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New Eastern Europe

IN THE THROES OF CRISES

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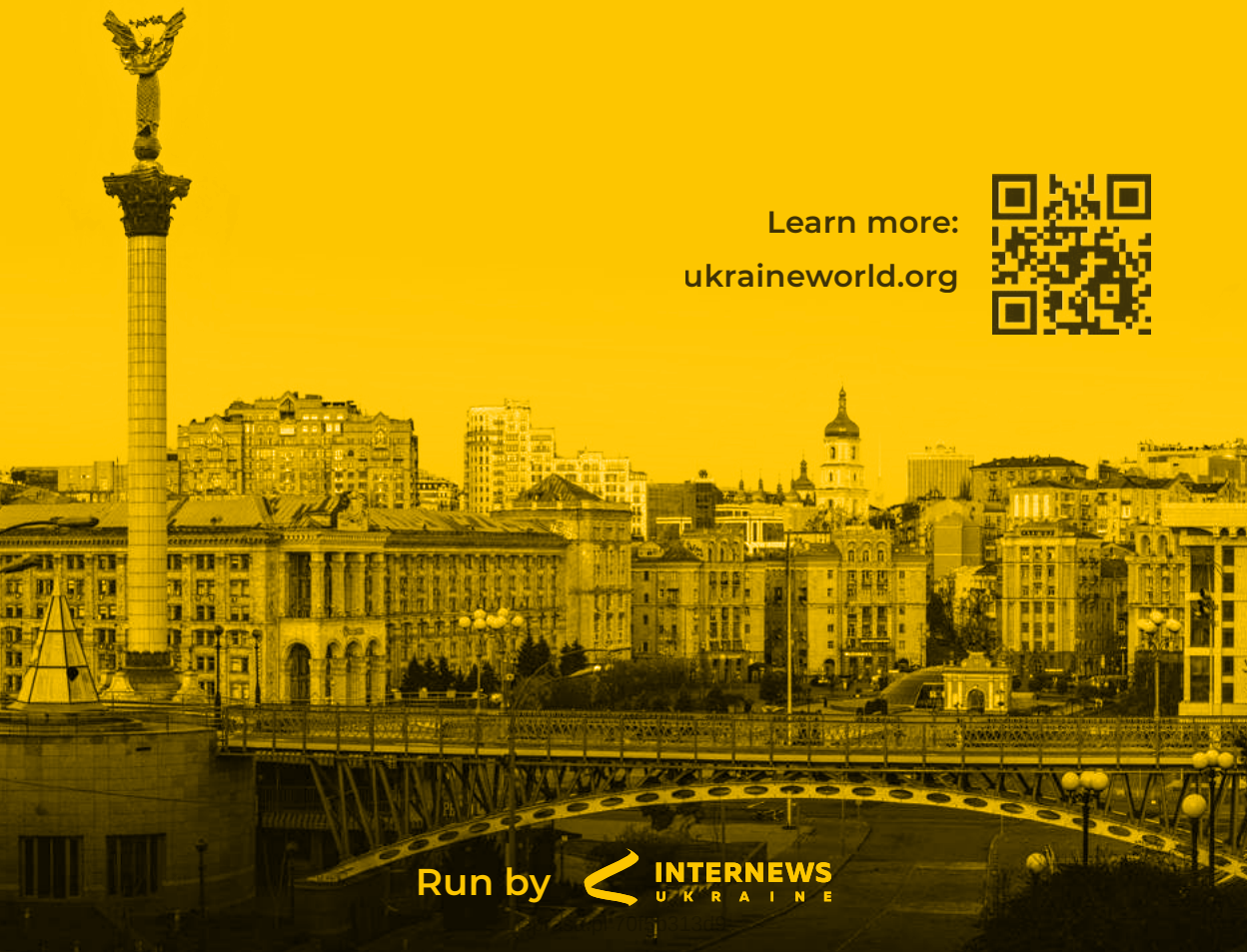

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DEAR READER,

As we near the one-year mark of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there is no clear end in sight. What is visible are the consequences of this war. The complete destruction of vibrant cities, the displacement of millions of Ukrainians and the occupation of Ukrainian territory by Russian forces has changed the lives of Ukrainians forever. As Russia continues its onslaught against Ukraine, it targets more than military sites, destroying civilian infrastructure, especially energy, in an attempt to break the Ukrainians' will. Ukraine, supported by the West, continues to defend and has thus far managed to hold off Russian advances in many parts of the country. Yet, the price is high.

The consequences of Russia's invasion are visible not only in Ukraine. The Kremlin has set off or exploited a series of crises that face most European countries as well. We can see it when we shop for basic necessities, such as cooking oil, sugar, milk or eggs, and we can see it on our monthly utility bills, especially heating and electricity. Therefore, in this issue our authors set out to explore how the crises of the last year are connected, used as political tools, especially by Vladimir Putin, and what affect they may have on societies throughout Europe and beyond. Undoubtedly, whether we can overcome the effects brought by the economic, political, energy, and social crises depends largely on what happens in Ukraine. However, western societies cannot ignore the fact that they too have a role to play.

As the fighting continues on the battlefield, another part of the war rages globally, and this is the 21st-century cyberwar which is taking place online and, similarly, affects all of us. With this in mind, we include a special section which we have prepared together with researchers from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków focusing on cybersecurity. The authors of the section discuss how Russia's war in Ukraine (and not only) has spilled over to the information sphere. They point to the dangers that we are all faced with as online users and the need for greater understanding and resilience against cyber-attacks.

As always, we encourage you to continue the discussion with us via our website, social media and podcasts.

The Editors

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EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CENTRE
pl. Solidarności 1, 80-863 Gdańsk, Poland
https://ecs.gda.pl/, ecs@ecs.gda.pl

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ILLUSTRATIONS AND COVER
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COVER LAYOUT
Do Lasu s.c.

SUBSCRIPTION:
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LAYOUT AND FORMATTING
Małgorzata Chyc | AT Wydawnictwo

EDITORIAL OFFICES
New Eastern Europe
ul. Szlak 26/12A, 31-153 Kraków
editors@neweasterneurope.eu

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When crises become political tools

MARCEL H. VAN HERPEN

In a crisis situation nothing is certain. We all share the unpleasant feeling that we are slowly losing the firm ground beneath our feet. And this crisis mood colours also our view of the future. Yet, there are actors who consciously and willingly cause crisis situations with the intention to profit from the ensuing chaos.

Today the word "crisis" is on everyone's lips. And this is not without reason. In the last few years we have been confronted with an accumulation of crisis situations. It started with the Donald Trump presidency and continued with the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only caused a huge death toll, but also destabilised the world economy. The crisis further deepened with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, undermining the international rules-based order that was built after the Second World War. The war led not only to bloodshed and hardship, but also further deterioration in an already dire economic situation, boosting inflation. So, here we are today!

Deep change

Let us first have a closer look at the phenomenon of crisis. What is it? And when we speak about a "crisis" what do we mean? Reinhart Koselleck, who wrote a classic study on the subject, defined a crisis as follows: "It is part of the essence of a crisis that a decision has to be taken, but that [this decision] has not yet been taken. And

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it is also part of the crisis that it remains open what kind of decision will be taken. The general feeling of insecurity in a critical situation is therefore mixed with the certainty that … an end to the critical situation is imminent. What the solution could be remains uncertain, the end itself, however, a change to the existing situation – threatening and feared, or hopefully welcomed – is certain for the people."

In Koselleck's definition a crisis situation boils down to the following elements: 1) there is a feeling of insecurity; 2) a decision has to be taken; and 3) the individual has no idea about the outcome of this decision, but it is certain that it will bring a deep change – positive or negative. I have some problems with the word "decision" used by Koselleck in this context, because often the outcome of a crisis situation depends not on the (rational) decision of one actor, but on the power play of different actors that leads to a result that no one has foreseen or expected. Feelings of helplessness, therefore, are not restricted to the average citizen. Political leaders also do not know how the dice will roll. In a crisis situation nothing is certain: we all share the unpleasant feeling that we are slowly losing the firm ground beneath our feet. And this crisis mood colours also our view of the future.

An example of the present crisis mood can be seen in a report on global trends, published in 2021 by the American National Intelligence Council (i.e., before the

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full-scale invasion of Ukraine). Most scenarios for the next 20 years in this report are far from reassuring. According to the authors the world will be "more contested, uncertain, and conflict prone", while "the risk of interstate conflict is likely to rise due to advances in technology and an expanding range of targets, new frontiers for conflict and a greater variety of actors, more difficult deterrence and a weakening or a lack of treaties and norms on acceptable use."

One of the scenarios – "a world adrift" – describes the emerging international system as "directionless, chaotic and volatile as international rules and institutions are largely ignored". According to the *New York Times,* "experts in Washington who have read these reports said they do not recall a gloomier one." It is, therefore, no surprise that today in the media comparisons are often made with the 1930s and that these comparisons increased after the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine. Already before the war French President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview that "I don't want simply to observe history. I want … to try to understand the lessons from history. I am struck by the similarities between the period in which we are living and [the period] between the two world wars …"

Losers and winners

It is clear that the world is in bad shape and that everybody is suffering from this situation. Everybody? Is this so? Are there only losers and no winners? This is an interesting question. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out vaccine deniers claimed that the pandemic was the work of the pharmaceutical industry wanting to boost its profits. Attacks on "Big Pharma" went viral on social media. The same phenomenon could be observed when Russia invaded Ukraine. Activists from the extreme left and extreme right claimed that the war, rather than being caused by Russian aggression, was the result of an American conspiracy to strengthen its grip on Europe and help the American arms industry, which would urgently need new orders.

> The global champion for creating crisis situations is Russia, a worthy successor to the defunct Soviet Union.

Nobody can deny that COVID-19 boosted the profits of the pharmaceutical industry and that the war in Ukraine will boost the profits of the arms industry. However, to conclude that the pandemic and the war were both the result of dark deep state conspiracies makes little sense. Of course, there are actors who win in a crisis situation without causing the crisis. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are clear examples. Due to the war, Turkey could improve its international status, while US President Joe Biden felt obliged to visit

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman al Saud despite his role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Meanwhile Qatar became the world's major gas supplier after a sanctions regime was imposed on Russia.

But there are also actors who consciously and willingly cause crisis situations with the intention to profit from the ensuing chaos. This is a policy conducted by rogue states. North Korea, which launched a ballistic missile over Japan in October 2022, is a clear example. The global champion for creating crisis situations, however, is the Russian Federation, which is in this respect a worthy successor to the defunct Soviet Union. Russia is continuously creating crises and causing turmoil and chaos by attacking foreign countries, undermining the international rules-based order, conducting cyberattacks, spreading fake news, intervening in elections, supporting rebel groups and putschists abroad (Wagner in Africa), and organising rallies in foreign countries, such as pro-Moscow demonstrations by Russians in Berlin or paid protests against the pro-EU government of Moldova. Concerning this final example, the *New York Times* commented: "Russia stokes a crisis and then, directly or through local proxies, offers a solution that requires acceptance of Russian hegemony."

Collision of wills

What can be done to counter these destabilising threats? The first imperative is to uphold international law and the rules-based international order because this is essential for liberal democracies. This means that the governments of rogue states have to be held accountable for the war crimes and the crimes against humanity they have committed. This implies that already now, while the war in Ukraine is still raging, preparations must be made for a trial before the International Criminal Court in The Hague. It means further that the principle of "aggression must not pay" must be upheld and that Ukraine must be helped to win the war without the loss of any territory – including Crimea and the territories of Donbas occupied since 2014. Sanctions should be upheld and, where possible, strengthened. And, last but not least, the West should supply all the armaments which are necessary for a Ukrainian victory.

The governments of rogue states have to be held accountable for the crimes against humanity they have committed.

Is this possible? We have to be conscious of the fact that wars are not only collisions of armies, they are – above all – collisions of wills. Has the West enough stomach to confront an imperialist, fascist Russia? I think we have, but much will

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depend on the maintenance of transatlantic unity and keeping divisive forces – populist parties and illiberal governments – under control. Like the generation of the 1940s we stand before our historical responsibility. We may like it or not, but we have to accept it. The future of Europe and the world depends on our actions today.

Marcel H. Van Herpen is the author of *Putin's Wars – The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism.* In his forthcoming book *History and Human Responsibility – The Unbearable Weight of Freedom in a Dystopian World* (St Augustine's Press, 2023), the author analyses the present crisis and argues that our generation has an increased, threefold historical responsibility – not only for everyone alive today, but also for the (mis)deeds of past generations and the well-being of future generations.

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Renewing the promise of European solidarity

BASIL KERSKI

The war in Ukraine reminds us that the peaceful civic revolutions of 1989–91 have not yet been completed. Today Vladimir Putin is once again trying to stop Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity and reverse its dynamics. He is also the co-creator of a new nationalistic populism in Europe and the United States. The main goal of this movement is to destroy civic culture and solidarity among people.

When we ask Europeans what comes to their mind when they think of the word solidarity, we see that their answer today differs compared to what it was before February 24th 2022. Many will probably say that for them solidarity means support for the democratic Ukrainian society that is being attacked by Putinist Russia. Among the answers there might be justified opinions that the Russian political system has become fascist. The war in Ukraine is the next step in Russia's authoritarian radicalisation, which translates into increased violence and aggression against its neighbours, but also against the Russian society. All dissent is brutally crushed there.

From today's perspective we can thus see the important role that was played in the preparation for the invasion by the policy of eliminating any critics of the authorities. It led to the murder of Boris Nemtsov, the poisoning and imprisonment of Alexey Navalny and the de-legalisation of Memorial and *Novaya Gazeta*.

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European integration as an expression of solidarity

Today solidarity is a concept which reflects the many needs and dimensions of human life. Interpersonal solidarity is of central importance here, which – in our everyday life – means solidarity with people whom we know: family, friends or neighbours. The public dimension of solidarity is linked to the functioning of nation-states which need to have well-functioning systems of security, public education, healthcare, social justice, environmental protection, and freedoms of speech and expression. We cannot thus talk about solidarity within a nation state without the rule of law, respect for minority rights and pluralism. Solidarity cannot be the privilege of a majority. And, solidarity presented as a privilege of one group, be it ethnic or religious – or that of the authorities – is in fact a dangerous promise offered only by nationalistic populists.

Solidarity without an international dimension is an empty and incomplete idea. Without solidarity among nations, there is no peace, no ground for development or no economic opportunities. This kind of solidarity also counteracts nationalisms and authoritarianisms. In Europe the experience of solidarity also includes the knowledge that egoisms, xenophobia, racism, religious fanaticism, nationalism and authoritarianism have always led us to wars. European integration was our answer to the two world wars. It became the embodiment of the idea of solidarity and is found on many levels of public life: from the lowest, local and regional levels, to the national and inter-state level. Solidarity, as it is embodied throughout the European project, is in fact an attempt to build an open society in all of its dimensions.

This process had two sources and unfolded in two waves. First the Western European integration was an expression of the reconciliation between the Germans and French, Italians, and the Benelux nations, as well as the Brits, which took place in the first decades of the post-war period. The democratisation of Southern Europe which took place in the 1970s only made the western community of democratic states stronger. The continent was then consolidated by the young democracies from the Iberian Peninsula and Greece, which at that time freed themselves from military dictatorship. The second element of European integration was the Polish Solidarity revolution and other Central and Eastern European civic revolutions which in the years 1989–91 led to the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the Warsaw Pact. We cannot forget here about the revolutions of the nations that were trapped in the Soviet Union and which not only fought for their independence but also human rights and democracy.

