the IT industry compounded these problems. How does the tech industry look now in the country following these developments?

The new elite

The tax regime contributed to the Belarusian tech-industry's rapid growth. In 2005 the Belarusian diplomat Valery Tsepkalo (later a candidate for the 2020 presidential election) decided to create a Belarusian Silicon Valley, naming it "Hi-

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Tech Park". Outsourcing companies were eagerly accepted and given significant tax benefits – no profit tax, no VAT and no capital gains tax. They only had to pay a nine per cent income tax. By the beginning of the 2010s, IT workers had become the new Belarusian elite. They represented the new middle class, earning (almost) as much as their peers in the European Union or the United States while still living in Belarus and enjoying its low prices.

The average salary of IT specialists was several times higher than the national average. Hi-Tech Park initially positioned itself as a place for outsourcing companies. At the beginning of the Belarusian tech era, the key players in the market were outsourcing companies working with foreign customers.

Sergey Osipov, an IT entrepreneur with a long track record and CEO of PlacyAI, sees this as a pattern: "[The] outsourcing strategy is always ahead of product strategy when talent costs are low. Client money today beats potential product money tomorrow. Outsourcing needs no investments, just clients – it's an easy start. Product companies emerge later as outsourcers shift to higher-margin strategies, aiming to go global. Belarus was on this path until 2020."

Gradually, Belarusian talent began to create their own products. In 2017, Facebook bought the Belarusian created face-altering app MSQRD, while Google acquired AIMatter, an app which used an AI platform to quickly process images. Later, the start-up industry grew even bigger. My interviewees repeatedly refer to 2019 as the time when the IT industry was at its peak. Salaries were at their highest and there was a shortage of skilled workers everywhere.

According to the start-up hub Imaguru, by 2020 there were more than 1,000 start-ups in Belarus. Many of them are highly successful international projects, such as Flo (the most popular health app in the AppStore), OneSoil, PandaDoc (the first Belarusian startup with a capitalization of over one billion), and Vochi (later acquired by Pinterest).

Osipov explains such rapid growth with Belarus's excellent STEM education (STEM education emphasizes four key fields: science, technology, engineering and mathematics – editor's note). He states that "Belarus has strong STEM education from the Soviet era. Many large factories and heavy industry plants were built in Minsk after the Second World War, accompanied by numerous tech universities. Minsk had the highest rate of tech education per capita in the USSR. This is a city of engineers, literally. People often remember Moscow as the administrative capital, St Petersburg as the cultural capital and Minsk as the tech capital of the Soviet Union. Today, modern Belarus actively utilizes this historical heritage first of all." High-quality STEM education, tax benefits and costs which are "half as low as those in Western Europe" contributed to this fascinating Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe.

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The storm approaches

In Belarus, IT professionals started to form a new middle class with all the accompanying demands, not only concerning consumption but also the realization of their rights and desire for democracy. Many Belarusian IT specialists played an active part in the 2020 protests.

"I was actively participating in protests since 2010," says Aliaksandr, a prominent Belarusian IT company employee (for security reasons, we do not reveal his identity). "One could say I protested in 2020 out of habit. I didn't have any expectations. On August 9th 2020, I was impressed by the scale of the events; there was a lot of hope, at least more than before. But I didn't allow myself to trust it," he adds.

Aliaksandr says that many of his colleagues protested during the summer and autumn of 2020, and many were arrested. Aliaksandr left the country in 2021 fearing prosecution for his pro-democratic views.

Top managers of large tech-companies supported the protests as well. For example, a top manager of EPAM (the largest Belarusian IT company), Maxim Bogretsov, openly supported opposition presidential candidate Viktar Babarika. Another EPAM employee, Pavel Liber, created the "Golos" application, which helped prove election fraud and the fact that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was the real president-elect of the country. Even after the election, Liber continued his cooperation with the democratic forces of Belarus, organizing elections and opinion polls.

Between August 9th and 12th, the level of violence on the streets of Minsk was unprecedented. According to human rights organizations, around 7,500 people were detained. Many of them were tortured. This led to the creation of several massive aid campaigns. Among them was Mikita Mikado, co-founder of the first Belarusian unicorn, PandaDoc. Despite living in the US for quite a long time, on August 18th 2020 he started a project offering financial and career help to police officers who quit the force. On September 5th, four of the C-level managers (Head of HR, Head of Product, Head of Accounting, and CEO) were arrested. Mikita stopped his campaign. The employees were then released after almost a year. The last one, head of product, Viktar Kuushynau, was released on August 20th 2021.

By February 2nd 2022, PandaDoc had ended its status as a legal entity in Belarus. This was a very timely choice as later events showed. "You cannot run a business in a country where your employees can be held hostage at any time," Mikado later said in an interview. And this is how the relocation wave hit the ground.

PandaDoc was not the only company leaving Belarus in 2020–21. By 2022, several well-known IT companies, former High-Tech Park residents, decided to close their businesses and leave Belarus. Among them were Flo, Wannaby, OneSoil, WorkFusion and Wargaming.

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"Most Belarusian IT companies didn't have any serious capital to transfer abroad. Their foreign clients cancelled orders due to the political situation, reducing the need for engineers. This has been ongoing for three years. Money avoids unpredictability," Osipov says.

Relocation 2020–24

When Sergey started a new company, an AI-based real estate assistant, he never considered registering the company in Belarus. "Our AI Real Estate Assistant relies on OpenAI's tech, which is restricted in Belarus and Russia due to sanctions. I love Belarus, but it's technically impossible to run our AI business there," he says.

According to dev.by's research, up to 20,000+ IT workers could have left Belarus starting from autumn 2020. They also say that the relocation stopped in 2024. The conclusion – everyone who wanted to leave has already left. Co-founder of the start-up hub Imaguru, Tatiana Marinich, commented to dev.by that according to their calculations, up to 78 per cent of start-ups left Belarus. According to very rough estimates from dev.by, the country lost about 150 million roubles in profits, not only in taxes but also in spending.

According to research by dev.by, over 20,000 IT workers could have fled Belarus starting in the autumn of 2020.

The country's neighbours started to use this opportunity. Poland launched the special "Poland.Business Harbour" programme. According to its official website, the Poland.Business Harbour programme offers a full range of services helping IT specialists, start-ups and established companies relocate easily to Poland. The programme was launched by the Polish government in 2020 not only for Belarus but also for other Eastern Partnership countries and Russia. Poland.Business Harbour offered visa support. IT specialists could apply for working visas on privileged terms. Start-ups could apply for several grants and enterprises could count on a wide range of services, including legal assistance, go-to-market strategies and government relations. The programme supported the relocation of IT specialists on very attractive terms. From 2020 to 2023, Poland issued 90,000 PBH visas for Belarusian IT specialists and their family members. However, because of "non-targeted visas", the programme was closed on January 26th 2024.

Another important relocation destination is Lithuania. EPAM, Wargaming, Flo, Apalon, Gurtam and many others decided to establish their new foreign offices there. Anecdotally, Belarusian IT companies are the leading tax payers for the second year in a row in Lithuania. In one interview, the Lithuanian deputy minis-

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ter of economy, Karolis Žemaitis, noted that according to their calculations, last year the state received about 90 million euros of net revenue just in the IT sector thanks to the relocated Belarusian companies. This amount does not include additional profits.

Global crisis versus Belarusian tech industry

A major hit was felt with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions, making cooperation between western and Belarusian companies quite difficult to say the least. As a result, in 2022, for the first time in recent years, the IT sector's contribution to GDP growth in the country showed a negative result. In 2023, this trend continued.