After the Second World War France lost its position as a colonial power. Yet thanks to European integration it kept its influence in European and world affairs.

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Germany would not be reunited nor get support for this process if it were not part of European integration. The EU became a tool of control for a united Germany but also allowed it to grow more prosperous and politically influential. German reunification, as an element of the integration process, was also the vision of the Polish democratic opposition in the 1980s. This vision of solving the post-war divisions of Germany was also to cause a geopolitical revolution which allowed Poland to return to the West. That is why also for us, the Poles, our full sovereignty and consolidation is owed to European integration. We recognise the value of this accomplishment especially today as we see the situation in non-EU states, such as Ukraine and the damage that Moscow's imperial policy is doing there.

Democracy, the greatest threat to autocrats

Today, we can also clearly see that Vladimir Putin is not only scared of crossing the NATO border – even though he could do it and start a conflict with the Baltic states, for example – but also that he faces a mental blockade when it comes to crossing the EU border. That is why the security challenge of today is not only to protect national borders. To counteract the threat from Russia, democratic Europe needs to be a community that is economically and technologically strong. This in turn can help offset China and other economically competitive and technologically advancing authoritarian states. Only a strong EU can ensure that Europeans are safe from Chinese imperialism, which supports the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and neutralises pro-democracy movements in Asia and Africa through its economic integration model linked with authoritarian political systems.

The vision of the European Union as an antidote to authoritarian global power should be more stressed in Polish thinking about security. In this conflict NATO alone is not enough. Democratic European states as well as those that are NATO members should rethink their economic and technological potential. We also have to work towards becoming independent from Chinese technologies. We have made the same mistake with regards to both China and Russia – we became convinced that we are the strong partner and that these two states, which serve as our energy or technology providers, are contributing to our prosperity and – in some way – also security. This was an illusion.

The concept of solidarity, as an idea defending universal human rights, our community of states and democratic societies, should also be used to limit the influence of China. It should thus include our solidarity with the civic movement in Hong Kong; as well as Taiwan which is a democratic state unrecognised by the Chinese authorities.

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The democratisation of Central and Eastern Europe, which took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was a part of the democratisation wave that was also sweeping through South Africa, Central and South America, South Korea and Taiwan. These processes were all interconnected. In the spring of 1989 we were witnesses to the first non-violent revolution in China, which was unfortunately bloodily crushed by the communist regime on June 4th 1989, the very same day when the Polish Solidarity movement won the first partially-free elections to parliament, marking the beginning of our democratic transformation. The Chinese transformation of 1989 was brutally stopped, but its ideas remain an important element of political life in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other Asian states.

When thinking about solidarity we should imagine a few interacting platforms as there is no such thing as one-dimensional solidarity. When we are talking about Poland and its functioning as a state we have to think also about its local, regional, national and European layers. Solidarity needs to be an idea that is alive and organises life in every dimension. Just like in 1980 the Solidarity revolution in Poland meant a renewal of the functioning of the society, both in terms of local governance and the challenges that were ahead of the Polish people.

Foundation of solidarity

The war in Ukraine forced us to understand the European dimension of solidarity better. The challenge that we are faced with now is whether we transform this solidarity that we are observing in many European societies into a systemic policy for the whole of Eastern Europe. And here I am not talking solely about Ukraine, but also Belarus and its future as well as the European integration of the South Caucuses and the Western Balkans. Another important question to consider is how long will we be able to maintain our emotional ties with the Ukrainian nation? I fear that many Europeans might become accustomed to the war and will lose sensitivity and empathy and for that reason turn their backs on the Ukrainian victims. Hopefully, I am mistaken.

On the Russian side, the brutal aggression against the Ukrainian people has generated a spiral of violence which brings, on a daily basis, unimaginable war crimes. These crimes are drawing the attention of the international community towards the war and strengthen our solidarity with Ukrainians. Emotions are of key importance in politics but also for practicing solidarity. However, it is also important that they are accompanied by cultural competence, knowledge about Ukraine, Belarus and imperial Russian traditions. The gap in knowledge about Eastern European states and nations needs to be filled urgently. To do so, we need to start a

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lengthy educational process in this matter. We need this knowledge to counteract Moscow's neo-imperial colonialism. And only in this way will we be able to build a stable order that is based on peace and democratisation in this part of Europe. We are obliged to do more than we have so far. We have to provide Ukraine with weapons as well as help Ukrainian refugees who stay in our countries. We have to start thinking, already now, about Ukraine's reconstruction and how to finance it, but also about comprehensive educational programmes for all Europeans that would improve their cultural and political competence and free them from the power of old imperialisms.

The new Europe will be strong and based on solidarity if its citizens know and understand each other. We need to remember that all historic breakthroughs were accompanied by increased cultural competence and the expanding of the horizons of those who participated in them. Poland, for example, would not have regained independence after the First World War if there was no awareness that Poland is an important European nation that not only has its own language but also national culture and political traditions that include ideals of freedom and anti-imperialism. The US administration under Woodrow Wilson did not only want to see a rebuilding of the Polish state after the war, its goal was to see a modern Polish state which could serve as a counter-model to the tsarist, and later Bolshevik, Russia, as well as authoritarian Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Democratic Poland was also to become an important element in the post-war democratic order in Europe. The return of the Polish state to Europe's map after 1918 was possible thanks to the international lobby which understood the history of Central and Eastern Europe. In 1989 the situation was similar. Poland's escape from Moscow's grip was possible thanks to the support it received from the political elite in the US, the UK, France, Italy and Germany, who saw the Polish people and Polish political culture as part of Europe's democratic tradition.

Culture and knowledge are, next to emotions, another important element in building European civic culture. For the idea of solidarity to become reality it has to be transferred into systemic solutions. The climax of this process will take the form of Ukraine's reconstruction. Today we know that in many places the destruction is total and thus there are justified voices for a new Marshall Plan for Ukraine. When thinking of such assistance we should keep in mind that the historical Marshall Plan was the result of the thinking of a wider region and never limited to one state alone. It will not be enough to help only Ukraine. We need to start thinking and drafting political solutions for the whole region, which would include the future of Belarus and the future of Moldova, which because of its solidarity with the Ukrainian people has now gained the attention of the wider world.

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For our freedom and yours

The war in Ukraine reminds us that the civic revolutions of 1989–91 have not yet been completed. Putin is a dictator and a political actor whose biography illustrates just how closely connected these events are. In the 1980s Putin was a KGB officer in Dresden in East Germany. His role was to actively stop any civic revolution. His boss, General Vladimir Kryuchkov, started the putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev. Kryuchkov and Putin were both among those who wanted to stop not only the civic revolutions in Central Europe, but also the transformation of the Soviet Union that would bring it into the community of democratic states.

Today Putin, who knows his biological limitations in terms of how much time he has left, wants to reverse the effects of Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity. He did the same thing in other states and many places, both within the Russian Federation but also by attacking Georgia in 2008 or illegally annexing Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. He is also the co-author of the bloody crackdown against the Belarusian revolution and a co-creator of the new, nationalistic, anti-solidarity populism in Europe and the United States.

The main idea of this new populism is to destroy the solidarity of civil societies, be it at the NATO or EU level. In Europe, Putin is investing in all anti-EU parties. The 1993 Maastricht Treaty prepared a foundation to deepen the European Union, to introduce a common European currency but also to expand Europe to the East. By supporting nationalistic populists within the EU, Putin is no longer fighting with European solidarity, but also eliminating the achievements of the peaceful revolutions of 1989. In this way, he has been reminding us that these revolutions have not yet been fully completed.

Today's generation of young Europeans, who were born after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, have to face the fact that they are now defending the heritage of events they did not witness themselves. The ideas and experiences of the Solidarity revolution as well as other non-violent revolutions are very simple: without democracy there is no prosperity, nor economic or technological development. There is also no security or ecological sustainability. Only a fully democratic state and open society can nurture pro-environmental thinking, one which does not see economic prosperity as limited to one group alone. This thinking is anti-oligarchic and anti-tyranny. NEE

Basil Kerski is the director of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk and the editor in chief of *DIALOG*, a Polish-German bilingual magazine.

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Is Europe's democracy in crisis?

FILIP KOSTELKA

Like their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s, today's populists understand that by dividing society and delegitimising their adversaries, they can get away with blatant violations of the democratic rules. They aim to fuel discontent and toxic polarisation, which transform public debate into tribal wars.

In the mid-1970s three eminent political scientists – Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki – penned a famous report on the crisis of western democracy, which they described as declining and overloaded with societal demands. Paradoxically, their report coincided with the start of a democratisation wave that, in 15 years, swept away dictatorships across the globe, including those in Southern and Eastern Europe.

While roughly 57 per cent of European countries were democratic in 1975, their share reached 77 per cent by 1990. Today, the old continent is more democratic than it ever was in the 20th century. No fewer than 85 per cent of European countries hold regular free and fair elections. Democratic regimes do not massively break down as they did between the 1920s and 1940s, when 12 out of 19 European democracies collapsed or fell prey to the expansion of totalitarian regimes. On the contrary, European democracy has so far proved resilient in the face of major threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine. Democracy is currently not in crisis and, in fact, we live in one of its best times.

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Cause for concern

These good times, however, cannot be taken for granted. A century ago, observers may have felt similarly optimistic when democracy emerged triumphant after the First World War and the ensuing flu pandemic. However, they would soon witness the rapid rise of authoritarianism and totalitarianism across the continent. Such developments are unlikely to repeat themselves, but there are reasons for concern. Many European nations have experienced at least a glimpse of democratic erosion. Populist politicians showing little respect for fundamental democratic principles have been increasingly successful at the ballot box. They scapegoat minorities, migrants and Brussels for their countries' ills. When in power, they attack key democratic institutions, such as free media and independent courts, to carve out an undue electoral advantage for themselves, and eschew public and legal scrutiny of their acts.

Many European nations have experienced at least a glimpse of democratic erosion.

Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, the playing field is often tilted in favour of populist incumbents. The Polish public broadcaster has been transformed into a mouthpiece of the ruling cabinet, and its Czech counterpart presumably avoided a similar fate only thanks to an unlikely outcome at the last legislative election. Extreme, but still rare cases such as Hungary and Serbia have seen the emergence of hybrid regimes, which are more autocratic than democratic. Their ruling parties have captured state institutions, eliminated independent media and bullied the opposition. Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić's effective coups are the dream for many of their less successful, but equally ambitious and unscrupulous friends both in the East and West.

The causes of the changing political climate are manifold. In Central and Eastern Europe, the accession to the European Union removed a powerful incentive for politicians' good behaviour, as the EU has so far struggled to bring its members into line. There is also an aspect of (bad) luck: Orbán would have barely been capable of building his dictatorship had not his party unexpectedly achieved a constitutional majority in the 2010 legislative election.

However, globally, the most important cause arguably lies in technological change. In the pre-Web 2.0 era, populist politicians and their inflammatory rhetoric were not given air time in established democracies. Elites had to respect the democratic rules of the game in order to avoid pariah status. Extremist and dissatisfied citizens lacked opportunities to flock together. Web 2.0 and the rise of alternative and social media put an end to the effective gatekeeping against the populist threat. Populists can circumvent *cordon sanitaires* and gather significant follow-

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ings, with which they can directly communicate through Facebook, Twitter or TikTok. Their influence and early electoral success then open the doors to mainstream media outlets as well.

Technological change enables authoritarian powers to interfere effectively in democratic countries' political competitions. China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia – until it concentrated most of its resources on the invasion of Ukraine – use social media to spread disinformation and support extremists in the hope that they will destabilise the democratic world. Technological change and its consequences affect European politics directly, by providing opportunities and partners to autocratic leaders, but also indirectly. In the era of Web 1.0, Donald Trump would probably never have made it into the White House. His presidency emboldened autocrats and decisively contributed to the weakening of democratic norms worldwide.

Divide and conquer

The success of populists reveals some of the limits of democratic electorates. Why have many Hungarian and Polish voters accepted their respective incumbents' illiberal reforms? It is because, like their counterparts elsewhere, many of them have a fairly biased understanding of democracy. Social science research shows that voters typically perceive politics through partisan lenses and, by democracy, they often understand it as a vehicle for their preferred policy outcomes. They are thus frequently unwilling to sanction politicians for breaking abstract democratic principles. This is even less so when these politicians are from voters' chosen political camp and, simultaneously, deliver desired public policies. Such limits have always existed and, probably, are hardwired into our nature.

Will the 2020s resemble the 1920s? Despite the recent worrisome trends, there is reason for moderate optimism.

Yet, they mattered less a few decades ago when gatekeeping worked better and mainstream politicians held each other in check. Like their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s, today's populists understand that by dividing society and denouncing their real or imagined adversaries, they can get away with blatant violations of the democratic rules. They aim to fuel discontent and toxic polarisation, which transform public debate into tribal wars.

Will the 2020s resemble the 1920s? Despite the recent worrisome trends, there is reason for moderate optimism. Fascism, violent coups and outright authoritarianism are historically compromised as concepts. Even authoritarians like Orbán are at pains to preserve the veneer of procedural legality and subsequently turn

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Photo: Golden Brown / Shutterstock

Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić's effective coups are the dream for many of their less successful, but equally ambitious and unscrupulous friends both in the East and West.

their countries into autocracies by stealth. They do so to please foreign stakeholders – including the EU, international bodies and the markets – but also domestic audiences. Their popular support does not come from being authoritarian. Quite the opposite, their election victories are possible only because the bulk of their voters do not understand that many of the adopted reforms, while legal on paper and potentially legitimate in isolation, are problematic in practice and undemocratic when combined. While this process illustrates the danger of sneaky "autocratisation" and partisan bias, it also demonstrates the prestige of democracy and its unrivalled popularity as a political system. There is still no credible alternative to the democratic ideal.

Rising to the challenge

While voters are susceptible to partisan bias and populist rhetoric, they tend to be put off by politicians' incompetence. Britain's poor economic performance after Brexit; Hungary's struggle with energy, living costs and food shortages; China's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic; and Russia's humiliating debacles

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on the battlefield do not make populist and autocratic solutions look particularly attractive. Brexit and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have highlighted the otherwise diffuse benefits of EU and NATO membership, challenging populists who had often scapegoated these two organisations and, instead, preached closer cooperation with the Kremlin. Even though European democracies will face significant challenges in the months to come, ranging from the continuing energy crisis to migration, they are unlikely to fail this stress test.

It is true that Europe's democratic future will also hinge on a certain number of critical events. The outcome of the war in Ukraine comes to mind first and foremost. Should Russia prevail this would not only be a disaster for tens of millions of Ukrainians. It would also reduce the prestige of democracy and force Europeans to make ugly compromises, which would empower cynical and populist politicians. Similarly, Europe's democracy will always be sensitive to the outcomes of the US and French presidential elections. If another Trump-style politician occupied the Oval Office, or a "Lepeniste" candidate took over the Élysée Palace and commanded a majority in the National Assembly, European democrats would be in troubled waters.