The situation in Belarusian IT is significantly influenced by the global IT market. Technological companies worldwide are experiencing a recession and layoffs are constantly taking place. One expert, a person connected with IT sales in a Belarusian outsourcing company, thinks that this also complicates the work of Belarusian IT companies. "Sales have become more difficult. The number of outsourcing companies has increased significantly in recent years, especially in 2018 and 2019. The number of clients has not increased. Thus there are many competitors offering similar services with the same rates," the expert says.

Yet, there is a market, and there is still a demand for developers' services. Location is not a problem at all. At the beginning of the war, clients refused to continue and closed projects, stating that the company was from Belarus and therefore supported Lukashenka's regime. That is why they refused to cooperate. "Now many Belarusian companies have opened offices in Poland or Lithuania, and work with western customers through these legal entities. In general, practically nobody is interested in where we are located," the expert adds.

Are Belarusians afraid that western countries will start refusing their services? There are reasons for that. For example, Arkadiy Dobkin, head of EPAM, said that the company would develop its offices in Latin America. Does this mean that soon Belarusian companies will have to compete not only among themselves but also with Indian or Latin American developers?

"There has always been a possibility of many clients turning to Indian companies, the only problem is the quality. The prices for their services are lower, but the quality is also low," the expert emphasizes.

Another IT sales expert anonymously told *New Eastern Europe* that Belarusian outsourcing companies mainly work with clients from America and Europe. The MENA region, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are gaining popularity. Sales are not

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going well with regards to Russia, as the services of Belarusian developers are too expensive for them.

Russia in Belarus

No place stays empty. Major Russian players took the place of US, European and Belarusian companies. Before 2020, it was estimated that ten per cent of foreign businesses registered in the High-Tech Park were Russian. Today, this number is approaching 30 per cent.

Large Russian banks (e.g. Tinkoff) are opening offices in Belarus and the Russian version of Facebook, VKontakte, is also strengthening its position in the country. Our insider works as a developer in a Minsk IT company. He agreed to talk to us on condition of anonymity. We will refer to him as Andrei. Andrei says that when the EU and US countries imposed sanctions, many companies began to ban the use of their software in Russia. He believes that sanctions contribute to the market a lot.

"We have to create our own products and hence there is a great demand exactly from Russian companies. And colleagues from companies that work for the European market say that profits are falling. And those who work for the Russian market, on the contrary, are making more money."

"Western investors are gone, but Eastern partners might fill the gap. Why not?" comments Sergey Osipov.

Despite the often bleak and unpromising view of life in Belarus from abroad, my interviewees, especially those inside the country, see no reason for despondency. There is a market. There is not too much work but Russian companies are filling the gap. If you do not have ethical complaints about working for a large Russian state-owned bank, everything can be marvellous for you. Salaries for IT workers are still higher than the average. And prices in Belarus are still much lower than even in neighbouring Poland or Lithuania.

It seems that today the Belarusian tech-industry is not thriving but instead surviving, even if it may appear that a new Iron Curtain is rising. Yet in the modern world with modern technologies, it will not stay in place for long. EE

Kseniya Tarasevich is a journalist and editor based in Poznań, Poland and is originally from Belarus.

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NATO at 75

Insights from frontline states

Photo courtesy of NATO

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NATO beyond 75

Strategic evolution amid global uncertainty

WOJCIECH MICHNIK

As NATO member states gathered in Washington for their annual meeting this past July, they also marked 75 years of NATO's existence. However, there was no real time or desire to celebrate, as the allies are facing an increasingly dangerous security environment and uncertainty in their own domestic political landscapes. The results of the upcoming US presidential election also loom large when it comes to NATO's future.

When on April 4th 1949, 12 states signed a founding treaty in Washington, giving birth to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, an alliance of like-minded states committed to collective defence and mutual protection, few would have expected that this transatlantic pact would endure for so many decades. More than 75 years later, 32 members of this Alliance – including the newest, Finland and Sweden – met in Washington again for the anniversary summit. NATO at 75 could be considered an anomaly, as alliances are typically short-lived formations that dissolve or become obsolete after serving their original purpose. However, against all the odds and predictions, NATO has defied this tendency and not only survived the end of the Cold War but also, thanks to Russia's imperial policies and invasion of Ukraine, grown stronger and larger. In the words of Radosław Sikorski, Poland's foreign minister: "NATO was created to deter an aggressive Russia. Russia is aggressive again. NATO won the first time; it will win the second time too."

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Advancing NATO's priorities

The NATO Strategic Concept, which the Alliance announced during the summit in Madrid in 2022, serves effectively as a compass for the group, outlining their main objectives and basic tasks. The three core tasks around which contemporary NATO has been built include deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security. While the Vilnius summit last year was the next step in implementing NATO's strategy, the Washington summit provided another occasion to further execute the allies' plans. It is worth remembering that NATO annual summits are not regular meetings, but important junctures in the Alliance's decision-making process.

The summit in Washington did not bring revolutionary decisions but rather followed a pattern of significant yet gradual changes. For the last ten years, NATO has been on a transformational path. What seemed like a wake-up call for the Alliance with Russia's attack on Ukraine's Crimea peninsula resulted in shifts within NATO to embrace its traditional defensive posture. These were only intensified by the shocks of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Ever since then, NATO has turned its focus towards the most robust defence and deterrence. In Washington, NATO addressed a number of issues and challenges at the heart of Alliance strategy, including dealing with Russia; the future of Ukraine in NATO; the threat of terrorism; and concerns about China's growing menacing role. Three common threads were present in both pre-summit talks and in the summit's final declaration: the question of assistance to Ukraine; progress in defence and deterrence; and NATO's global partners.

During the summit in Washington, the Alliance reaffirmed the need for more robust and rapid changes in NATO's efforts to meet the new standards required by the current security environment. The emphasis on burden-sharing was also quite clear, as currently two-thirds of members have fulfilled their commitment to spending at least two per cent of their GDP on annual defence spending (before Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, only three member states met this criteria). Moreover, as NATO continues its transformation to modernize for a new era of collective defence and the possibility of an attack against the Alliance's sovereignty and territorial integrity, it underlined strengthening deterrence and defence posture. Hence, in Washington, the Alliance pointed out its success in deploying in-place combat-ready forces on NATO's Eastern Flank, including implementing the "Integrated Air and Missile Defence Rotational Model" across the Euro-Atlantic area.

As air defence remains one of the most vital aspects of defence and deterrence, NATO also announced the "NATO Ballistic Missile Defence Enhanced Operational Capability". With the delivery of the Aegis Ashore site in Redzikowo, Poland,

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which complements existing assets in Romania, Spain and Turkey, NATO's "missile defence shield" has become a comprehensive defence system over the European sky. The summit declaration made it clear, though, that while missile defence could complement the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence, it could not be a substitute for them. In the context of Russia's continuous nuclear sabre rattling, the message from Washington was clear: as long as the threat of nuclear weapons exists, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.

Deterring Russia, strengthening Ukraine

There is no question that assisting Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression is a fundamental task for NATO. In this context, the Washington summit began with President Joe Biden announcing that "the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania and Italy will provide Ukraine with equipment for five additional strategic air defence systems." This move, eagerly anticipated by many, signals that the NATO Washington summit prioritized the pressing challenges to Euro-Atlantic security over celebrating the Alliance's 75th anniversary. In a joint statement, the US, Germany and Romania announced that each would supply Ukraine with a Patriot missile battery. The Netherlands, in collaboration with other nations, will facilitate an additional battery. Italy will contribute by providing a SAMP-T long-range air defence system.