Nevertheless, if technological change is the main facilitator of the populist rise, democratic systems may gradually learn how to stand up to this challenge. It is crystal clear that the internet and social media need better regulation. Democratic politicians also need to become more effective at tackling today's major problems which include growing economic inequality and climate change. From this perspective, especially when it comes to inequality, a certain dose of populism may actually be healthy and help mainstream political forces adopt a more proactive approach. European democrats have a lot on their plate, but their starting position is not at all bad. Overall, there are many reasons to view the democratic glass as nearly full rather than almost empty.

Filip Kostelka is a professor and chair in Political and Social Change in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence.

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The EU economy may not be in the best shape, but Ukraine will not be abandoned

LESIA DUBENKO

Russia's brutal war against Ukraine has dramatically exacerbated Kyiv's dependence on the West to keep the economy afloat. Ukraine's finance ministry estimates that in 2022, 38.6 per cent of the country's budget came from external donors in grants and credits while Ukraine's GDP, according to the International Monetary Fund, contracted by a third.

As Russia continues to bomb Ukraine's power grid and destroy its infrastructure, the country's economic projections for 2023 are devoid of optimism. For the country to survive, it needs economic assistance from abroad – and this is where matters get complicated. While Brussels recently gave the green light to the long-awaited macro-aid package worth 18 billion euros, the latest economic forecasts also spell trouble for EU economies, with the eurozone's GDP growth expected to slow to 0.3 per cent.

Coupled with inflation that is poised to remain high and concerns over the rising cost of living, the economic situation in the EU may certainly affect its support for Ukraine, depending on a host of financial, political and social factors.

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On the bright side

While inflation in the European Union is expected to remain high in 2023 at seven per cent (6.1 per cent in the euro area) according to the European Commission, the good news is that, in line with predictions, it will also decline. Furthermore, the Commission states that by 2024 the EU will have largely adjusted to the shock. Data likewise suggests that major EU economies, despite predictably feeling the ramifications of the sanctions imposed on Russia and the Russia-West energy war, will cope with the situation. While the commission expects Germany's economy to contract by -0.6 per cent, the German-based Institute for the World Economy is more optimistic, noting that it will increase by 0.3 per cent in 2023, up from the institute's autumn forecast of a 0.7 per cent drop.

Other EU net contributors like Italy, France and the Netherlands are also looking at growing GDPs though at a reduced pace. In addition to that, the EU economy is bolstered by the strongest labour market in decades, with unemployment rates at record lows and participation and employment rates at record highs.

These economic fluctuations – which are likely to continue to be adjusted as new data flows in – could be interpreted and manipulated, in many ways. Of course, this is where the political factor kicks in. However, the fact that major EU contributors like Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and others completed their electoral cycles in 2021–22 significantly narrows the space for political, and possibly pro-Russian, manoeuvres from the opponents of sanctions and Ukrainian aid; especially those belonging to the extremes of the political spectrum, such as the German AfD or Die Linke or their equivalents in other countries.

Though contingent on seven criteria, the prospect of full-fledged EU membership will grant Ukraine access to additional funds.

The results of a recent survey by Eurobarometer, the EU's statistical arm, further give grounds for optimism, showing that 74 per cent of EU respondents approve of providing aid to Ukraine, with figures remaining high in the EU's net contributors and even overwhelming in the rich Scandinavian states.

Another factor that spells good news for Ukraine is its EU candidate status that was obtained in June 2022. Though contingent on seven criteria, the prospect of full-fledged membership will grant Ukraine access to additional funds. While membership is naturally ruled out until the war ends, recent moves towards integration are not just an act of diplomatic symbolism but a commitment, ultimately granting Ukraine access to the EU's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). This is currently available to candidate countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and others.

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The key social factor to note here involves the Ukrainians who have relocated to the EU after February 24th 2022. European countries are hosting an estimated 7.9 million people, while a total of 4.7 million have registered under the European Union's temporary protection directive – to be extended until March 2024 – which enables them to work in the union. Some of these people are already contributing to the EU's economy, working in various services such as the beauty and health sector. The Polish Economic Institute revealed that almost 14,000 businesses were created by Ukrainians in Poland in the first nine months of last year.

Their share is only slated to increase as Ukrainians adapt to their host countries – and so will their contribution to the economy, in both taxes and consumer spending, including from those Ukrainians who did not officially register.

We are looking at potentially hefty contributions. Previous estimates made in my 2021 report, "Ukrainian Labour Migration to the EU: State of Play, Challenges and Solutions", between 2014 and 2019 Ukrainian workers in the EU, who have been the largest group of external workers in the bloc for several years, have contributed between 956 million and 1.06 billion US dollars (those with permits issued for three to five months), 2.65 billion and 5.4 billion (six to eleven months), and at least an additional 207 million (12 or more months).

For Ukraine, this is likewise important as during the period 2014–19, it received 67.914 billion US dollars in remittances and is expected to keep receiving tens of billions every year. The energy issue is likewise showing positive signs. Russia's use of fossil fuels as its main blackmail tool has not had the desired effect. Some states have indeed given in to its "gas-for-roubles" demands, with data showing that the Russian economic coffers are still being filled at a steady rate. However, the gas prices have likewise slumped from over 200 euros per megawatt hour – ten times higher than in 2021 – to 65 euros per MWh. According to the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, European countries ramped up their global supplies of LNG in mid to late 2022, increasing imports from 83 billion cubic metres (bcm) in 2021 to 141 bcm in 2022. Meanwhile, new LNG import infrastructure is being created in Europe, including in Germany.

And on the dimmer one…

On the flipside, several factors should be taken into account. Among them is the aforementioned inflation. Although the European Commission's prediction is that it is expected to decline in 2023, the seven per cent and 6.1 per cent (in the euro zone) forecast is also a significant revision compared to what they had anticipated just several months ago, when they were expecting inflation of 4.6 per cent

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and four per cent respectively. Accordingly, there is a chance that at least in the short term these numbers might be readjusted again – and not necessarily in the positive direction. This is especially true since the authors underscore that their forecasts are based on working assumptions.

The economic situation in EU member states, though manageable, is still rocky. According to the Bundesbank, the German economy will shrink through the middle of next year as businesses and households struggle with high energy costs – before a nascent recovery takes hold. The forecast for other countries also looks mixed even if not entirely negative. Given that a recent survey by Eurobarometer also shows that the rising cost of living alongside poverty are the most pressing concern for 93 per cent and 82 per cent respectively of the EU public, room for immediate political manoeuvre is still available.

In the EU, an array of countries, spearheaded by a Hungarian administration that is in open confrontation with the Ukrainian government due to alleged mistreatment of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, are discontent with the sanctions policy. Other countries like Austria have also voiced desires to soften restrictions. Greece, where the public does not view the EU's help to Ukraine favourably, could also amplify its voice as it is gearing up for legislative elections in July. To add to Europe's frustration, a report in *Politico Europe* from November suggested that the US is benefitting from the Russian war on Ukraine. This may lead to new obstacles when providing money to Kyiv.

To that end, it is worth keeping in mind that the EU's track record of commitment to funds for Ukraine has been shaky. In spite of its pledge together with the US to send 1.5 billion euros to Ukraine monthly in 2022, it did not fulfil this promise. Out of the pledged nine billion, Kyiv received just six billion euros.

While EU candidate status does effectively grant Ukraine access to new financial assistance, it also appears that Brussels no longer views war as an excuse for sluggish reform implementation. The latest macro assistance of 18 billion euros is in line with the bloc's typical carrot and stick policy – money in return for reforms – with the next 15 billion euros (4.5 billion every quarter) being contingent on Ukraine's implementation of reforms, which, as history shows, is often slow.

The energy factor must also not be downplayed even if so far the EU has managed to partially shrug off Russia's energy blackmail. Russia provided 60 billion cubic metres of gas to Europe in 2022, about half of what was promised in contracts. And it is not entirely clear whether in 2023 Europe will manage to preserve this path due to a tight global LNG market, and China's potential demand as it reopens after COVID-19 lockdowns. While Russia failed to achieve its blackmail goals, the current gas prices are still significantly higher compared to the norm of the past decade, with the gas market facing the potential risk of crippling shortages, espe-

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cially in the winter of 2023–24. Europe's production is also down by almost 13 per cent year-on-year in November, according to ING. Meanwhile, the Bruegel think tank notes that governments are also likely to organise vast energy bill support payments for consumers and businesses – totalling 705 billion euros across Europe.

Although some Ukrainians in the EU, arriving after February 24th 2022, have managed to find jobs, it is also true that many did not. According to the Ukrainian think tank Europe without Barriers, most of the Ukrainian migrants turned to protection in countries like Poland, Germany, Czechia, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria, with the majority of these people lacking income and thus needing social benefits. This will likely take a toll on the EU's economy, though it is unknown to what extent.

Effects of the crisis

Despite the negative economic tendencies that are likely set to continue for the foreseeable future, the situation at large suggests that the prospect of the EU or its members significantly downsizing support or abandoning Ukraine is unlikely. On the contrary, a recent research piece by the Ukrainian Centre for Economic Strategy estimates that Ukraine will receive a total of 100 billion US dollars in aid and not just via governmental channels. The final number may even exceed this projection should the West's intentions, spearheaded by Estonia, to seize Russian assets and transfer them to Ukraine come into effect already this year. It is almost certain that neither the EU nor its member states are planning to lift the sanctions, not least because the bloc and its major economies have adapted to the new economic setup. In fact, the EU is already preparing the tenth sanctions package on Russia that will focus on closing existing loopholes. Moreover, EU member states have found alternative energy sources or are trying to do so, which has led Germany's finance minister to declare that the country no longer depends on Russian imports for its energy supply.

> The prospect of the EU or its members significantly downsizing support or abandoning Ukraine remains unlikely.

Yet, economic factors, while playing a significant role, are not always the best indicator to rely on. Not only are they always changing due to different methods of calculation and lacking in immediate and precise data – with Goldman Sachs now saying that Europe will avoid plunging into a recession – they are almost always overshadowed by political needs. The political mood in the EU and its key ally the US has not changed. In fact, much suggests the contrary, with western countries ramping up military aid to Ukraine. They have agreed to deliver Patriot systems,

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main battle tanks and even possibly jet fighters, with talks indicating that we are inching towards such agreements.

The resolute stance that Ukrainian independence and sovereignty are essential to preserving the system of international law and order is similarly paramount. Russia's information war and propaganda has spent decades and billions on promoting its "backyard" policy. The Kremlin likely relied on its real-world effects when it launched its war on Ukraine in the hope of conquering it and returning to business as usual. One year into the war it is safe to say that this campaign failed to convince the western public.

Russia's raw material-based economy in turn is slowly yet steadily being crippled by the western sanctions as more loopholes are closed and new sources of energy found, albeit at a higher price. Moscow cannot afford to fully lose the European market – even if it claims so by saying that its oil and oil products will not be sold to anyone imposing the price cap between February and July 2023. Analysis from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air estimated that the EU's ban on Russian crude oil imports and the G7's 60 US dollar per barrel price cap are together costing Russia 160 million euros a day.

Finally, Ukraine's economic and social resilience matters as well. It is indeed true that Kyiv's financial dependence on the West is immense, but businesses and infrastructure are functioning rather well even without western help. All that is truly needed now is to defeat Russia on the battlefield, and focus on building Ukraine back better. NEE

Lesia Dubenko is a Ukrainian political scientist and analyst. She is a graduate of Lund University (MSc in European Affairs) and covers issues relating to international affairs, migration and disinformation.

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The easy times are behind us, but we are not giving up

IWONA REICHARDT

Poland responded generously to the mass inflow of refugees from Ukraine as Russia invaded in February last year. However, the need for help continues with every day of the war. While times are indeed hard for the country's army of volunteers, they are determined to continue aiding people in their time of need.

Right before the end of 2022 the vice chairman of the Polish Development Fund, Bartosz Marczuk, published a tweet in which he presented the amount of money that Poland had spent on helping Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian aggression on February 24th. The data that he presented showed that altogether in 2022 it was between 35 and 40 billion Polish zlotys, which is between 7.5 and 8.5 billion euros. Out of it, ten billion zlotys were spent on weapons, six billion amounted to state support for Ukrainian refugees (including support for children), around ten billion was spent by local governments and non-governmental organisations, and another ten billion was made up of the private help of the Polish people. In the same tweet, Marczuk estimated that by the end of 2022 Poland had hosted 950,000 Ukrainian refugees. The majority of them (90 per cent) were women and children, and around six per cent were people with disabilities.

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The toll of the crisis

The above information is based on official data obtained from the Polish state databases. As such, it most likely does not fully reflect either the full scale of war migration or the real range of private assistance that was offered by Poles to Ukrainians who had escaped from the Russian aggression and found refuge in the country. In both cases, we are talking about phenomena that are not always captured by official statistics, even though they do take place and have a significant impact on the reality on the ground. Equally importantly, these data, even though praiseworthy when it comes to Polish support to Ukraine, do not tell us much about the challenges that we are to face in 2023, which as we already know will most likely be more difficult than 2022. This is true both for Poland and Ukraine.

As of now, we know that the current Polish government is already preparing for the parliamentary elections which are planned for the autumn. For that reason, it will be carefully monitoring social moods and popular preferences, also in regards to Ukrainian migrants. In this context we have started seeing a (still slight) decline in support towards the refugees who are increasingly becoming victims of the discontent that Polish society is experiencing due to the worsening economic situation. Compared to other states, inflation has hurt Poland particularly bad. In autumn 2022 it reached a whopping 17 to 18 per cent. The forecast for 2023 is even more gruesome, with a 25 per cent increase forecasted to start in February. Yet, neither the worsening of the economic situation nor the prospect of another difficult year, which is now feared by the majority of Polish households, have changed the overall attitude of Polish society towards the war as such. On the contrary, the trend here is stable, and the hearts and minds of the Polish people are on the Ukrainian side. Russia does not cease to be seen as an aggressor and a threat.

> The trend is stable, and the hearts and minds of the Polish people are on the Ukrainian side.

Since the autumn of 2022 we have started to see a change in government decisions. This entails a redirection of Polish assistance from that offered to refugees who relocated to Poland towards that offered directly in Ukraine. One example of this new development can be seen regarding the so-called "module homes", which since May 2022 Polish firms have built in many places in Ukraine, including Bucha. The goal is to help as many people as possible to stay in Ukraine and provide them with decent enough conditions to survive until the end of the war.

The story about Poland and the Poles is never complete if we limit it to statistical data and government decisions (no matter of which provenance). Poles often surprise the world, breaking the image that is built about them in the West and in

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Photo courtesy of Agnieszka Szyluk.

Agnieszka, the coordinator of the largest aid centre still functioning in Krakow, poses with some recently donated food for refugees. "We see that private persons help us less now than they did in the beginning of the war. We also know that their resources have dried up," she says.

western media. The same thing happened in the beginning of this phase of the war when – against the earlier anti-refugee sentiment (be it in 2015 or in 2021 when a humanitarian crisis started at the Polish-Belarusian border) – they started to help, en masse, the war refugees who fled from Ukraine. However, while the assistance that Poland offered alongside the opening of the borders to a large number of refugees has significantly improved the image of today's Poland abroad, we cannot use this image to interpret the current situation in Poland, which is both complex and changing. And it will continue to be like this in the coming months. I can see it in my own hometown, Kraków, which is the third city in Poland with the largest number of Ukrainian refugees.

The needs remain

To capture the dynamics of these changes I met with the coordinator of an aid station located in Kraków at 54 Łagiewnicka Street. Local volunteers call it "Łagiewnicka" for short. The station is one of the places where since the beginning of the current stage of the war material assistance in the form of clothes, blankets,

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cosmetics and personal hygiene items have been offered to Ukrainian refugees. Operated by a foundation called "Good always returns", it is now one of the few places in Kraków where aid is offered daily and without limits.

Agnieszka, who earlier coordinated a women and children's shelter also here in Kraków, joined Łagiewnicka in June 2022 and started to organise and oversee assistance here and in Ukraine. She also helps one of the most well-known informal assistance initiatives in Poland, called "Soup for Ukraine". Its volunteers encourage Kraków residents to cook and can their own soup for refugees, which is distributed among the needy. In the spring of 2022 soup from Kraków was sent to Ukraine, to the frontline and humanitarian organisations. It was even distributed in Bucha, soon after it had been liberated by the Ukrainian forces.

What is the situation like now, as compared to how it was in February and March 2022? I asked Agnieszka this question as we met. "In the beginning of the war we had almost everything. Donations were flowing in, like mountain springs," she responds. "People were coming to us out of the goodness of their hearts and the wealth of their closets and wallets. Now, after months, these resources have almost entirely dried up. That is why if I myself do not reach out and find things, or get in touch with people with whom I worked before, or somebody would not call me, then we would not be able to offer the help that the refugees still need."

The biggest shortages are seen in basic hygiene products and cleaning supplies, but even warm clothes and blankets are more and more sought after as well as small household appliances. There is also a huge demand for medical equipment and supplies, especially for seniors, children and the disabled. A similar situation is reported by other aid stations, including those that back in July would refuse donations because they had no room left in the warehouses to store them. Those were indeed times when donations and volunteers were almost outnumbering the refugees; but not anymore.

New wave?

Now, when I browse through Polish Facebook, I can see that the determination to provide help has diminished, despite the ongoing difficulties in Ukraine. Thus, volunteers from time to time continue to make emotional posts about empty shelves, shortages of soup, or the need for women's cosmetics, tampons and pads. These posts are often complemented by powerful graphics produced with their authors' artistic imagination.

Wondering whether Poles are still responding to such calls, I ask Agnieszka why she does that. "Of course we can see that private persons help us less now than

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they did in the beginning of the war. We also know that their resources have dried up, but at the same time our needs have not declined. Now, with the new refugee wave they have actually increased."

I ask Agnieszka if there is a new refugee wave, having in mind the words of a Polish minister who not that long ago stated that the increased movement and longer lines at the Polish-Ukrainian border were the result of holiday traffic. Yet Agnieszka confirms that she has been seeing a larger number of refugees since at least October, that is from the moment when Russia started its massive attacks on critical civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. In her view, the number of people who have come to Poland is large, even if they are not as visible as before.

> The determination in Poland to provide help has diminished, despite the ongoing difficulties in Ukraine.

Indeed, a visit to the train station, which back in June 2022 was still full of refugees and volunteers, does not show any great sign of a new wave. "Of course we saw the biggest number of refugees right after the invasion," Agnieszka explains. "Then we also adequately responded to their needs. Now, many people are joining their families or friends who have already settled down here in Poland. Only very few seek accommodation in public shelters."

Housing woes

Housing is certainly the greatest challenge that Ukrainian refugees face in Poland. In large cities rental costs are a nightmare for a majority of tenants. The market is highly competitive and the demand exceeds the number of places offered. Government housing programmes are few and far between and have generated frustration, especially among young people. This issue is also felt by the people and institutions who hosted the refugees. The modest sum of 40 zlotys (nine euros) they received for each refugee for each day was granted only to the hosts and for a limited time. Once it had passed, many refugees lost their place to live and had to find a place in an increasingly more brutal rental market.

That is why even though – as the data presented by the earlier quote suggests – between 60 and 70 per cent of Ukrainian refugees already work in Poland, they do not stop accepting material help from places such as Łagiewnicka.

"I often see Facebook posts written by Ukrainian refugees who are looking for a new place to live, because they had to vacate the place where they had lived after the time of state help had expired," Agnieszka says. "After speaking with those who come here, I have learnt that even if someone has a job and income, after paying

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rent and utilities they do not have much left to live on. Remember that in these refugee families there are many dependents: children, elderly parents, or disabled family members. Our speedy inflation does not allow them to make ends meet. That is why they will keep coming here."

At the end of our meeting, I asked what is the future of such places and initiatives as "Łagiewnicka" and "Soup for Ukraine". Agnieszka gives me a simple but straightforward answer: "The easy times are behind us, but we are not giving up." That is why projects like the one she coordinates are looking for help also outside Poland and increasingly more often reaching out to European partners. Seemingly, their resources are still larger and it is in them that the Polish volunteers now put a lot of hope. NEE

Iwona Reichardt is the deputy editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe* and an assistant professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

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Russian infrastructure attacks aim to create humanitarian crisis

MACIEJ ZANIEWICZ

Since October 2022, Russia has been carrying out massive missile strikes on civilian infrastructure in order to force a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Temporary breaks in the electricity supply have become an everyday reality. Yet, a lengthy blackout poses a threat to the lives of millions of people and needs to be counteracted at all costs. Ukrainians continue to adapt to these difficult circumstances.

"When will the next power outage be and for how long will it last? This is something you never know. But this thought accompanies you especially when you are taking a lift to the 13th floor of the building." Nadiya returned to Kyiv in October. Before, just like almost eight million Ukrainians, she found refuge abroad – in Poland and the United Kingdom. However, for her Ukraine is home and it is here that she sees her future. Even despite the fact that since October 2022 Russia has systematically been destroying Ukraine's critical infrastructure.

A thaw

Nadiya was not the only one. The largest number of Ukrainian refugees arrived at the EU's borders in the first weeks after the start of the Russian full-scale invasion last February. However, once it became clear that Kyiv had been defended and

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the situation at the frontline was somewhat stabilised, many Ukrainians started to return home. This could be seen at the Polish-Ukrainian border, where for many months the traffic going into Ukraine was greater than that coming out.

In the energy sector we also noted some moderate optimism in summer 2022 after the worrisome developments in March and April, when discussion about Ukrainian energy was largely focused on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and the risk of a nuclear explosion. On March 4th 2022 the Russians attacked the premises of the plant, in violation of the Geneva Convention, which they later occupied and used as a military base, keeping the workers inside hostage. The greatest risk at that moment was not the destruction of the reactor, which is protected by a thick concrete protection layer, but a possible error made by the terrorised and tired crew members.

Russia's goal was to disconnect the power station from the network and deprive Ukraine of the electricity it needs to maintain its economy. Before the war the Zaporizhzhia plant was providing over one-fifth of the electricity consumed in Ukraine. The Russian invasion, however, led also to a rapid collapse in electricity demand in Ukraine, which since the start of the invasion has declined by 30 per cent. As a result, even without the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, and the other plants which are in the occupied territories, Ukraine still had a large electricity surplus, which could even be exported abroad. And this was a source of optimism.

At the same time, the Russian invasion has accelerated many processes in the energy sector which either were pushed aside or faced procedural obstacles for too long. Already in March – three weeks after the invasion – the Ukrainian electricity system was synchronised with the European synchronous area. This symbolically marked the end of Ukraine's energy dependence on Russia. The synchronisation will foster the long-term stability of the Ukrainian energy system, but can also facilitate the export of electricity to the European Union. Already in the summer of 2022 electricity exports reached the levels seen before the start of the war, which allowed Ukraine to make 55 million euros in just two months. Electricity, in fact, has become one of Ukraine's key export products.

> The Russian invasion led to a collapse in electricity demand in Ukraine, which has declined by 30 per cent in the last year.

Another project that progressed after March was the rebuilding of the electricity line between Khmelnytskyi and Rzeszów (in Poland), with the aim to double Ukraine's electricity exports. For years this project faced difficulties in Poland where politicians did not support it. The full-scale invasion along with the energy crisis facing Europe completely reversed the situation. Citizens in the EU need as much cheap electricity as possible; and Ukrainian energy is much cheaper than

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what is generated in the EU. Thus, modernisation works were started quickly. Their completion was envisioned for December 2022.

Energy terrorism

Russia did not, however, have stabilisation on the military front and in the energy sector in mind following the summer. Starting on October 10th the Russian military command in Ukraine was taken over by General Sergey Surovikin. With this change in leadership Russia altered its military strategy and began to systematically destroy critical civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, using missiles and Iranian kamikaze drones. Attacks were organised in waves. From October through to the beginning of 2023 there were as many as ten such attacks. On average, the Russians would launch between a dozen to over a hundred missiles and drones that were sent to destroy different targets in Ukraine. They were never fully successful, as Ukrainian air defence forces managed to destroy up to three-quarters of the incoming projectiles. However, those that did hit their targets managed to cause enough damage to massively interrupt Ukrainian infrastructure, in particular electricity.

The Russian tactic is well thought out. The targets of the attacks are electrical substations and then – after that –power plants. "To destroy a power plant, you need several accurately fired missiles to reach the target. Substations are much easier targets," explains Antonina Antosha from the Ukrainian energy company DTEK. "Russian power engineers used to obtain their knowledge in Ukraine over the Soviet times and are now consulting with the Russian military on how to cause the most damage to Ukraine's power system," she adds.

A power plant is also a key element of industrial infrastructure. We can compare it to intersections and junctions in a road network. High-voltage lines can be compared to highways which are used to send electricity to distant locations. Medium-voltage lines, in turn, are like regional roads. For electricity to reach them, they need to have their voltage lowered. And it is these junctions that the Russians have been targeting. As a result, electricity cannot reach recipients, even if the power plants are working and there is a possibility to import energy from abroad.

The scale of destruction is almost unimaginable. And yet already now attempts are made to assess the losses. DTEK, which is the largest energy company in Ukraine, and which even before the invasion had lost two out of its eight energy plants, estimates that its losses are in the hundreds of millions of US dollars. The Kyiv School of Economics has determined that the overall losses of the whole energy sector are around 9.1 billion dollars.

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At the moment there is not a single coal or gas (or even hydro) power plant in Ukraine which is not at least partially damaged. The same fate is shared by almost half of the combined heat and power plants. Only the renewable energy power plants did surprisingly well. While 25 per cent of their potential is now lost under occupation, only six per cent of them were destroyed or damaged. It was the dispersed arrangement of the wind energy plants that prevented them from being targets of attacks. However, many of them are located in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

In addition, nuclear power plants were rarely targets for the missile attacks. The occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant was shelled, but these attacks were aimed at administrative buildings and those that are located outside the plant complex. The Pivdennoukrainska nuclear power plant was attacked once but also here there was no damage done to the reactor. The spectre of nuclear radiation seems to be a deterrent even to Russia.

Systemic attacks

The electrical substations are in the worst situation. Over half that were under Ukrainian control until February 24th are either damaged or destroyed, while 15 per cent are occupied. After each attack, immediate repairs are undertaken by rescue and maintenance teams, which is not an easy task. In fact, one substation can be bombed even a few times. That is why Russia uses its spies to learn about the reconstruction progress. Once a substation is back online and operating again, it is put back on the list for Russian missiles. This race is very costly, not only for Ukraine. The missiles that are used can cost Russia millions of dollars each.

Russia's goal is to bring about a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine at all costs. Its systemic attacks on infrastructure cause breakages in supply – the so-called blackouts. An attack on a few key substations at the same time forces the system operator to cut large parts of the country – maybe even the majority of it – off from electricity, in order to save sensitive equipment. Until at least parts of the substation have been fixed, the power supply needs to be based on a schedule of temporary blackouts. Each subsequent attack makes it more and more difficult to maintain the schedule and blackouts are increasingly more difficult to plan.

"We are usually without electricity for half a day, or even two days or more," says Nadiya. "The first weeks were the worst. We had to sit in dark and cold rooms not knowing what was going on and with no contact with the outside world."

The lack of electricity does not only mean a lack of light. Sometimes it also means no access to cell phone networks or the internet. What is worse, there is no

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tap water since water infrastructure also needs electricity to run the pumps. There is no heating, because without electricity heating cannot be transmitted to households and institutions.

"There were nights were the temperature in our flat was as low as 12 degrees Celsius," Nadiya adds. "We then slept in three layers of clothes, all bundled up."

These experiences show how adaptive the Ukrainians are. In Kyiv, for example, the buzzing of power generators is everywhere, and these provide electricity to cafés and shops. Childcare facilities are also open, even if it means that teachers and kids need to wear headlights. People started to massively purchase mobile batteries. You can use them even to power such appliances as electric kettles. This is what Nadiya was using when she wanted to wash herself during longer blackouts.

Sisyphean labour

Temporary breaks in electricity supply have become an everyday reality in Ukraine. However, a lengthy blackout poses a threat to the lives of millions of people and needs to be counteracted at all costs. That is the responsibility of Ukrenergo, the operator of the transmission system in Ukraine. Ukrenergo is also in charge of the rebuilding of the destroyed electric power stations. Rescue teams enter these premises only after the fire is put out and military forces clear them. Ensuring security for the rescue team is a must. They are some of the silent heroes of this war. In peacetime it would be hard to imagine that somebody would attempt to fix power grids during rain or in icy conditions. Now there is no choice. The only thing that stops them from doing their job is a rocket alarm.

Temporary breaks in electricity supply have become an everyday reality in Ukraine.

The problem, however, is not the people, but the lack of equipment. All states gather resources for emergency situations. However, there is no state in the world that would have on hand the mass amount of transformers and other equipment needed to constantly repair a whole electricity system. The equipment is also not commonly stored in warehouses but produced on demand. And the time between issuing a demand and receiving a transformer can take a whole year. In Ukraine this equipment is needed now.

In response the free world has come to Ukraine's aid. Since March the European Energy Community has been running a programme of coordination for Ukraine. A special Ukraine Energy Support Fund matches financial resources obtained from donors with needs on the ground. The supply of equipment and gas is in turn co-

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ordinated by the Ukraine Support Task Force. This formalised structure allows for the maximum effectiveness of the help offered.

Antosha from DTEK states that while Poland is without a doubt the most active, assistance comes also from other states – including France, Germany and the UK. The Japanese company Hitachi, for example, declared that the production of transformers for Ukraine is its priority. Its Polish and Ukrainian branches, in cooperation with DTEK, have already provided Ukraine with 52 transformers. However, finding the right equipment remains a huge challenge. According to Yevheniia Nimak from the Ukrainian energy ministry, the greatest problem is that of the compatibility of equipment. There are often situations when the material assistance that is offered cannot be used in Ukraine and what is most needed is unavailable. Ukrainians try to address this challenge as well. "The war has unleashed our creativity. Our engineers are now working on how to make these other transformers work in the Ukrainian system," Antosha concludes.

Build back better

Without a doubt the destroyed infrastructure is a huge tragedy and millions of Ukrainians live now without electricity. The number of victims remains on the rise. Effective missile defence systems are a top priority and are necessary for Ukraine to protect itself from further attacks and repair the damaged equipment.