The emphasis on air defence support for Ukraine was no accident. The day before the announcement, Russian airstrikes in Ukraine claimed the lives of at least 42 people and injured 190 others, including an attack on the country's largest children's hospital. While the support for Ukraine's air defence comes from NATO individual member states, not from NATO itself, this announcement at the beginning of the summit signalled the Alliance's commitment to place Ukraine at the front of its current agenda.

Subsequently, NATO's announcement that it would establish the "NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine" (NSATU) programme was a significant step in aid. NSATU will coordinate the provision of military equipment and training for Ukraine by NATO members and partners. According to the summit declaration, its aim is "to place security assistance to Ukraine on an enduring footing, ensuring enhanced, predictable, and coherent support". This new format, as it was underlined in the communiqué, will support Ukraine's self-defence in line with the UN Charter. This signals a substantial change in NATO's responsibilities. NATO has so far refrained from directly providing lethal assistance to Ukraine, instead allowing individual member countries to take the lead bilaterally and through

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the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group, also known as the Ramstein format. However, since most of the military support for Ukraine has come from individual NATO members anyway, coordinating these efforts under the NATO umbrella makes more sense in terms of logistics and strategy. Consequently, NATO announced plans to establish a training and support facility in Wiesbaden, Germany, staffed with 700 personnel. This new centre will coordinate training and equipment donations to bolster Ukraine's defence capabilities. In addition, NATO member states announced a pledge of long-term security assistance for Ukraine regarding the provision of military equipment, assistance, and training to support Ukraine in building a force capable of defeating Russian aggression. Alliance members pledged to provide a minimum baseline of funding of 40 billion euros within the next year, and to provide sustainable levels of security assistance for Ukraine to prevail in its defensive war against Russia.

NATO members pledged to provide Ukraine a minimum baseline of funding of 40 billion euros within the next year.

Ukraine, as expected, did not receive an official invitation to join NATO, only a repeated pledge that NATO continues to support the country on "its irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership". The Alliance reaffirmed that it would be ready to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join NATO "when Allies agree and conditions are met". While this definitely did not meet Kyiv's expectations, the two aforementioned decisions to support Ukraine heralded NATO's more substantial commitment to assist in dealing with Russia's war of aggression. Overall, NATO's primary responsibility is the defence of its members and its own territory. While there is significant support and sympathy for Ukraine, NATO is not positioned to directly engage in combat on Kyiv's behalf. However, there is a delicate balance to be maintained regarding how NATO can further assist Ukraine's efforts to win the war without becoming directly involved in a conflict with Russia. This issue is particularly complex because NATO member states hold differing views on the extent to which the Alliance should assist Ukraine.

China's challenge and the Indo-Pacific partners

In a notable shift, NATO has taken a firmer stance towards China, as reflected in the language of the Washington summit declaration. The Alliance identified the People's Republic of China as "a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine" through its "no limits" partnership and extensive support for Russia's defence industry. NATO particularly criticized China's transfers of dual-use mate-

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rials, including weapons components, equipment, and raw materials that bolster Russia's defence sector.

This marks a significant change in NATO's tone, as the Alliance not only acknowledged China's role in undermining European security but also issued a veiled warning to Beijing. NATO emphasized that China cannot support the largest war in Europe in recent history without facing negative repercussions regarding its interests and reputation. While, predictably, China's official response to the NATO summit declaration was to dismiss it as "biased, slanderous, and provocative", it is hard to deny China's growing influence in Europe. One recent example included joint military exercises with Belarus, held on Monday 8th July. These were held just a few kilometres from the border of Poland and occurred just one day before the Alliance's summit in Washington.

While NATO maintains that China poses a "systemic challenge to Euro-Atlantic security", it does not refer to Beijing as a threat. Yet, the language of the summit declaration is quite stronger in relation to China. Even if the word "threat" does not appear directly, NATO members seem to agree publicly that China is hostile to the West. This is a striking departure from perceptions of China in previous years. Consequently, NATO acknowledges that to bolster its own security it needs partnerships not only within the Euro-Atlantic area (such as NATO's partnership with the EU) but also beyond the transatlantic realm. NATO's Indo-Pacific partners – Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea – constitute a pillar of this partnership. The Alliance's relationship with the "Indo-Pacific Four" could help tackle more complex challenges to Euro-Atlantic security that have a global dimension and require cooperation with partners across the globe, including those in Asia.

Even though NATO does not frame these partnerships as anti-Chinese, Beijing clearly perceives them as such. While some critics claim that NATO should stick to the Euro-Atlantic territory in its political and diplomatic activities, others argue that today's global security system is too complex and too volatile for NATO to ignore other regions. Arguably, building and strengthening a network of partners across the globe has been a pillar of NATO's strategy for almost two decades. How the Alliance intends to benefit from this network in Asia-Pacific is a different question.

The Trump effect?

Among the vital issues for NATO's future is the evolving role of the US in the Alliance. Since the United States has been reorienting its foreign policy focus to China and the Asia-Pacific region more broadly, some European allies are worried about being left isolated during extremely dangerous times for security. This fear

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of abandonment seems to have been growing in 2024, a year of presidential elections in the US. One unspoken concern loomed large over the Washington summit: what if Donald Trump wins the upcoming election and returns to the presidency? While NATO, for clear diplomatic reasons, avoids taking positions on political candidates within its member states – considering such matters as internal affairs – this issue was not officially discussed during the summit. Nevertheless, the apprehension among many NATO members is palpable.

Their concerns are well-founded, given Trump's previous tenure during which he expressed scepticism about NATO's relevance to US security interests. He not only criticized European allies for not contributing more to defence spending but also infamously suggested that he would encourage Russia to do "whatever the hell it wants" to them. In addition, Trump's position on Ukraine and continued support for Kyiv's defence has been questionable at best, if not outright negative. The former president is said to have privately stated that he could end Russia's war in Ukraine by pressuring the country to give up some territory. For Ukraine and many European members of NATO such remarks herald a potential geopolitical disaster. This is why the spectre of Trump loomed large over the Washington summit.

Additionally, his unpredictable approach to foreign policy has encouraged NATO member states to brace themselves for every possible scenario. Europe is facing the gravest security crisis since the end of the Second World War. An unpredictable US partner, ready to withdraw its troops from Europe and its support for Ukraine, is the last thing the old continent needs. Perhaps the only silver lining in this situation is that a possible Trump second term might motivate and mobilize some European NATO members to spend more on defence and prepare themselves to rely less on the US. To build a Trump-proof Alliance, many in Western Europe need to change their attitude, which remains stuck in the Cold War mentality of over-relying on the US's security umbrella.

Future challenges

Russia and its devastating war against Ukraine still ranks number one on NATO's list of concerns. There is no peace on the European continent as long as a nuclear power wages a war of aggression against a sovereign state, creating the most volatile security situation in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Hence, there is no surprise that NATO in 2024 repeated its previous statements that Russia remains "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security". This is also reflected in the Washington summit declaration as Russia is mentioned there 44 times, while NATO stresses that Moscow bears full responsibility for the war

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against Ukraine, including violations of international law, war crimes and attacks on critical infrastructure.