At the same time, we can say that now is also the moment to rebuild the Ukrainian energy system. Considering the long-term perspective, it is clear that it cannot be patched and just brought back to the state it was in before the war. In this regard, there is a wide consensus – private and state-owned energy companies, the government and independent think tanks are all of the opinion that the post-war Ukrainian energy system should be green and modern.

The Ukrainian think tank DiXi Group in its report "How to rebuild a 'green' country: recommendations for Ukraine's recovery", points to two key "wings" of the reconstruction. The objects whose functions are necessary for people's lives, which include dams, should be rebuilt as quickly as possible but with respect to due diligence and security standards. Meanwhile, objects such as new factories will have to be built in an energy efficient way and in accordance with EU environmental standards. The same can be said about the energy sector. According to the DiXi Group, new investments should be directed, first and foremost, towards renewable and decentralised energy sources.

Antosha of DTEK has the same opinion: "After the 1666 London fire people first started to rebuild the city on their own, just like it had been before, which meant

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a risk of another large fire. And this is what we want to avoid. We want the new energy sector to be green." To achieve that Ukraine will need foreign investments. Without them, it is not able to independently start the reconstruction of the sector even now. However, for business to invest in a war-torn country there need to be guarantees for investors. One of the solutions could be to use the confiscated property of Russian firms and individuals who are now under sanctions. However, this is a difficult process and there are no agreements on how to do this, just yet.

In Nadiya's view Russia has been bombing the Ukrainian energy system to scare and break the population. Even though each series of attacks makes things worse, the Russian plan has not borne much fruit. Ukrainians are still returning home, instead of fleeing. They also try to adjust their lives to the new reality. They buy power generators and batteries. They have created co-working hubs where they can work remotely even when there is no electricity. They buy wood-burning furnaces. They also warm themselves in the so-called "points of invincibility" set up by the authorities. With each attack, however, the Ukrainians get angrier and angrier at Russia and its cruelty. At the same time, they remain full of hope that the war will end and their country will become a better place to live than it was before the war.

Maciej Zaniewicz is an international cooperation programme manager focusing on Ukraine at Forum Energii – an independent Polish think tank focused on energy policy and issues.

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Tackling the climate crisis in a time of war

ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

The Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group came together in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The group brings together experts and journalists from around the world focused on the situation in the region. Their goals are to raise awareness about the war's environmental damage, lay the groundwork for a sustainable reconstruction of war-torn Ukraine, and prevent the war from being used as an excuse to put climate issues on the back-burner.

On a wintry Thursday in Berlin, journalist Angelina Davydova is in her home in an online meeting with a group of environmental advocates from three continents. They have organised a unique kind of editorial board meeting. Separated by oceans and time zones stretching sixteen hours, pulled away from their personal and work lives by the war and, often, amidst blackouts and air raids, the group has come together to brainstorm the next "issue" of their Ukraine War Environmental Consequences (UWEC) Work Group. The group, created eight months ago in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine for a readership around the globe, documents, monitors and analyses the war's environmental repercussions and points the way towards potential solutions.

How the Ukraine war was talked about at the recent United Nations climate summit in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt (COP 27) is one of the overriding themes for the coming issue that November. Other key questions include "Should Ukraine build a Danube Canal?", "What is the war's invisible impact on Ukraine's forests?" and "What is the state of Russia's environmental civil action today?" Ideas for stories, profiles,

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new investigations and interviews swirl. So do suggestions about fundraising and updating the website. Loose and open-ended, the agenda evolves with the input of the contributors. There is no cosy editorial office for the group, which sees itself as part analytical think tank, part rigorous journalistic project. Rather, members meet on Zoom while chatting on Telegram, the online platform most resistant to power outages. Wildlife biologist Oleksii Vasyliuk has found time to participate during the couple hours of power he gets every day from Vasylkiv, a provincial town near Kyiv. Eugene Simonov, a river conservation specialist originally from Russia, has joined in from Canberra, Australia, where he lives in self-imposed exile now after the Kremlin labelled him a "foreign agent" 15 years ago. Other UWEC members – activists and scientists, researchers, journalists and translators – have joined in from Lithuania, Georgia and the United States.

Keeping climate in the debate

"We all work with very sad topics, but doing what we do is very important," Davydova says. A St Petersburg environmental journalist and expert who, in the years leading up to the war, had worked toward raising awareness about the importance of climate change in Russia, Davydova has been rebuilding her life in Germany since fleeing her country in March. "We all work on the same projects, and we communicate, and for me it is very important."

While there are other non-profit groups that monitor the environmental impact of military conflicts, including the Conflict and Environment Observatory in Britain or Pax for Peace in the Netherlands, "our project isn't only analytical, it is media," Davydova tells me. The stories are all published in Russian, Ukrainian and English but beyond the language issue, the group aims to reach citizens around the globe. "It is important to collect, verify, monitor, analyse and write about it in a way that people can understand," says the 44-year-old journalist.

> If the tragic human toll of the war is not glaring enough, its environmental impact is also substantial, but less covered.

With the work group, Davydova embodies a little-talked about, invisible effort to fight the insidious toll of the Ukraine war. Both online and global, it is led collectively by a loose partnership of like-minded environmental advocates. Its goals are to raise awareness about the war's environmental damage, lay the groundwork for a sustainable reconstruction of war-torn Ukraine, and prevent the war from being used as an excuse to put climate issues on the back-burner in and beyond Ukraine.

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The stakes are high. If the tragic human toll of the war is not glaring enough, its environmental impact is also substantial but less covered. It is profound and far-reaching, in fact it "is likely to be the most lasting impact of the war, because contaminated soils, deteriorated health conditions of populations exposed to various kinds of military pollution, exterminated forests and so on," says Eugene Simonov, a 35-year veteran environmental scientist who coordinates the Rivers Without Boundaries project. "And all those immediate impacts are likely to last for long and, to a great extent, define the conditions in which people in the zone of conflict will still survive for decades to come."

The war's direct environmental legacy is obvious. Bombings and rockets are destroying wetlands and forests, transforming vast swathes of protected nature into mass graves and spilling toxic material into rivers. Its is less visible how the war has disrupted international, including scientific, cooperation on climate change and the environment, weakened oversight and led governments, not only in Russia, to roll back key decarbonisation steps they had painstakingly taken over the past few years. And the aftermath is likely to linger long after the bombings have stopped, Simonov stresses.

Turning the tide of environmental disaster from exile

The Ukraine War Environmental Consequences (UWEC) Work Group is an attempt to turn the tide, fending off the barrage of propaganda and misinformation that has filled the airwaves. The concept was born in May, weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine when alarmed scientists and experts started documenting what they saw, often remotely, from Ukraine to Lithuania, the United States to Australia. Belarusian journalist and environmental activist Aleksei Ovchinnikov for example, issued "environmental war digests" on his Belarus Green Portal. He had fled to Ukraine in 2021 because of the oppression and imprisonment his environmental activism had led to in Belarus but was in Georgia on February 24th and remains there today.

Oleksii Vasyliuk from Vasylkiv in Ukraine had published a myriad of war-related analyses on the website of the Ukrainian Nature Conservation Board, which he co-founded. In Australia, river scientist Simonov connected with Jennifer Castner, an American environmental and human right activist long involved with Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Ukraine with whom he had cooperated on common projects whose command of the Russian language would prove invaluable. "Now that it is no longer safe or ethically and logistically possible for non-Russians to participate in meaningful advocacy work in Russia, I was excited to join Ukrainian,

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Belarusian and Russian environmentalists and journalists in creating the UWEC Work Group," says Castner, director of the Altai Project, which aims at protecting wildlife and indigenous peoples in Siberia and the Far East.

As for Davydova in St Petersburg, she soon saw that her hands would be tied if she stayed: protesters against the Kremlin's "special operation" were reprimanded and civil society groups, including those with an environmental agenda like "Friends of the Baltics", were named "foreign agents".

In the pre-war days UWEC members had operated in the same environmental circles in Russia and other countries. Most knew and trusted each other. If the war tore them from their daily tasks, now it was uniting them around a common determination to join forces and spread the word collectively on the war's environmental consequences outside Ukraine. "In Ukraine, this was obvious, but I wanted people in other countries to know about it," says wildlife biologist Vasyliuk, who says that so far, some nine Ukrainians have contributed to the UWEC effort in one way or the other. Davydova, an internationally respected figure who is both a professional journalist and climate change expert, brings to the group "very high standards of fairness and reliability", Vasyliuk admits. "Thanks to her, our team has a reason to consider itself 'media' and not only a group of experts." Presenting verified information, although very challenging in a war, is a crucial part of the UWEC mission. Vasyliuk says the group strives to "reduce fake news about the consequences of the war – unfortunately, there is a lot of it."

Eugene Simonov, speaking from Australia, concurs that "it's important to keep the problem visible (the war's impact on the environment), rely on more or less proven facts, and make society aware of the choices it faces. There is also a lot of less reliable information around so we have to figure out what is more reliable as experts." The hurdles are huge, and they include life-and-death issues and the effort to get as much information as possible without endangering Russian scientists. Simonov's status as a so-called foreign agent "makes it toxic for many actors to deal with me," he says. "They have to report that they are dealing with foreign agents and who knows what happens after." He adds that "we are trying not to expose our Russian colleagues who are in Russia and are helping us."

A story of resilience and defiance

In many ways, Davydova's link to the UWEC Group is a natural continuation of her global life journey, at the crossroads of journalism, civil society advocacy and science. She grew up amidst the upheavals of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with her mind turned towards discovering the world. As a child, she would spend

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Photo courtesy of Angelina Davydova

Journalist and activist Angelina Davydova decided that fleeing Russia was her only option to continue her work. The rockets raining down on Ukrainians were also shattering her work, her life. "All I had been working on for many years – building informal contacts between scientists and western colleagues, and pushing for an environmental agenda in Russia – now, all of a sudden, a lot of it was irrelevant," she says.

hours peering at world maps she had plastered on the walls of her parent's dacha southeast of St Petersburg.

"I imagined I would travel there one day," she says. The reality of environmental disasters dawned upon her early. In the summer after Chernobyl in 1986, when a medical condition led her to the Leningrad Regional Children's Clinical Hospital, she heard about the children coming from the disaster zone to be treated in her hospital in the aftermath of the nuclear catastrophe. "We all knew about it."

If in preschool she had to learn Lenin's biography by heart, her primary school brought a different experience. On the first day of fourth grade she was greeted with a large banner with the words "*Perestroika* = *Glasnost* + *Democracy*" hanging outside the school. Later, various Soviet-era youth movements that had structured the lives of so many Russian youths disintegrated into nothing overnight. And the transition had been brutal. Many young people fell into material consumption and chaos. Then in 1998, she took part in an international youth exchange programme in Thuringia which opened new perspectives for her. Later, she studied economics in St Petersburg before learning journalism in the field, by attending trainee programmes in different countries, including at Deutsche Welle in Germany.

After completing a journalism fellowship at the Oxford-based Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2006, Davydova joined the German Russian Exchange, an international non-profit created in the 1990s to promote democracy

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and peaceful cooperation between Germany, Ukraine, Belarus and other Eastern Partnership countries.

The arts are what got her hooked on the environmental cause. In 2008 she was asked to lead a unique international arts event in St Petersburg: "The Moving Baltic Sea Festival". For six weeks, a ship sailed along the Baltic coast, from Greifswald to St Petersburg. Whenever it dropped anchor, in Gdańsk, Kaliningrad, Riga or Narva-Joesuu, residents were invited to events connecting ecology and culture, from discussions to films and photo exhibits. Davydova believes in the power of culture in raising interest in climate issues. Before the war broke out, she remained active in projects weaving together the arts and environmental causes. She spoke at Eco Cup, a festival which, before the war, brought international environmental films to Russia and served as an environmental expert to help launch Russia's first festival of environmental theatre.

From being a journalist, she took the next step, becoming a voice in efforts to bring climate change issues into the national dialogue in Russia. In 2008 she attended the UN climate summit for the first time and has been attending ever since, as an observer. Climate change "was a new topic in Russia", she said. Huge forest fires ravaging southern Siberia made it clear that things needed to change. The Kremlin took initial steps, even adopting climate change legislation. Eventually Russia joined the Paris Agreement in 2019. It was hugely important, Davydova says. "Whatever happens in Russia environment-wise has global implications. What Russia does or does not do matters for the rest of us."

In Russia, Davydova "played an absolutely crucial role in the Russian and wider European environmental community, in trying to link various Russian stakeholders to ongoing climate policies and processes, and trying to talk with various forces in Russia and outside to develop some kind of momentum for climate solutions," Simonov says. He has known Davydova for years. "She was good at developing some common ground and making people talk to each other and helping them exchange information."

Angelina Davydova believes in the power of culture in raising interest in issues related to the climate crisis.

On the international scene Davydova is known as "the first influential climate journalist in Russia who raised awareness about the theme for the public", says Alexander Vorbrugg, a senior researcher at the University of Bern (Switzerland) Institute of Geography who specialises in Eastern European countries. "She covers quite some ground."

In September Vorbrugg partnered with Davydova to organise a workshop called "Political Ecology and the new political environments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: A collective search for strategies." It was an attempt to give a platform

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to specialised scientists from around the world with an interest in environmental issues from the region – including to some Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian scientists forced into political exile and war refugees – to find ways to continue working together.

"Did we do enough?"

It did not take long for Davydova to see fleeing Russia as her only option. The rockets raining down on the Ukrainians were also shattering her work, her life. "All I had been working on for many years – building informal contacts between scientists and western colleagues, and pushing for an environmental agenda in Russia – now, all of a sudden, a lot of it was irrelevant," she admits. "I felt sad, a bit lost."

She fled, catching a direct flight to Istanbul. From there, watching the news on the television, she discovered the human dimension of the war – the bombings. She stayed two and a half weeks at a friend's house to "catch my breath and plan further". Berlin, where she knew people and the language was a logical destination. Yet rebuilding her life there has been a rough journey, she says.

When she left St Petersburg, she also left behind the knowledge that what she was doing "made a lot of sense, had an impact" and that she had witnessed the birth of "exciting, brave" independent media initiatives. Now she would have to start all over again. She battled anxiety by diving into work and travelling around the world. As a fellow with the NGO Media in Cooperation and Transition until December 2022, and as a climate projects coordinator with n-ost, a cross-border journalistic network, she trained climate journalists, collaborated on pan-European projects, and worked on multi-disciplinary projects related to climate change, such as "Climate Caravans". She has given lectures on Russian civil society and climate change at Indiana University Bloomington (US), for example, and has written for think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She also continues to jointly run the "Eurasia Climate Brief", a podcast that gives a voice to environmental experts from the Eurasia region.

> It did not take long for Davydova to see that fleeing Russia was her only option.

Wherever she went – Georgia, Turkey, France, Lithuania, Kazakhstan – she stumbled upon old acquaintances from home who, like her, had escaped the war. "That's when I realised that my previous life is gone," she says. "I had the feeling that my whole circle of contacts was crumbling." Compounding the feeling of uprootedness was the passing of old friends from the St Petersburg she knew. "I began

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asking myself: where am I, what makes the basis of my life? What makes sense for me to do, how can I help other people?"

Then a question began to haunt her. "Have we done enough? Did we do the right things if we couldn't prevent things from happening," she says, referring to Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.

A sense of purpose and belonging

Angelina Davydova says that she feels calmer and more grounded today in large part due to the Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group. "When I speak about what I am doing, I put this group in a special place," she says. "We are doing something unique. It is not just documenting, monitoring, and archiving the impact of war. We are a group where people from Ukraine and those originally from Belarus and Russia are still talking to each other."

From Australia to Berlin, Georgia to Ukraine, the UWEC global partnership testifies to something big: the ability of human beings from belligerent countries to unite around the common good. The war has wreaked havoc on the lives and work of many environmental advocates, forcing them to "start changing what we are doing and who we could reach," says Simonov. The UWEC is their way to fight the war the best way they can.

"But there are high risks associated with dealing with us if you are in Russia because we call the war "a war" and are telling more or less objective stories of its impact, and pointing fingers at those who cause the impacts whenever necessary."

From Canberra, Simonov says that while "we are all in flux, we are at war," the work group has become "part of my identity. I believe that this is one of the places where I am most needed." He says his connection with the group is a way to "internalise" this war. "Some people hide from it in drinking, some engage in actual support of the war such as mutual killing, some burn their passports in front of embassies. I am an environmental activist and researcher, and UWEC is my attempt to apply my competences to help address and confront the war's impacts. So while the war is on and its impacts are acute, this is my station of duty."

In the first days of the war, Vasyliuk's home, the Ukrainian town of Vasylkiv near Kyiv, played a decisive role in the war: outgunned residents fought off Russian troops, preventing them from capturing the town's military airbase, thus keeping the Ukrainian capital safe. Many of those who died in combat were ordinary citizens, not professional soldiers. Vasyliuk says that although most Ukrainians "now categorically have cut all ties with Russia," the bonds with the Russian members of the work group, most of whom now live outside of Russia, are strong. "I feel sad

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that Putin has created conditions in which they not only became exiles but also have to fight against their own country for justice and dignity."

Tuning into UWEC's weekly editorial meetings has been a herculean task for Vasyliuk. Air-raid sirens sound practically every day. Russian rockets have often rained down on his city. He remembers the time when massive airstrikes plunged his city into darkness, forcing him to interrupt the meeting.

"When the rockets are flying, the power plants in Ukraine are turned off to reduce possible damage, so there can be spontaneous power cuts." Juggling his work and environmental activism with daily television appearances and only a couple hours of electricity each day, is extremely stressful, he admits. But he says he can remember only two times in more than six months when he could not connect with the weekly work group meetings. The group is important to him, he says. "This is a team of professionals who are well versed in what they talk about, and it is a team of very sincere, positive people. I hope that I can shake hands with my colleagues one day."

Isabelle de Pommereau is a journalist and reporter. Originally from France, she is based in Frankfurt and works as a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Deutsche Welle* and *Alternatives Economiques.*

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A nuclear crisis or nuclear discourse?

KINGA ANNA GAJDA

A nuclear threat which induces the fear of even a possible attack can serve as the perfect bogeyman. Vladimir Putin knows this all too well. Thus, he uses it to generate hysteria among western societies. As of now, he is at least partially successful.

In the 1970s the Albanian communist regime started to massively construct anti-nuclear bomb shelters all around the country. In total, some 175,000 bunkers were built. Many were located on mountain slopes, others as concrete-covered underground passages. Their purpose was to protect Albania's communist leaders, Enver Hoxha and Mehmet Shehu, from the consequences of a nuclear attack. History shows, nonetheless, that none of them were ever used for their intended purpose, while half of them were not even used for drills.

Element of discourse

Today one of those bunkers in Tirana hosts a cultural institution called Bunk'art. The museum offers visitors an opportunity to both expand their knowledge of Albania's history and experience art. In its exhibition one can find, among other things, an installation by Ledia Konstandini, a Tirana-based artist. In it, Konstandini explores the topic of Albania's social transformation and especially its inherited or lost culture. While analysing these issues she focuses on the fear that accompanied or continues to accompany them. Her works trace the remains of fear in

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Albanian architecture and urban spaces, including in the Bunk'art 2 space, which she uses as the theme for her work called "Incube". The name suggests an artistic intervention – literally, to incubate. In other words, to grow small organisms or to allow germs to enter an organism and grow there until a sickness develops. Driven by this etymological inspiration, Konstandini analyses the moment when fear is born. But she also explores the paranoia, imagination and illusions that accompany this strong emotion.

Through her work Konstandini shows that the nuclear threat is predominantly an element of discourse. The fear of a radioactive attack or explosion grows, albeit quietly, in societies that are slowly but surely powered by numerous suggestions regarding a potential catastrophe. This fear is then painstakingly cultivated and from time to time comes to the surface in the real world, where it shows its face in the form of different symptoms of illness.

Today these symptoms are quite visible, especially in light of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. We constantly hear talk among politicians or media pundits that points to a real threat of nuclear war, which could be initiated by the Russian Federation if the West goes too far in its support towards Ukraine. At the national level, we can also find elements of the nuclear discourse, especially at times when the topic of nuclear power plants as an alternative to traditional energy sources emerges. In Poland, for example, we have an ongoing discussion about the planned construction of three nuclear plants.

The nuclear discourse also includes analyses regarding the risk of nuclear contamination. This was seen especially during the discussions which took place when Russian troops entered the Red Forest in the Chernobyl area, as well as those surrounding the possibility of the destruction of the Zaporizhzhia power plant, which was widely feared. A similar anxiety was sensed in Germany at the time of the leak at the Isar nuclear plant. All these cases and discussions that emerge show that the nuclear threat is something real and as such experienced by many societies, but also that it can be easily used to stir up fear of mass destruction. Narratives about the end of the world often present a nuclear explosion as the ultimate catastrophe. And since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine the apocalyptic vision of the world's future, fuelled by the fear of a nuclear attack, has become mainstream in mass media discourse.

Essence of humanity

Jacques Derrida famously said that the use of American bombs in 1945 would put an end to "classical" conventional warfare. Yet, in fact since then, for nearly 80

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years, there has not been a nuclear war, or the use of nuclear or atomic weapons during a conflict. Therefore, when the nuclear topic makes front page news, we need to bear in mind that as of now the threat of a nuclear attack remains in the realm of discourse. Indeed, a non-localised nuclear war has been relegated to the power of man's imagination. Others might say its speculation is grounded in real possibility. Even though the threat of nuclear war is used through public discourse as an element generating fear, it can also be effectively applied to blackmail political and strategic opponents.

Yet, we should make no mistake; the nuclear threat cannot be belittled by any means. Even if for the moment it remains only in the sphere of discourse. Nuclear weapons do exist and their power of destruction is widely known. These weapons are on standby. What is more, as Derrida further argues, "the anticipation of nuclear war (dreaded as the fantasy, or phantasm, of a remainderless destruction) installs humanity – and through all sorts of relays even defines the essence of modern humanity – in its rhetorical condition." In other words, Derrida sees a projection of an irreversible apocalypse, which could destroy the whole world and its culture and memory. The nuclear times, as Derrida claims, are times of destruction; the destruction of everything that has existed in our lives. But it is also the time to bring up the topics of threats and uncertainty in public discussions.

Konstandini's incubator is thus a metaphor of the nuclear age, which we unfortunately happen to live in. The awareness of the nuclear threat is in a way what connects us also with the previous century and the apocalyptic vision of the end of the world that had begun back then, and which was first named as the nuclear age. Even though the global apocalypse has not yet taken place, the vision of the end of the world has permanently remained in the back of our minds.

The stories of catastrophes such as Chernobyl, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Three Mile Island or the Trinity Site are examples of how the emission of nuclear radiation can serve as a turning point for global public opinion and its sense of threat and thinking about the future. The Belarusian Nobel Prize writer Svetlana Alexievich argues that just like with everything, human beings can adjust also to the consequences of a nuclear catastrophe, and this process shows certain dynamics as well. Yet, when the threat of such an explosion seems real, as it does right now, it for sure leads to a panic concerning the oncoming end. Traces of the past in the form of radioactive waste, but also various diseases, explain why the current Russian aggression in Ukraine, but also other events, can so quickly and effectively reactivate the vision of a global destruction of mankind and the world as we know it.

Joseph S. Nye argues that the short and long-term consequences of radioactivity can serve as a force which, although disproportional and irrational, can lead to the destruction of the world. That is why, in his view "deterrence" is the main

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strategy of the nuclear race, which uses fear to discourage unfavourable activities and results in the emergence of a system based on extreme carefulness. At times of nuclear threat even the slight thought of a possible attack can serve as the perfect bogeyman. Vladimir Putin knows this all too well. Thus, he uses it to generate hysteria among western societies. As of now, he is at least partially successful. Just think how many discussions there have been about the potential use of a nuclear bomb by Russia and the response that would come from the United States.

Nuclear terrorism

In this way, the nuclear discourse has become a tool in international relations which has been applied in the security strategies of the constantly competing world powers. Its purpose is to cement the position of some states or alliances, which actively participate in what we can call a nuclear game. Nonetheless, when assessing Russia's activities in this realm, we can even use such strong concepts as that of nuclear terrorism. Indeed, this term is most used with regards to the use of a so-called dirty bomb or an attack on a nuclear power plant, which have already been mentioned in Russian rhetoric at the UN level. Not surprisingly, the accusation of playing with such a weapon was directed against the Ukrainian side, however, it is all too clear that Russia uses it as a potential cover-up for its own possible future deeds. For the moment, thankfully, the crime of using a dirty bomb remains in the realm of public discourse and as of now has not been used on Ukraine's territory. However, in some ways it reminds us of the reality from the Cold War period, serving as a lesson from the past, when such threats were used to manipulate public opinion as well as opponents. A dirty bomb is thus both a bogeyman and a tool to completely freeze the activity of the other side. Given the gravity of the possible consequences, talk about the use of such a bomb can indeed paralyse an opponent.

All told, the threat of nuclear war is an effective tool that has dominated international public discourse since February 24th 2022. As such, it plays an essential, but at the same time also paradoxical, role. It is clearly a foreign and defence policy instrument. However, the extent of its effectiveness is decided by public opinion and people's willingness to live in a bunker, where pre-existing nuclear phobias will only grow stronger.

Kinga Anna Gajda is an associate professor at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

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North Macedonia in the crosshairs of Russian propaganda

JOVAN GJORGOVSKI

North Macedonia may not be the first country that comes to mind when discussing Russian propaganda. Despite this, the small Balkan state continues to grapple with consistent efforts by the Kremlin to influence domestic politics. Such campaigns are ultimately designed to challenge the nation's continued desire to further integrate with the West through EU membership.

Supporting democracy does not come cheap, but then again freedom is also costly. In Kherson, Bakhmut and Zaporizhzhia the cost is in human lives. In Europe it is in the ever-rising electricity and utility bills. For North Macedonia, a small country in the middle of the Western Balkans, prices are not the only problem. The youngest member so far of NATO, for the past several months especially, has faced textbook hybrid attacks intended to create fear, panic and distrust in state institutions. Ever since the start of the war in Ukraine and the declared support of the Macedonian leadership for Kyiv, the country found itself on the Kremlin's "naughty" list, deemed by the Russian leadership as unfriendly. This act was unfortunately not considered too serious by the government or the Macedonian population.

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200 bomb threats in three months

It all started with a bomb threat in one high school, something that does not regularly happen in this country. Two days later there were seven bomb threats in several high schools. Emails were sent via Proton Mail (an anonymous email service) and no one claimed responsibility. At the same time, the threats were not taken seriously. Almost everyone, myself included, believed that it was probably the work of a teenager who wanted to get out of some kind of test and was trying to avoid going to school.

Day by day, the threats continued. Schools were evacuated, parents were angry and the capital Skopje was blocked by police.

Day by day, however, the threats continued. Schools were evacuated, parents were angry, the capital Skopje was blocked by police and bomb squads, finding each and every time that the threats were false. Journalists raised the issue of whether it was some kind of a hybrid attack, but even then the politicians did not admit publicly that it was actually Russia that was behind these events. Of course, in the current political situation in North Macedonia, every moment of this saga is used for political gain in one way or another. The most fortunate development is that all of the reported bomb threats have been hoaxes. There were even several arrests by the police. Some of those arrested were pursuing nothing more than publicity stunts, while some were just poor copycats of the real perpetrators.

The situation became more serious when, apart from high schools, bomb threats were made in primary schools and shopping centres. The peak came when in one day there were almost 50 reported bomb threats in schools, shopping centres, a TV station, the foreign ministry and most notably the Skopje international airport, causing the entire capital to grind to a halt. On the same day, a bomb threat was even reported in one of the biggest hotels in Skopje ahead of a public event that was supposed to be attended by the prime minister, Dimitar Kovachevski, and several members of his government. In one of the emails the sender reportedly claimed that there were bombs in 23 locations and that they will continue with the threats every day. The ending of the message was very clear: "We can continue to do this or you can lift the sanctions." This was when some of the politicians and experts went public in recognising the hybrid attack and pointed the finger at Moscow.

The problem for North Macedonia in this regard is that even though the culprit is clear, there is little the country can do to prevent these hybrid attacks. This is largely due to the fact that the state IT and security infrastructure is underdeveloped and the attacks come from a foreign country which is bent on creating chaos, especially in the Western Balkans, which is fertile ground for disruption.

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Russian propaganda in North Macedonia

Why would Russia target North Macedonia, a country of no more than two million people with a small army? The country is a member of NATO, but also one of the main contributors per capita in terms of military hardware and assistance to Ukraine since the start of the war. Almost all of North Macedonia's tanks and some combat vehicles were sent to Ukraine. Reports also indicated that the government sent five planes – which were coincidentally bought from Ukraine in 2001 – back to Kyiv. The assistance was even publically recognised by Mikhail Podolyak, advisor to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who publically thanked North Macedonia for the help in Macedonian.

While this was going on, Russian Telegram channels almost regularly reported videos of destroyed Macedonian tanks and equipment, without any proof that they were in fact Macedonian. Yet, since the main task of Russian propaganda is to sow discord, it set to work. One video in particular apparently showed Macedonian military equipment sent to Ukraine via a train. The video went viral even though it was later disproven and geo-located in Belarus. Yet, videos like this were widespread on social media, encouraging many to ask: why is North Macedonia sending tanks to be destroyed in Ukraine, and getting nothing in return?

This was a difficult question for some to answer, especially considering the amount of fake news being spread since the start of the war. Some politicians in the ruling coalition tried to explain that North Macedonia is a member of NATO and that Ukraine in many ways is similar to us, even though it is not a NATO member, and that their fight is ours as well. And in all honesty we do have a lot of similarities. Both Macedonians and Ukrainians had and still have other nations denying our national identities. Both countries have been part of the communist bloc in the past and now want a clear European perspective. There are historical, linguistic and even religious issues with our neighbours. Ukraine's fight therefore is our fight because the Ukrainian people suffer the same discrimination and denial as we do. And even though this might be a sufficient reason for most Macedonians to condemn Russia and support Ukraine, it somehow was not enough.

> The problem is not just Russian propaganda, but also the incapability of institutions to deal with it.