Along with NATO, the EU is also facing hard realities and new challenges. Some of them have a global dimension, like a multilayered geopolitical competition and a shift towards a "world of blocs" in which states increasingly less friendly to the West will be forming their own partnerships. Some challenges are regional, like international terrorism and transnational criminal organizations. These should not be underestimated as NATO faces the threat from the East. Others, like Russia's war against Ukraine, originated in Europe, directly affecting Euro-Atlantic security yet also having the potential for global repercussions.

The return of a major war in Europe could have devastating results not only for the whole continent but also for its well-established institutions like NATO and the EU. Here might lie an additional challenge to the transatlantic Alliance's long-lasting success in the future: societal resilience and the ability to adapt to a changing security landscape. So far, and for way too long, it seemed that most Europeans have lived in a fairy tale world convinced that war happens somewhere else, away from wealthy European societies.

Now, in the face of Russia's bloody war against Ukraine, it is still extremely difficult for some to wake up from this comfortable model of life to bear the burden of deterring the adversary. NATO seems to understand the stakes and political consequences of the Russian war for transatlantic security. The decisions taken in Madrid, Vilnius and Washington reflected this logic as NATO consequently follows its strategy adopted in 2022. The Alliance – at least at the policymakers' level – recognizes that "what happens in Ukraine does not stay in Ukraine." The question is whether NATO member states' societies are ready to accept this and act upon it in the long-term perspective. EE

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The evolution of the Alliance

JEAN-YVES LECONTE

Photo: Clément Bucco-Lechat (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

When discussing the history of NATO and the Alliance's experiences of the last 75 years, maybe we should start with some important points that we often forget today, while they still have an influence on the current situation. We forget that at the beginning of NATO, in 1949, Germany was not a member and joined the Alliance in 1952. Today, in the Russian narrative, the question is why did NATO continue to exist after 1989? In order to answer this question, which is in fact the same as why the newly reunified Germany remained a member of NATO, we need to remember the situation in 1989.

Back then, George H.W. Bush was the president of the United States, François Mitterrand was the president of France and Margaret Thatcher was the prime minister of the United Kingdom. All of these leaders were from a generation which remembered the Second World War. The first threat they saw when the reunification of Germany began to be evident was what will happen with Germany in the future. It was not about Russia. Their worry was about Germany. And this concern about the return of German warmongering was also a very sensitive issue in Moscow. When in November 1989 Helmut Kohl proposed the reunification of Germany, he said that the country had to be in the Atlantic alliance to respond to the fears of allies.

Kohl said this to France, the UK, Russia and the US in order to persuade them that Germany would stay a pacifist state and not seek to be strong and aggressive. In fact, in 1989, the new architecture of Europe was not created to respond to a potentially aggressive Soviet Union but rather to assuage fears of the comeback of an aggressive Germany. By signing the Moscow Treaty in 1990, the Soviet Union was fully conscious of its acceptance that the new Germany would be in the Alliance. For allies, including Mikhail Gorbachev, it was a guarantee that Germany would not become again what it had been twice in the 20th century. Thus, the Atlantic alliance after 1989 was not an alliance against Russia or the Soviet Union. It was to quell fears about what could happen with a united Germany. Vladimir Putin, and those who today try to explain Russia's current actions by presenting those years as an original anti-Russian sin, are simply not telling the truth.

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The second thing to note relates to the history of France's relationship with NATO. This is namely the fact that France began its nuclear programme in 1954. Why? In 1954, we were not in a situation where we could make a durable peace treaty in Indochina after our defeat in Dien Bien Phu, and we realized that we could not count on the help of our allies. Whatever we think of French policy at that time, when decolonization was the order of the day, this lack of solidarity changed our perspective. The conditions of our departure from Indochina were also linked to what led the US to engage in a long war in Vietnam.

France then felt that there were situations where we could not count on the solidarity of our allies. Thus, we decided in 1954 to build our own atomic programme in order to challenge this apparent threat and the European Defence Community, which would have made it impossible for a European country to have an independent nuclear weapons programme.

Given the impact on international security following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, a strong and operational Alliance is more essential today than ever. However, it has to be said that operations by NATO or its members in a number of crisis theatres since 1990 have not always had the desired consequences. The American operations in Iraq (often mistaken for NATO operations despite the veto of Germany and France) and Afghanistan ended in failure. The operation in Libya, in which France had a leading role, played a dramatic role in the development of insecurity and the proliferation of jihadism from West Africa to Sinai. These failures and mistakes were perfectly exploited by the Kremlin.

NATO's 75th anniversary is also about the evolution of an alliance of countries that initially used to dominate the world economy, but whose predominance is largely waning with the growth of the BRICS and the political aspirations that this engenders.

Thus, in my view, NATO's future depends on three factors: 1) The way in which the conflict in Ukraine will end. If Ukraine were to fail and be unable to choose its future and its alliances freely, this would result in a major loss of credibility for NATO and a direct threat to its members. 2) The ability of European NATO members not to have to rely on the United States for their defence, to take account of feedback from Ukraine and to ensure the effective implementation of Article 47 of the Treaty on European Union. 3) The willingness of its members to face up to new threats such as economic and political influence, disinformation and destabilization operations. Changes concerning a newer member, Hungary, are also important. Budapest is playing a two-sided game and is undermining good faith cooperation within the Alliance. EE

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Why Baltic security matters

ANDRIS BANKA

Photo courtesy of Andris Banka

From the perspective of the three Baltic countries, Russia's brutal war in Ukraine has only reinforced the notion that the United States is the key linchpin in the European security order. In the early hours of February 24th 2022, as Russia embarked on levelling Ukrainian cities, Washington called upon the 173rd Airborne Brigade to move swiftly from Italy to Latvia, thus assuring the most exposed Eastern European nations. Since then, countries like Germany have taken on increased security burdens in the region, most notably by agreeing to deploy a brigade to Lithuania. Still, on the whole, Baltic leaders perceive the US presence as the strongest deterrent measure. As bluntly acknowledged by Lithuania's foreign minister: "In the near future, I don't see Europe being able to defend its territory without the assistance of the United States."

Currently, Washington's role in the Baltic security landscape appears to be solid. Rhetorical assurances, regular military exercises and, most crucially, US boots on the ground – albeit in small numbers – all serve as important signs regarding the seriousness with which the lead NATO power treats Europe's Eastern Flank. Yet, underneath these observable security alliance dynamics, some worrying trends and even cracks are emerging. While the overall support for NATO within the US remains high, it is visibly splitting along party lines. The Republican Party appears increasingly resistant to the notion of US global leadership, questioning whether US taxpayer's money is well worth the investment in maintaining a robust alliance network. This vision of course is regularly amplified by the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, who at one point even suggested that he would encourage Russians to do "whatever the hell they want" with NATO members who do not honour their financial commitments.

Allied governments naturally have no say in domestic affairs on the other side of the pond. Prudently, however, they should prepare for a White House incumbent who questions the merits of traditional US security partnerships. In this regard, Baltic lawmakers have already begun to lay some groundwork. Aware of Trump's inclination to view NATO primarily through the lens of dol-

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lars and cents, representatives from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have sought to deploy rhetoric aimed at soothing Trump and his political circles.

"Trump is a golfer, so when you pay your fee in the golf club you can play. It doesn't matter how big is your wallet. When you pay that fee you can go to the golf course," the Estonian defence minister recently said during the NATO summit in Washington. This was very clearly a Trump-tailored message. Such messaging draws upon the previous playbook during the Trump term, when Baltic lawmakers made sure to convey and emphasize to their US interlocutors that they meet the agreed GDP spending target on defence.