The problem here is not just Russian propaganda, but also the incapability of institutions to deal with it. Most importantly, the fault here lies with the political parties. The ruling coalition publicly supports Ukraine, but they have larger issues at hand at the moment: rising energy bills and food prices and above all the desire to stay in power. For some political parties, especially the ones in opposition, the

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Photo courtesy of NATO.

Flag raising ceremony to mark the accession of North Macedonia to NATO in 2020. The country is one of the main contributors per capita in terms of military hardware and assistance to Ukraine since the start of the war.

narrative that is most commonly used in private is that North Macedonia is a small country with a lot of problems and Ukraine should not be at the very top of the list of priorities. This is harmful in the sense that it deepens the divide in a country that has rarely been united. To explain this, we need to go back a few years.

Russian manipulation of the dispute with Bulgaria

North Macedonia is a NATO, but not an EU, member, and NATO membership for us came at a price. The country known to all of us as Macedonia got the prefix – North – after the agreement with Greece a few years ago. All public monuments were re-christened, names of public institutions changed and even birth certificates are different now. We as Macedonians even got a new derogatory term – North Macedonians. While all of this was happening, the Russian embassy in North Macedonia kept using the old name and used social media to refer to its "brotherly people" as Macedonians. The entry to NATO was noted by the Kremlin, but not taken too seriously. In the country, Russia was not seen as a potential threat, even though on the eve of the constitutional amendments for the changing

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of the name there were protests in Skopje by two pro-Russian political parties, the leader of one carrying a Russian flag on top of an armoured vehicle. Unfortunately, this was not interpreted as foreign influence or hybrid warfare by the public.

North Macedonia is not yet a member of the European Union and this is where the malign influence has had its peak. It started with a veto from Bulgaria in the Council of the EU to block the start of membership negotiations. The dispute with Bulgaria is deep and goes back to the end of the Second World War, but the veto proved to be the perfect opportunity for Moscow to employ misinformation, disinformation and fake news to sow doubt in the EU and NATO. One funny example involves holidays and national heroes. For instance, the Russian embassy in Skopje would congratulate a Macedonian public holiday, calling it Macedonian on social media, while at the same time the embassy in Sofia would do the same thing, calling it Bulgarian. A cheap trick, easily discoverable, but not for the average person who is fed information primarily from social media and who just wants to believe the lies he or she is being served.

In a recent poll conducted by the International Republican Institute in North Macedonia, support for EU membership has fallen by 11 per cent compared to last year. Serbia is now regarded as the most favourable partner and the EU is second, a drastic change from just two years ago when Brussels was seen as the primary partner. What struck me the most personally was that Nikola Gruevski – the former prime minister who was convicted in North Macedonia for money laundering and escaped to Hungary thanks to Viktor Orbán – is viewed as the most popular politician. This is a person who is on the US blacklist and is still wanted for serious crimes in North Macedonia. The findings from the poll are not only the result of interference from Moscow, but unfortunately also due to the failure of Brussels to help resolve the issue with Bulgaria and fast track the accession negotiations.

Dangerous rhetoric

The dispute with Bulgaria worsened when the Bulgarian president, Rumen Radev, summoned his national security council for consultations regarding the protection of Bulgarians living in North Macedonia. Sound familiar? The divisive discourse between Skopje and Sofia was fuelled by Bulgarian politicians like Radev but also Kostadin Kostadinov, the leader of the far right "Revival" political party and a pro-Russian politician who openly denies the existence of the Macedonian nation and the Macedonian language. His political party won ten per cent of the national vote in the last elections thanks mostly to its pro-Russian, anti-EU and anti-American rhetoric. He and other Bulgarian politicians claim that Macedoni-

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ans are a communist invention created by Lenin and Tito, a claim that is not only offensive, but dangerous in the long run.

On the other hand, in Macedonia there is the political party "Left" led by Dimitar Apasiev, who even publically met with the Russian ambassador in North Macedonia several times, but never with their Ukrainian counterpart. Apasiev openly advocates for the country to withdraw from NATO and join the Chinese "Belt and Road" initiative.

This kind of rhetoric from both sides of the border is being used and amplified by bots on social media to fuel resentment towards the EU and NATO. The narrative they most commonly use in North Macedonia is that Brussels will always protect Bulgaria because it is a member state and that basically everybody around us is against us. All in all, the war in Ukraine is raging in the Balkans as well, only not with Kalashnikovs, but with disinformation on social media, hacker attacks and fake news. Russia's hybrid war against the West has found fertile ground in this region and amongst states which despite having a clear Euro-Atlantic orientation are vulnerable, mostly because they are not in the EU or NATO.

For North Macedonia, the path was clear since independence, the future is in NATO and the EU. The first goal was reached several years ago, the second is still a work in progress, and I believe that after all the sacrifice not even malign influence can prevent that from happening. NEE

Jovan Gjorgovski is a journalist based in North Macedonia
and an editor with the Kanal 5 television station.

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War at the border, protests at home

Pressure mounts on Moldova

WILLIAM FLEESON

The economic and political situation in Moldova, the small country to Ukraine's southwest, remains tenable at best. While the country's President Maia Sandu has shown resolve and used the situation to pursue the European path, not all Moldovans support her politics – especially those directly affected by the economic and energy crisis.

On a bright Sunday afternoon this past October, protesters marched, not for the first time, down the main boulevard in Moldova's capital city, Chișinău. Others milled around on the pavement, holding up picket signs and joining in as the marchers shouted slogans like "Resign!" and "Down with Maia Sandu!", referring to Moldova's president.

Another sign pleaded for help, in a tone that could be taken as ironic or else completely sincere: "God save us from the idiots of the PAS," it read. PAS is the acronym of the Party of Action and Solidarity, Moldova's ruling party.

As dusk settled on the city, the demonstrators released flares of coloured smoke in red, blue and yellow, the colours of the Moldovan flag. What was less clear is whether the smoke signals their patriotism or a more troubling effort to obscure the real elements behind their shows of public dissent. One matter is plain enough: the protesters wanted Sandu out of power. Immediately.

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Heat or eat

Sandu leads Moldova, the poor, ex-Soviet republic of 2.6 million people, at a time when ordinary citizens have ample reason to protest. In February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova's eastern neighbour. Europe has since experienced rapidly rising inflation, sky-high energy prices and a dramatic rise in the overall cost of living. Moldova's own inflation is running at an extreme 31 per cent. The cyclical energy dilemmas well-known to other parts of the developing world – reduced, perhaps to crudeness, by the phrase "heat or eat" – have now come to Moldova, too.

This economic situation is most difficult for Moldovan pensioners, whose meagre income, often set decades ago, falls far short of covering the costs of basic food, medicine and household bills. Moldova's proximity to Ukraine has brought hundreds of thousands of refugees across the border, especially from hard-hit regions in Ukraine's south and southwest. And the country's working people of all ages fear a cold winter and the price, in cash or in sacrifice, that they must pay to keep warm.

If last year's crisis for Chișinău began as a refugee intake crisis, the problem is evolving into a long-term accommodation crisis. Rent prices are rising for the city's residents, while the state is grappling with serving Ukrainians who want to stay in the country on an indefinite basis. In January the total number of Ukrainian refugees remaining in Moldova surpassed 100,000 – the highest monthly figure since the start of the war, according to data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The number marks a symbolic threshold that will translate into longer and greater difficulties for Moldovan public service providers.

Yet if anyone stands prepared to tackle Moldova's challenges, it is likely Maia Sandu. A well-known figure in Moldovan politics for years, she is an elite even among other elites, with a fearsome professional record that belies her 50 years of age. She has a master's degree from Harvard University. She worked as a World Bank economist during various periods from the 1990s to the 2010s, spending two years at the bank's headquarters in Washington DC. In 2012, Sandu became Moldova's education minister. She formed and led the PAS from 2016, running for, and losing, the presidential election that year. She served as a member of parliament and as Moldova's prime minister in 2019.

In 2020 Sandu ran for and won the presidency, with a decisive 58 per cent of the national vote. Her platform centred on reform, anti-corruption and the long-term ambition of joining the European Union (EU). For the past two years she has sought to make good on her presidential agenda. Sandu's profile has caused controversy among the electorate, before and since becoming president – and Moldova's first female head of state. Sandu's formidable political career, western ed-

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ucation and work experience, and stated goals for reform have rattled parts of a Moldovan populace that have sought refuge in the ideas of conservatism and stability. Especially for older Moldovans, reform attempts recall the painful changes and volatility that the country endured after declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Distrust and resentment

Thus the war has imposed new stress on different Moldovan generations. Further tension derives from Moldova's official position of neutrality – as enshrined in the country's constitution – amid a persistent regional conflagration. A small but disquieting example of this tension came in October, when Russian rockets, launched from the Black Sea and bound for Ukraine, violated Moldovan airspace. Later the same month, debris from a Russian rocket, shot down by Ukrainian air defence, landed in Moldovan territory, without causing any harm.

> Tension derives from Moldova's official position of neutrality amid a persistent regional conflagration.

Other challenges to Moldovan neutrality, and to Sandu's leadership, are much longer-standing. For three decades Russia has maintained about 1,500 soldiers in Transnistria, the sliver of a breakaway republic between Moldova's eastern border and southwestern Ukraine along the Dniester River. Russia's intentions regarding its Transnistrian forces, and the durability of Moldova's neutrality, could provide signals as to the war's progression as the conflict grinds toward the one-year mark.

For Sandu, her myriad successes, and her patent ambition, would characterise to the average Moldovan a president who represents everything they are not. This divide between elites and the population breeds distrust and resentment, two all-too-common traits of political life in former Soviet countries.

Whose protest is it, anyway?

Back on Chișinău's streets, most of the protesters were older, at or near retirement age. But working adults of all ages were present at the gatherings. The series of demonstrations persisted for months during autumn 2022, when fair weather and rising discontent brought thousands to the capital to make their voices heard. The protests continued, at varying sizes and intensity, through to the end of the year.

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The anti-Sandu demonstrations are led by Ilan Shor, a controversial Moldovan politician-in-exile. Last autumn Shor's political outfit, called the Shor Party, set up a tent city of protesters in the capital's downtown. Some of these protesters have been paid, in certain cases repeatedly, to be there, as confirmed by a broad group of Moldovan and international media investigations. This fact of paid protests calls into question whether those protesting mean what they say, or whether they are in it for easy money; or both.

Ilan Shor's controversial status stems from his participation in a 2014 scheme involving a massive bank fraud of one billion US dollars.

Nevertheless, Shor's controversial status stems from his participation in a 2014 scheme involving massive bank fraud that extracted nearly one billion US dollars in Moldovan public funds from the country. Dubbed at the time "the theft of the century" by Moldovan and international media, the sum equalled about 11 per cent of Moldova's GDP. In 2017 Shor was convicted in absentia of fraud by a Moldovan court. He now lives in Israel, where he was born and holds citizenship. Israel and Moldova do not share an extradition treaty, making it impossible for Moldova to arrange Shor's return (and, presumably) imprisonment in the country.

Shor's connections with Russian state agents are also well-known. In October, Shor was put under sanctions by the US Treasury Department, alongside more than 20 other individuals and entities active in Moldova. A press statement from the US agency was blunt, describing the sanctions as a response to "the Kremlin's malign influence operations in Moldova". The Shor Party did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

Not all favour the EU path

For now, however, Shor continues his political activities from outside Moldova. He is using public money against the public interest, while sowing discontent among ordinary Moldovans and threatening the stability of Sandu's democratically-elected government.

Shor and his party see in the war an opportunity to shake things up in their favour, gaining political sway in the process. Sandu's government, in contrast, has acted forcefully to advance the country in a European direction, making good on her 2020 campaign promise. She has condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine and called for the restoration of peace.

Though Moldova may be neutral in a military sense, Sandu's administration has aggressively pursued a European course. In early March, just days after the start

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On the streets of Chișinău, Moldova's capital, protesters gathered to voice their dissent with the government. Most were older, at or near retirement age. But working adults of all ages were present at the gatherings.

Photo: Ion Gnatiuc

The series of demonstrations persisted for months during autumn 2022, when fair weather and rising discontent brought thousands to the capital to make their voices heard.

Photo: Ion Gnatiuc

CHIŞINĂU
BOTANICA

Photo: Ion Gnatiuc

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MOLDOVA

The anti-Sandu demonstrations are led by Ilan Shor, a controversial Moldovan politician-in-exile.

Photo: Ion Gnatiuc

The streets of Moldova remain places to watch. The country stands as a prime example of the Ukraine war's regional fallout and its long-term effects that extend well beyond the zones of conflict.

Photo: Ion Gnatiuc

of Russia's invasion, Moldova's prime minister, Natalia Gavrilița, submitted a request for EU accession. In June, the EU responded by granting Ukraine and Moldova formal candidacy for membership in the bloc. The move represents a decisive victory toward Sandu's campaign promise of moving to European integration.

The voices of Moldovans who do not support integration with Europe, however, were loud and clear on the October afternoon when the photos for this story were taken. Moldovans at the event spoke to their current shared grievances. Their views hinted at the divisions that anti-Sandu elements like the Shor Party hope to further deepen.

"We were in crisis even before the war," said Daria Munteanu, 66, a pensioner from the village of Strășeni, northwest of Chișinău. Munteanu said she receives the equivalent of just 75 US dollars per month, which is not enough for her living expenses. She fears the war in Ukraine may spill over into Moldova.

Munteanu saw a connection between rising inflation and the profits of corporations that operate in Moldova. Her faith in the country's authorities was badly damaged during the Shor fraud scandal, she said, and she sees the Sandu administration as similarly corrupt and detached from ordinary Moldovans. All of these reasons compelled her to join the protests. "We need to make these bandits respect us," she said.

Similar concerns are shared among working-age adults. Evgenia Bors, 45, and her daughter, Daniela Gasper, 26, came to Chișinău from Furceni, a village north of the capital. Both would support a Shor presidency, the women said. And they, too, are concerned that the war could come to Moldova. Bors and Gasper said they resented how the protesters have been portrayed in local and foreign media – as poor provincials, frequently drunk in public, unconcerned with the actual politics, and whose main interest is to create a mess in the capital. "We're not drunk, we're not poor," Bors said. "We've come peacefully, to protest peacefully."

Regional fall out

Even the youngest adult protesters – those who are about to enter the workforce – worry about the country's prospects, and their own. Lilian Rose, an 18-year-old trainee auto mechanic, said he must join a family tradition of emigrating abroad in order to make a living. He plans to leave Moldova as soon as his traineeship is finished. Perhaps to join his mother, who works in Italy, or his father, who works in France, or someplace even farther afield. "I would like to go to America," Rose said.

Rose complained that Moldova suffers from low wages, rising consumer prices and a general lack of opportunity for young adults like him. He also said that

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Moldova's cycle of labour emigration is perpetual, as Moldovans begin working abroad, settle into a better life and then never return.

Chișinău's autumn protests continued at a smaller scale into winter, when colder weather kept all but the most ardent from demonstrating publicly. The Sandu government still stands, and the protesters' calls for the dismantling of the current government never seemed to pose a substantial threat to the current administration.

But if the protests continue, if the Shor Party and other anti-government actors keep up their resistance – and, most of all, if Russia's war in Ukraine continues well into 2023 – then the possibility of renewed protests in Chișinău cannot be ruled out.