Taking a broader view, however, one must note that certain challenges in the relationship go beyond personalities and the current US political cycle. With the return of great power politics, structural currents keep pulling the United States into different directions – Israel and Taiwan being the best examples of this issue. Against this backdrop, the Baltic republics and other Eastern European nations must be ready to articulate why their security needs ought to be seen as urgent priorities. A growing chorus of voices within the US, for instance, propose that scarce American resources are wasted in Europe as they "eat away" capabilities that will one day be needed in Asia. Scholars and analysts associated with the so-called realist school of thought regularly portray the Baltics as too geographically remote to matter to America's national interest. Backing such small states, according to this view, means dissipating US treasure for no obvious geopolitical advantage.

The Baltic leaders must address this type of criticism head on. Priority should be given to a message that is moulded rather practically. The discourse surrounding US alliance politics and the need to retain such links have revolved around values, sacred commitments and the liberal international order. No doubt, these are crucial "touchstones" of the US alliance system. However, such broadly defined concepts arguably might not sway people inside the US. Instead, a more practical illumination of how the alliance with the Baltics is linked with the well-being of everyday American citizens should be pursued.

Talking points that stress the fact that the Baltics are the most pro-American voices within the EU, where they have advanced salient US national interests, are important in this regard. The three countries have also staunchly sided with Washington against its main rival China and they serve as valuable intelligence assets for their key ally across the Atlantic. Examples like this might be a better way to market Baltic importance. More practical and less abstract explanations may resonate better with US audiences.

Furthermore, Baltic representatives should also seek to cast a wider informational net in the United States. During the Trump term in office, then NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg pur-

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posefully sought to engage viewers of Fox News. It was a masterful move by the Alliance – go to the networks where people can directly hear you. Likewise, the Balts should be open to the idea that they need to reach as many people as possible to convince them that their small states are worth defending. While there are multiple challenges facing NATO today, for the Baltic countries, ensuring the uninterrupted presence of US forces remains a top priority. EE

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Tug of war

The NATO summit and (not so) modest gains in Washington

BEATA GÓRKA-WINTER

Photo courtesy of Beata Górka-Winter

NATO's 75th anniversary summit in Washington took place in the shadow of the most shattering armed conflict in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The Russian invasion of Ukraine almost completely consumed these talks, but at the same time nobody would deny that it constituted the most important trigger for NATO's much accelerated adaptation to the new, harsh geopolitical reality. Importantly, a few months before the NATO summit, numerous intelligence experts suggested that Russia's ultimate goal is not only "to restore the Soviet empire", but also to directly attack Alliance territory with a natural emphasis on the Eastern Flank countries. Regardless of the actual assessment of Russia's military capabilities and resources in the coming years, NATO has already sensed the writing on the wall and started to cover all bases, systematically increasing its defence spending and resources both in the area of deterrence to prevent such aggression, as well as potential retaliation in the event of an attack. Russia is therefore considered the greatest threat to the security of the transatlantic space. This was openly stated both in the new NATO Strategic Concept adopted in Madrid in 2022, as well as in the Washington summit communiqué, where Russia is mentioned 44 times.

Almost traditionally, the sitting of the North Atlantic Council was held in an extremely difficult political climate. The declared unity and solidarity of the Alliance, ritually emphasized in the final communiqué, was significantly disturbed by the ongoing internal political turbulence in France and the arbitrary decision of Viktor Orbán to visit Kyiv, Moscow and Beijing with his (allegedly) own vision of a "peace plan" for Ukraine without even consulting with allies. But the most blazing fire reached the heads of state from the very heart of the NATO talks – Washington itself. One month before the summit Donald Trump's audacious statements that the US would not

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defend NATO countries that refuse to meet their financial pledges – and that he would even "encourage Putin to attack" these countries – shocked Europeans to the core. The continent once again realized that the bulk of its really serious efforts to make its attitude towards NATO credible would probably be dismissed anyway. Currently, over 20 NATO members have declared that they are going to spend more than two per cent of GDP on defence in 2024.

In Trump's eyes, nevertheless, European countries are never "good enough" when it comes to their input into Alliance finances and capabilities. Thus, after his possible return, the shame and blame game will also make a comeback. It is also very unclear how Trump sees the end of the war in Ukraine and the quest for Ukrainian membership in NATO. He presented a very vague "peace plan". After the summit, Mike Pompeo, Trump's former secretary of state, revealed that this plan could actually involve increased military aid to Ukraine, offering Kyiv lend-lease support (together with lifting many limitations on the use of US weapons in Ukraine against Russia) and even more burdensome sanctions against Russia.

Yet, despite significant political tensions within the Alliance, and even more visible societal war fatigue, the final declaration of the North Atlantic Council meeting nevertheless emphasized the role and importance of NATO (including for newcomers Finland and Sweden); the unity and solidarity of the Alliance; and, most importantly, provisions on further support for Ukraine. It was announced that Kyiv can count on an additional 40 billion euros in military support. However, this announcement did not establish a constant mechanism for financing the Ukrainian security sector as was proposed by the outgoing Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. In this context, many months before the meeting, some NATO members (the so-called Ukraine Compact countries), in close coordination with the G7 and the EU, signed a number of bilateral agreements on military support (supplies of equipment, including artillery, ammunition, long-range missiles, air and missile defence systems, the training of soldiers, and protection in cyber space), as well as humanitarian, economic and infrastructure protection.

Together with NATO's partners in the Indo-Pacific region – Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand – the Alliance will implement projects related to the development of artificial intelligence, the fight against disinformation (this seems to be a bit of a misguided idea due to the completely different regional contexts), as well as the development of civil society. NATO has also taken over the effort to coordinate the supply of military equipment to Ukraine and the training of the Ukrainian armed forces under the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) mechanism. It was decided to establish a NATO Command for Ukraine in Wiesbaden, Germany, although the political umbrella in the form of the Ram-

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stein coalition, which has been in place since the beginning of the war and involves about 50 countries, has been retained. The establishment of the NATO-Ukrainian Joint Analysis, Training and Education Center (JATEC) in Bydgoszcz, Poland was also approved. This will support Ukraine in the implementation of security sector reforms.

Despite the far-reaching institutionalization of NATO's cooperation with Ukraine (previously, the NATO-Ukraine Council was established in 2023) and a broadly outlined assistance package, it is clear that the prospect of Ukraine's NATO membership remains distant. This is evidenced by the terms of the signed bilateral agreements (ten years on average). They serve as a kind of substitute intended to take the place of full membership status. Not only do none of these agreements give Ukraine guarantees under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, but shortly after the summit ended Germany announced that it would reduce military aid to Ukraine from the current eight billion euros to four billion in 2025.

Internally, NATO allies are perfectly aware that building credible deterrence consists of both maintaining decent defence spending (two per cent as a "floor" as agreed in Vilnius), and improving interoperability between the armed forces. There is also a need to increase the efficiency of production and expenditure in the arms industry. In this context, they adopted a document called the "NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge", which refers to the pursuit of creating an innovative, competitive and sustainable defence industry, in particular where cooperation and openness between allies is the norm. The document includes a commitment to further reduce and eliminate obstacles to trade and investment between allies; generate clear signals of stable demand for defence industry production through orders and contracts; and share information on the requirements and parameters for equipment and armaments. Allies will be required to develop national, regularly updated plans in which they will determine how to increase defence industrial capacity and report on the results on an annual basis. These plans are to be presented to other allies for comments and reviews.

A significant obstacle to the implementation of these commitments is the fact that many NATO countries have still not revived their arms plants and are struggling with restrictions in the supply of certain raw materials and components. There are also issues in the construction of production lines (e.g. for the production of ammunition), which often have very limited production capacity.

On a military level, the NATO summit also brought a lot of good news. Regional defence plans have been adopted and allied troops are regularly increasing their level of interoperability through military drills. This has been demonstrated by the largest exercise in the history of the Alliance, Steadfast Defender 2024, which took place earlier this year and included around 90,000

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troops from different NATO countries. The troops took part in exercises in all domains – air, land, sea and cyber. In addition, joint coalitions are being formed within the Alliance. For example, there is now a missile coalition with a range of over 500 kilometres (with the participation of France, Germany, Poland and Italy). In 2026, the US brigade stationed in Germany is to be equipped with long-range missile systems. This includes hypersonic missiles, such as Tomahawks and the SM6, which have a range that could hit targets in Russian territory. EE

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The impact of NATO membership on national security

A 25-year retrospective

NELE LOORENTS

Photo courtesy of Nele Loorents

Estonia's accession to NATO in 2004 marked a historical moment that solidified the commitment to collective defence and enhanced security against potential threats, particularly from Russia. NATO membership has undeniably served as a cornerstone in shaping the security landscape of Estonia over the past 25 years. The evolution of NATO's deterrence and defence posture, particularly in light of geopolitical shifts and emerging threats, has directly influenced national defence policies, investment priorities, and military readiness. This commentary will explore some of the significant changes that have occurred within Estonia´s national defence architecture, defence investment allocations, and the broader security environment in light of the evolving security situation.

Since regaining independence, Estonia has perceived Russia as an existential threat. This perception was starkly portrayed by Russia's aggressive manoeuvres in 2008, including cyberattacks on Estonia's digital infrastructure and the invasion of Georgia. These events underscored the urgent need for a robust defence posture, driving Estonia to re-evaluate its defence and security strategies. The subsequent invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 have further reinforced this outlook.

As a response to Russia's aggressive actions, NATO has been focused on bolstering its deterrence and defence posture over the past decade. The key milestones in this journey include the summits in Wales in 2014, Warsaw in 2016, Madrid in 2022, and Vilnius in 2023. During these meetings of NATO leaders, crucial decisions were made regarding increased defence investments; the establishment of NATO's Forward Presence in Eastern Europe; the implementation of a new force model; and the adoption of a new generation of regional defence plans. These decisions reflect a collective recognition among NATO allies of the need to regain a strong and

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responsive defence posture considering evolving threats. However, this is something that still remains mostly just on paper. Thus, the main question is the implementation of everything that has been agreed. Nevertheless, this is not merely the responsibility of NATO as an organization, as it involves a collective effort of all its members. It is up to every ally to contribute and move forward together.

The change in the security environment and the shifts in NATO's deterrence and defence posture have also substantially influenced Estonia's national military structure, defence capability development and operational readiness. Over the past two decades, the Estonian government has made significant efforts to increase the defence budget. Since 2015, Tallinn has been committed to spend at least two per cent of GDP on defence with a further increase to at least three per cent throughout the next four years. This financial commitment underscores the understanding that investment in defence is not merely a financial obligation but a critical component of national sovereignty and security.

The increased budget has facilitated substantial investments in various areas, including firepower and ammunition alongside intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. The military has also expanded its wartime structure by significantly increasing the number of active service personnel and active reserves, ultimately raising the wartime readiness total to nearly 43,000 personnel, which is a substantial effort for a nation with a population of 1.3 million. This expansion can be seen as a direct reflection of NATO's new strategic framework, which emphasizes the need for rapid reinforcement and heightened readiness in the face of potential threats. NATO's strengthened Forward Presence posture in the Eastern Flank also entails a recognition of the necessity of improved host nation support infrastructure. As part of this effort, the government plans to invest over 300 million euros in the next four years to enhance training facilities and accommodation, ensuring that the military is adequately equipped to respond to threats as they appear.

The recent accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO represents another significant strategic development that further enhances the security architecture in the region. These two countries bring additional military capabilities, resources and strategic depth to the Alliance, fostering a more integrated defence posture in the Baltic Sea region. This regional cooperation is particularly crucial given the evolving threat landscape, which now encompasses a broader spectrum of challenges, including hybrid threats and cyber warfare.

As NATO, and especially the countries in the Eastern Flank, have been lately more exposed to emerging threats, including cyber and hybrid attacks, there is an urgent need to pay closer attention to the complexities of hybrid warfare. Hybrid tactics often blur the lines between traditional military confrontations and non-conventional tactics. Addressing

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these threats requires a whole-of-government approach and social resilience. Cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and other hybrid threats can therefore pose a significant challenge to NATO. The case of hybrid attacks exemplifies the critical need for enhanced cooperation between NATO and the European Union. However, this collaboration is vital not only at the organizational level but also in national and multinational formats, where useful frameworks can be developed to address hybrid threats effectively.

Estonia's proactive engagement with NATO initiatives has also helped foster a national culture of defence which encourages civic responsibility and public awareness regarding national security. Societal engagement and support are crucial for building a resilient populace that can oppose a variety of threats. The ongoing commitment to defence investment, military readiness, and regional collaboration not only fortifies Estonia's national security but also contributes to the stability of the broader Euro-Atlantic area. EE

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Finland in NATO

From Finlandization to active integration

EOIN MICHEÁL MCNAMARA

Photo courtesy of Eoin McNamara

With over 100 years of independence, Finnish society has many achievements to celebrate. As the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland in 1906, it was the first place to introduce universal suffrage. Finland is one of the world's most developed democracies. The country has consolidated a successful welfare state based on a social ethos of equality and solidarity. Its economy has thrived at many intervals, with its pioneering technology sector globally prominent during the famous "Nokia boom" in the 1990s while remaining renowned for technological know-how today. What is most interesting about the social stability and prosperity that Finland enjoys that these achievements have often been fostered amid recurring geopolitical turmoil instigated by its larger neighbour: the Soviet Union later succeeded by the Russian Federation. Violent turmoil accompanied the birth of Finnish sovereignty. As the tsarist Russian Empire buckled under pressure from the Bolshevik Revolution, Finland declared its independence on December 6th 1917.

The new state faced a rude awakening. A bitter civil war soon broke out in 1918 between the Finnish "Whites" representing democratic and nationalist interests, and the communist "Red" forces who received support from the Bolsheviks. The White forces were victorious, allowing Finland to consolidate its democratic statehood into the 1920s and much of the 1930s. However, more turmoil lay in store. The Second World War essentially comprised three wars for national survival for Finland. It was included in the notorious 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler gained a free hand to invade western Poland, while his Soviet counterpart Josef Stalin aimed to expand his sphere of influence to Finland, the Baltic states and eastern Poland. When Soviet forces attacked, beginning the Winter War in November 1939, Finland defied the odds, repelling Soviet aggression under the talismanic military leadership of General (later Grand Marshal) Carl Gustaf Mannerheim.

Nevertheless, when the Winter War ended in March 1940, Finland was forced

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to cede territory in eastern Karelia and also along its border further north. Experience during the Winter War prompted General Adolf Ehrnrooth to declare that Finland must be "never again alone" (in Finnish: *Ei koskaan enää yksin*) without allies, a phrase that continues to resonate in Finnish politics. Yet, despite such sentiments, a challenging geopolitical environment meant that Finland largely battled on alone for the rest of the 20th century.

In 1940 Finland aligned with Nazi Germany, fighting the Continuation War against the Soviet Union for territories lost during the Winter War. In 1944, it switched sides after the Moscow Armistice with the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. German forces were repelled from Finnish territory in the Lapland War that ended in April 1945. Despite the suffering and difficult choices during the Second World War, Finland's independence remained precarious after 1945.

Helsinki failed to receive much sympathy from western powers. Some Finnish offensives during the Continuation War were perceived as too aggressive. Convened by the Allied powers, the Paris Peace Treaties signed in 1947 levied reparations on Finland, payable to Moscow. Restrictions on Finnish military strength were also imposed. Signed in 1948, the Finnish-Soviet Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (FCMA) underpinned the Paasikivi-Kekkonen Doctrine, informally known as "Finlandization", which guided Finnish foreign policy and sometimes even social progression throughout the Cold War. Finland escaped the Sovietization suffered in the neighbouring Baltic states until 1991. It could develop as a liberal democracy and a market economy, but its government and media refrained from criticizing Soviet policies. Moscow was concerned that Finnish territory might be utilized by adversaries to attack the Soviet Union.

Remaining neutral, Helsinki avoided membership in western institutions, most notably NATO and the European Economic Community, later renamed the European Union. Finland maintained significant trade ties with the Soviet Union but enhanced political and economic cooperation with Nordic institutions also offered Helsinki some rare western integration opportunities. Finnish leaders emphasized reductions in Cold War tensions, most prominently highlighted in the multilateral Helsinki Final Act in 1975, which formalized common European security principles.

"Finlandization" withered with the Cold War. In 1992, the FCMA was replaced by the less restrictive Treaty on the Foundations of Relations between Finland and Russia. Finland joined the EU in 1995. Naïveté is never a trait in Finnish security and defence policy. Helsinki maintained a "defence and dialogue" outlook with Russia early after the Cold War. Unlike neighbouring Sweden, which suspended conscription between 2010 and 2017, Finland continued with conscription for a strong reserve-based defence system. Despite a small population of 5.5. million, the Finnish

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Defence Forces maintains a professional core of 22,000 personnel, reinforced by a 280,000-strong reserve to be rapidly mobilized in wartime. A 900,000-strong posture is available when Finland's reserve is fully mobilized.

Air power is vital in Finland's deterrence outlook. Cold War restrictions on the Finnish Air Force were dropped in the 1990s. Finnish air power was quickly strengthened with the purchase of F/A-18 Hornet fighter aircraft from the US. These Hornets have now completed a thirty-year cycle. Helsinki announced their replacement in December 2022 with 64 F-35s in a 9.5 billion US dollar procurement from US-based Lockheed Martin. This deal is among the largest defence procurements in Europe in recent years. Nevertheless, despite strong independent defence capacity, the Finnish public understood that the strategic environment had changed seismically following Russia's escalated military aggression in Ukraine in 2022.

Examining the regional balance with care after the Cold War, Finland welcomed NATO enlargement to the Baltic states and wider Central and Eastern Europe as a stabilizing influence. Before 2022, Finland calculated that strong independent capacity matched with active defence cooperation with Sweden, other Nordic states, NATO and the EU could deter aggression on the one hand while supporting regional stability in Northern Europe on the other. Before 2022 most Finns did not support NATO membership. However, Russia's routinely gruesome atrocities in Ukraine reversed this trend. Finland's application for NATO membership in 2022 and its accession in 2023 were supported by large majorities in public opinion polls, with NATO's collective defence and extended deterrence perceived as the strongest guarantees against future atrocities occurring on Finnish territory.

Finnish foreign policy early after the Cold War was often subject to intense domestic political debate, but consensus across Finland's main government and opposition parties currently supports active NATO integration. Like Sweden, which joined NATO in 2024, Finland's initial contributions as a NATO member involve additional capabilities and readiness. The country acts as a "strong lock" for allied deterrence in Northern Europe. Speaking before Finnish diplomats in August 2024, recently elected President Alexander Stubb explained that Finland is "transitioning from active stability policy towards values-based realism". According to Stubb, Finland's self-image is not simply to "survive" but to be "an active player, seeking opportunities in various directions".

NATO accession for Finland and Sweden has prompted some commentators to refer to the Baltic Sea as a "NATO lake". Outlooks tempting complacency to see NATO as overwhelmingly dominant in the region will not be heeded in Helsinki. A series of hybrid threats have already affected Finland since joining NATO and readiness continues to be stepped up. Beyond the Baltic Sea, the

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Finnish Air Force contributed assets to NATO's Air Policing and Shielding mission in Romania for the first time in June and July 2024. Further Finnish participation in collective defence around the Baltic Sea and within the wider Alliance is expected with continuing NATO integration, at last fully realizing General Ehrnrooth's "never again alone" outlook from the Winter War. EE

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Collective security and national sovereignty

Hungary's 25 years in NATO

PÉTER STEPPER

Photo courtesy of Péter Stepper

In examining Hungary's involvement within NATO over the past 25 years, one should begin with how the country views NATO. While Budapest is honoured to be a member of this esteemed organization, it is crucial to understand why. It is important to remember this, particularly when it comes from a nation that takes great pride in its so-called "sovereigntist" foreign policy. It is also necessary to comprehend the motivations behind the statements made by Hungarian decision makers. In this framework, we should start with the protracted historical journey taken by Central European nations, such as Poland and Hungary, to transform into what are referred to as "small states" in international relations theory. Although today Poland – unlike Hungary – is a large state with serious military performance, this was not always the case. An existence as a Central European small state was not unfamiliar to them in the 18th and 19th centuries.

But if you look back to the 16th and 17th centuries, where I would like to start this story, the predecessors of both Poland and Hungary were major great powers and regional actors. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy were basically what we can call "policy makers" and not "policy takers" in the sense of influencing not just their local neighbourhood but regional and wider European politics as well. As a consequence of the 20th century, I must say that we have lost that privilege because of the emergence of firstly Russia, then Germany, and finally the Soviet Union. So, we were always in a position here in Central Europe where there was a constant struggle to merely survive and regain territorial integrity and statehood as we know it.

NATO provides the chance to overcome that and progress forward. In the end, we are in a situation where we do not have to constantly fear for our basic survival and NATO is the main reason for this reality. This is beneficial to

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us here in Central Europe, particularly because of the American nuclear shield, as well as the general US sense of international and foreign affairs. It is important to mention this here because occasionally Hungarian foreign policy – which is more favourable to Donald Trump than it is to the Democrats – is misunderstood. Of course, party politics leads to ideological arguments, but it has nothing to do with our understanding of the American world order in general. However, do not get misled in this regard. Budapest is content with the current state of affairs in the world, with the United States as the hegemonic power. The rule-based international order is still the cornerstone of Hungarian foreign policy, regardless of the various political and ideological controversies that have arisen over the past 25 years.

My second point relates to events which took place in 1989. There was, in fact, a case made for the necessity of NATO following the fall of the Soviet Union. It goes without saying that the initial question was why does NATO even exist? There is a well-known proverb that emphasizes NATO's political orientation. According to Lord Ismay, it was imperative that we keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in and the Germans down. The key question though, is whether this maxim has changed or remains still the same in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union. And I think it has changed now.

While there may be some truth to the idea that Germany as a unified state presented challenges for France and other major European powers in the past, NATO has evolved into something more akin to a policy institution rather than a so-called politicized organization. Here, there are parallels to the politically charged Cold War era. What was the principal aim of politics then? To defeat the Soviet Union. However, this period of politicization will eventually reappear because of the times we live in. Core tenets of NATO policy, such as the existence of ISIS as a threat or the fact that climate change is an issue, have been universally accepted in recent years. Thus, reaching consensus on such ideas has been relatively simple.

Yet today we are living in a different era for two reasons. First, Hungary is among the many small states attempting to guarantee security. We make an effort to increase defence spending because we think that having a potent military of our own helps to deter our geopolitical rivals, including Russia. Prior to 2010, Hungary's defence budget accounted for less than one per cent of the country's GDP. Today, we are on the right path. However, because of that – and this is not limited to Hungary, it affects many other European NATO members as well – if you begin to spend more on defence, it goes without saying that you would want to see your country's interests represented in any kind of organization, and NATO is no different.

Thus, the final point I want to make is related to the previous one, which is that Hungary prioritizes economic sta-

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bility above all else. Whether we like it or not, Fidesz has become rather adept at winning elections, and such predictability has been key for the markets. Therefore, political stability and credibility are required for economic stability. And for that reason, following 2010, the Hungarian army began to modernize. The military reserve system is one such example. Hungary boasted the second-best example of increasing reserve forces in Europe, not as large as in the case of Finland, but still to a significant level. Increasing the reserve forces was one of the important topics of discussion even before joining NATO. In 2016, Hungary started a multi-year acquisition programme to procure modern equipment for the land forces and the air force. Last year, approximately 40 per cent of the Hungarian defence budget was related to R&D and innovation, which is double the NATO requirement.

However, there is a crucial difference between the army modernization programmes in several other member states and Hungary. We are not doing it because Washington asks for it, or because of some abstract notion of solidarity. We take this action because we think that reforms in the national defence sector are critical to our own security. Furthermore, it goes without saying that we are talking about a multinational strategy, because we understand NATO works best through effective international cooperation. Hungary might have a bit of a different perspective than others, but this is also one way to contribute to the success of NATO. FE

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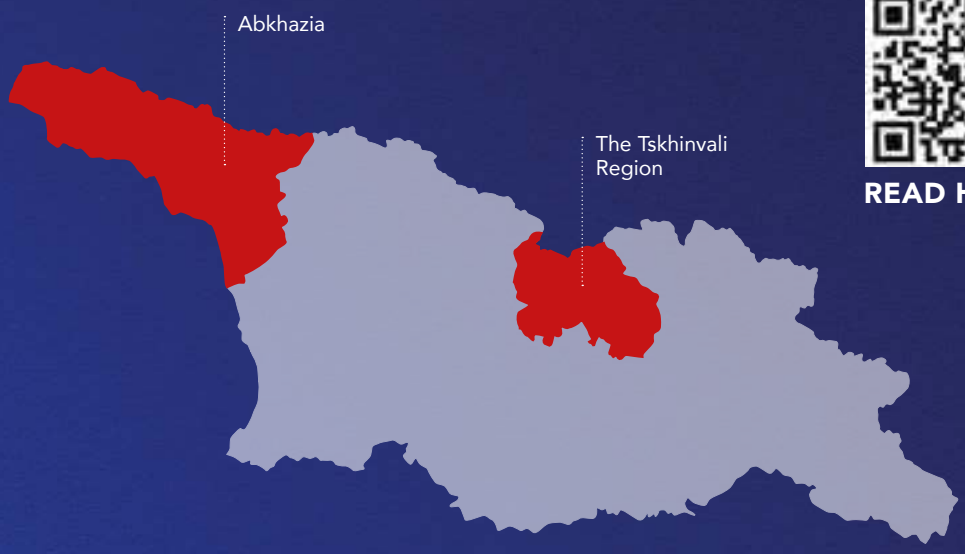

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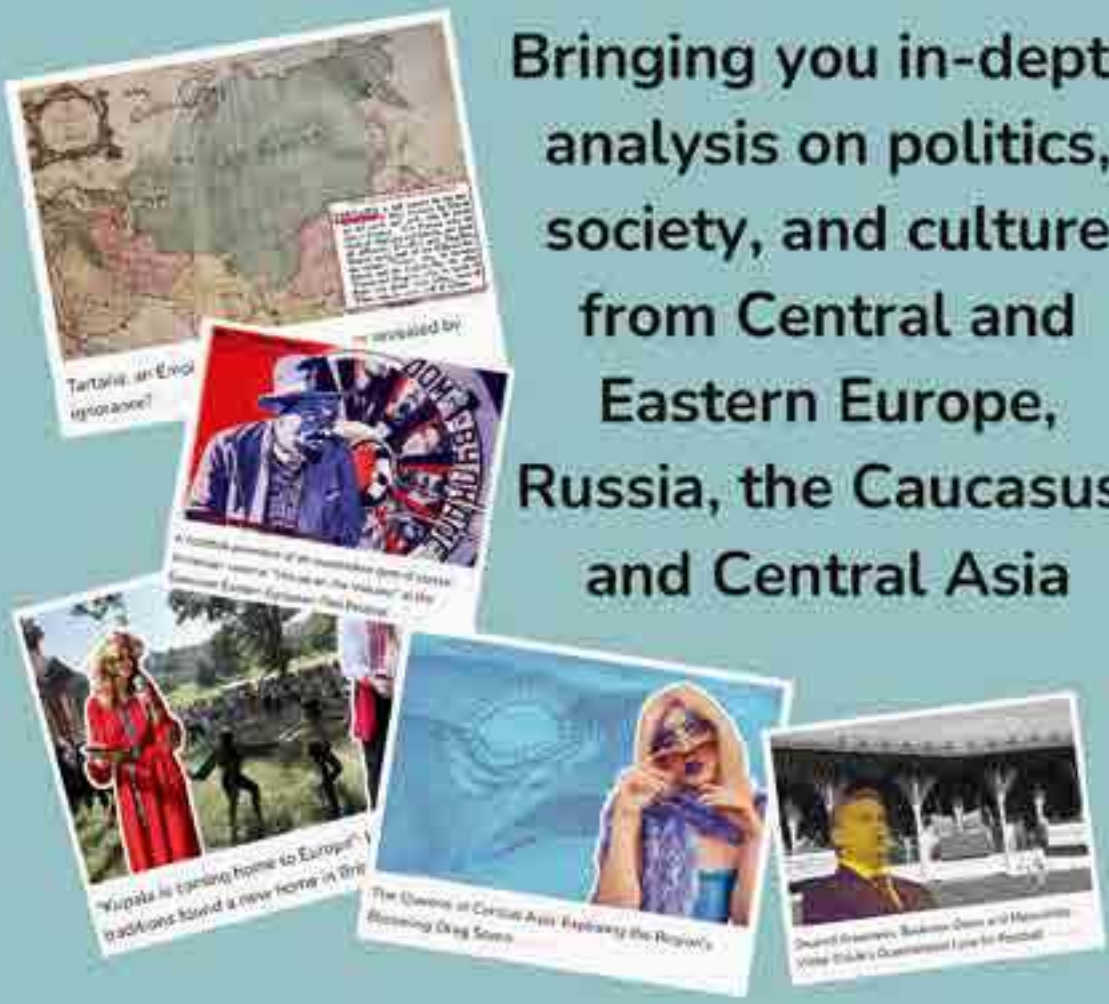

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