Thus Moldova and the streets of its capital remain places to watch. The country stands as a prime example of the Ukraine war's regional fallout and its long-term effects that extend well beyond the zones of conflict. The longevity of Moldovan discontent, and the disruptive effects of exiled politicians who are asking for and receiving support from Russian partners, are themes to follow closely in 2023. Ordinary Moldovans will no doubt be watching, too.

William Fleeson is a writer and journalist. A native and resident of Washington, DC, his writing has appeared in BBC Travel, *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, the *Washington Independent Review of Books* and elsewhere. His work has been nominated, most recently, for *The Best American Essays* anthology.

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How Hungary's Russia connection undermines EU support for Ukraine

GABRIELA GREILINGER

Budapest's readiness to block military and financial aid to Kyiv, delay EU sanctions against Russia and its outspoken criticism thereof are creating serious repercussions for the EU's image as a foreign policy actor vis-á-vis Russia. These issues further indicate deep divisions among member states and call into question European unity. They also reveal one of the EU's most discussed weaknesses, namely, its inability to speak with one voice in foreign policy.

To the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, any measure is welcome to achieve his personal and inner circle's objectives. While being a member of western institutions, such as the European Union and NATO, Orbán consistently seeks contact with autocrats from the East, particularly Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. This double-faced foreign policy benefits the Hungarian government in two ways: first, it helps to uphold its image as a credible actor on the world stage back home; and second, it ensures that Hungary continues receiving financial support and legitimation for its illiberal model of governance from outside of the EU.

In light of Russia's full-scale invasion, Hungary's relationship with Moscow has presented considerable obstacles to the EU's support for Ukraine. Since the start of the conflict, Hungary repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to delay crucial aid

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for Ukraine and block EU sanctions against Russia, thereby undermining the image of Brussels as a strong, unified foreign policy actor vis-á-vis Russia.

A Russian Trojan horse in the EU?

The Hungarian Fidesz government's relationship with Russia is grounded in a policy known as the Eastern Opening ("Keleti Nyitás"), which was introduced after its election victory in 2010 to increase investments, business and political relations with the East. The deepening of ties with Russia has also created great potential for Moscow to leverage influence via the use of energy dependence, intelligence activities and "corrosive capital". Some critics even refer to Hungary as a Russian Trojan horse in the EU. Considering Russia's war in Ukraine, the challenges the Russian-Hungarian relationship and its entanglement through various projects poses to the EU are increasingly evident.

Over the years, Hungary became particularly dependent on Russian energy supplies. Although Russia's quantifiable economic influence over Hungary is low, there are some projects, such as the nuclear power plant, commonly known as Paks II, which can easily be exploited by the Kremlin. These have the potential to influence the country's politics and foreign policy as they involve high-level decision-makers.

Paks II, the controversial project to build a second plant as an extension to the 1980s Soviet-era Paks I, was awarded to the Russian state-owned Rosatom in 2014 without a public tender. It is planned to be partially financed through a ten-billion-euro loan from Russia, thus potentially further exacerbating Hungary's dependencies on the Kremlin. According to Benedek Javor, a former member of the European Parliament, the construction of Paks II should be considered a political project, given that, as regards to energy supplies, there is no need for a second power plant, and if so, there would be plenty of other potential partners. While the EU encouraged its member states to break away from Russian energy dependence in light of Moscow's war in Ukraine, Hungary continued pursuing the construction of the Russian-financed nuclear plant.

> The deepening of ties with Russia has created great potential for Moscow to leverage influence over Hungarian foreign policy.

The moving of the Soviet-era International Investment Bank (IIB) to Hungary in 2019 presented another instance that caused unease among EU leaders over possible Russian influence activities in the EU. The diplomatic immunity granted to people working in the bank gave reasons for concern over potential intelligence operations, as well as the possibility of the bank operating as a money laundering

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hub. While multiple EU members who were part of the IIB announced they would leave it as the Russian war in Ukraine started, Hungary neither left nor expelled the bank from its territory. Almost a year into Russia's war in Ukraine, the IIB and its employees remain active in Hungary, posing a security threat to Europe and the West as a whole.

Yet, the Hungarian government does not seem too concerned about potential Russian spy activities on its own territory or in the EU. Even in 2021, before the invasion of Ukraine, it was revealed that Russian hackers gained access to the Hungarian foreign ministry's servers and, according to Direkt36, a Hungarian investigative platform, "completely compromised the foreign ministry's computer network and internal correspondence" over the past decade. The news sparked concern among western allies, as Russia could also gain classified information on them through Hungary. Even more concerning was the government's quasi-non-existent reaction and its failure to address this issue with Russia, which demonstrates that it is either unwilling or afraid to offset Moscow and damage the relationship.

The Hungarian government does not seem too concerned about potential Russian spy activities on its own territory.

Then, just weeks before Russia attacked Ukraine, Orbán travelled to Moscow on a visit the government later called a "peace mission". Regardless, it was quite clear that the visit was only to benefit Budapest, given that the Hungarian foreign minister announced the issues on the agenda would concern gas purchases, the production of the Sputnik COVID-19 vaccine in Hungary and plans for the construction of Paks II. The visit is said to have alarmed European leaders as it could have potentially undermined the EU's common position on Ukraine's sovereignty, which was then already threatened by the increased Russian troop build-up along the border.

Blocking aid and betraying allies

Already at the start of the war, the Fidesz government demonstrated its unwillingness to support Ukraine by refusing to provide weapons or even allow military aid to be transported to its neighbour through Hungary. While this did not seriously harm support to Ukraine as other member states and the US provided aid – and there are numerous ways to get equipment to Kyiv without transiting Hungary – it was still a powerful symbolic act that demonstrated where Hungary stands on this war. As such, the government's often-recited argument that the country "does not want to get involved" in the conflict and that they are "on the Hungarian side

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of history" should rather be understood as an effort to avoid alienating Russia. Hungary's alleged neutrality instead shows that it avoids clearly siding with the EU. Moreover, it also reveals deep divisions in the EU and undermines a common approach to Russia.

In December 2022, Hungary even blocked an 18-billion-euro aid package to Ukraine, stating that aid to the country should be provided on a bilateral basis and "common EU debt is not the solution". This veto of financial support could be interpreted as an attempt to blackmail the EU, as it came at a time when Hungary itself was fighting for its share of the EU budget, which was threatened to be frozen due to concerns around issues related to the rule of law. In the end, the EU managed to circumvent Hungary's veto, revealing the sad reality of EU disunity on the importance of supporting Ukraine.

Orbán's diverging position also revealed a growing rift with his closest allies within the EU. In March 2022 the prime ministers of Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Poland travelled to Ukraine to show their solidarity and support. A month later, the Slovak prime minister visited Kyiv to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Orbán, who usually shares close relationships with these EU member states, decided not to join their trips. Instead, being in the midst of his election campaign and facing a united opposition for the first time, he made use of the rally-around-the-flag-effect and reiterated that he does not want Hungary to get involved in the war.

After winning his fourth consecutive election in April 2022, Orbán singled out Zelenskyy in his victory speech as one of the enemies of the Hungarian people, next to the "international left", "Brussels bureaucrats" and the "foreign media". Only in November 2022, the Hungarian president, Katalin Novák, who has only a limited, ceremonial role, finally paid a visit to Ukraine. Poland, arguably Hungary's closest partner in the EU, expressed disappointment and a lack of understanding regarding Orbán's position on Ukraine, exhibiting the rift between the two former allies who propped each other up in disputes with the EU.

However, Hungary's ambiguous stance on the Russian aggression also comes with security implications for other EU member states. The country has significantly delayed Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO by refusing to put the issue up for a vote in the Hungarian parliament, despite publicly saying that it fully supports their membership. Opposition parties have accused Fidesz of deliberately slowing the process and potentially even blackmailing the EU given that the government stated that they still had to pass anti-corruption reforms in relation to the EU funds that were being withheld. And yet, the potentially most damaging act relating to the EU's support for Ukraine and bloc unity on Russia is Hungary's repeated blocking of sanctions on Moscow.

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Scrambling over sanctions

Sanctions are a crucial tool that the EU has at its disposal to defend its values in its external relations and attempt to change the behaviour of other parties. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, EU sanctions against Russia have been extended every six months. When Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, the EU's response was to expand existing sanctions against the Kremlin. These restrictive measures are crucial to minimising Russia's gas and oil revenues and subsequently its ability to wage war.

Although the EU was surprisingly swift and united in imposing the first wave of restrictive measures as the war started, Hungary has repeatedly stood in the way of the unified response and delayed several sanctions packages, mostly attempting to water them down and prevent certain individuals from being targeted. Given Hungary's dependence on Russian oil and gas, the government warned that it would block any sanctions targeting Russian energy exports, calling it a "red line". So far, Hungary has managed to avert the most potent sanctions on Russian oil delivered by pipelines, and instead, only oil imports by sea were targeted.

In June 2022, Hungary even successfully blocked the blacklisting of Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who is a key supporter of Putin and the Russian invasion. The reason for vetoing the sanctions against Kirill remains unclear and could thus be considered purely symbolic to appease Moscow. During the most recent sanctions negotiations, arguably producing the weakest package thus far, the Hungarian foreign minister once again insisted on the removal of certain names from the list, as sanctioning them would cut "remaining channels of communication with Russia".

Viktor Orbán has undermined the EU's credibility and unity in its response to Russia with an anti-sanctions campaign.

Apart from the blocking of sanctions, Orbán also undermined the EU's credibility and unity in its response to Russia with an anti-sanctions campaign, depicting EU sanctions as missiles. With this communication strategy the Hungarian government blamed "Brussels" for the dire economic situation in the country, without mentioning the actual culprit: Putin's war in Ukraine. Additionally, the Fidesz government conducted another "National Consultation" (*nemzetközi konzultáció*) between October 2022 and December 2022 regarding sanctions. By failing to mention that Hungary supported all the so far adopted EU sanctions packages, the government acted as if Brussels had single-handedly decided on these measures. The entire consultation may quite literally be considered a mere propaganda campaign by the government, as it is unlikely to translate into any policy effect and is a mere

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political tool, as previous consultations have shown. The Hungarian government even hoped for sanctions to be dropped by the end of the year. The rhetoric is thus purposefully spreading disinformation by pretending that the sanctions were enforced on Budapest.

Revealing the EU's weaknesses

Besides the Hungarian government's outspoken criticism of the sanctions and its unwillingness to support Ukraine in this war, Hungary's disruption of the common EU approach is also reflected in other actions. In the summer of 2022, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó went to Moscow to ask for more gas, although the bloc wanted to curb Russian gas deliveries. During the same summer, Orbán, in a speech, stated that the focus should not be on winning the war but rather on peace negotiations. This position also diverges significantly from the general EU and transatlantic consensus that Ukraine must be supported at all costs and that there can be no "peace deal" that grants Russia any concessions.

> Hungary's balancing act between the EU's sanctioning policy and its relationship with Russia will persist.

Although representatives of the Hungarian government reiterated their alignment with the EU and NATO's stance on the war and its commitment to support Ukraine, its rhetoric in some interviews and actions suggests differently. For example, in an interview to DW given by Orbán's spokesperson, Zoltán Kovács, when pressed on which side the Hungarian government was on, he suggested that they just want peace and an immediate ceasefire. However, he not once called on Moscow to stop the fighting and made no mention of Russia's role as the aggressor. Moreover, the spokesperson could not bring himself to say that they want Ukraine to win. Instead, he reiterated that Hungary just wants peace, while ignoring the interviewer's follow-up on whether Hungary wants peace at any price, even if that meant that Russia would win.

Overall, these instances further exemplify Budapest's critical stance towards Ukraine and reluctance to acknowledge Russia's responsibility for the war. Its readiness to block military and financial aid to Kyiv, delay EU sanctions against Russia and its outspoken criticism thereof are creating serious repercussions for the EU's image as a foreign policy actor vis-á-vis Russia. Moreover, these issues further indicate deep divisions across EU member states and call into question European unity. They also reveal one of the EU's most discussed weaknesses, namely, its inability to speak with one voice in foreign policy. Most alarmingly, the situa-

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tion also undermines the EU's policies and demonstrates the bloc's weakness of being divided over crucial foreign policy issues – a weakness Russia is ready and happy to exploit.

As the war gets closer to its one-year mark with no end in sight any time soon, the EU needs to continue making Russia's war as costly as possible. One of the most potent ways to do so remains sanctioning Moscow. This will likely mean that Hungary's balancing act between the EU's sanctioning policy and its relationship with Russia will persist. Budapest is thus likely to further undermine support for Kyiv in order to put itself in a better bargaining position with the EU while appeasing Russia. The consequences that this will have for Ukraine and the EU's reputation as a whole, should not be underestimated.

Gabriela Greilinger is a political scientist from Austria who is currently based in the United States. She is the founder of the youth platform *Quo Vademus*, a grassroots think tank for youth and public engagement in politics and current affairs.

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Georgia's strong economic performance comes at a heavy price

MACKENZIE BALDINGER

Since February 24th 2022, Georgia's economic ties and dependence regarding Russia have markedly increased, leading to heavy criticism of the Georgian Dream-led government about its lack of transparency around ties to Russian business interests. Most obvious among these concerns are those centred on the party's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire and former prime minister who made his fortune in Russia before entering Georgian politics.

Nearly one year on from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a stroll through the streets of Tbilisi provides a visual reminder of both the ongoing conflict and the Georgian population's prodigious support for the Ukrainian people. With billboards flashing blue and yellow and Ukrainian flags nearly matching their Georgian counterparts in representation, it is unsurprising that a March 2022 poll commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) showed that 98 per cent of Georgians support the Ukrainian people.

To the dismay of much of the population, however, support from the Georgian government has proven less robust. While the official stance of the government has been one of solidarity with Ukraine, offering support for UN resolutions condemning Russia's actions in the country, for example, many in Georgia see their

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government's response as too little, and often, too late. The latest example of this came in early December, when news emerged that five Georgian soldiers had died fighting in Bakhmut in Eastern Ukraine. The ruling Georgian Dream party took two days to issue a statement, using the opportunity to blame the opposition for "arranging provocations" and deceiving "our fellow citizens to take them to Ukraine [to fight]" – a move that has received widespread condemnation for what many view as disrespect against fallen heroes.

Yet, as the war has dragged on, questions about the Georgian government's support for the Ukrainian cause has also expanded beyond the political arena. A look at Georgia's economic performance indicates that 2022 was a banner year – which many have been quick to point out is largely due to the country's growing economic ties with Russia.

Georgia's economic boom

Touting the country's estimated growth at 10.5 per cent for the year, Levan Davitashvili, the minister of economy, told reporters in late November that increased trade, tourism and transport were to thank for Georgia's strong performance in 2022. Later that week, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili attributed this success to the work of his government, noting that double-digit economic growth and unemployment at a "historic minimum" were thanks to "sound economic policy". But while the ruling Georgian Dream party has been quick to accept accolades for the country's strong economic performance, it has been less forthcoming about exactly how that growth has been achieved. In a September visit to the country, President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Odile Renaud Basso characterised Georgia's exceptional growth in 2022 as "due to unexpected short-term factors including higher net inflow of money transfers from Russia and higher than expected income generated from tourism".

In fact, a look at the sectors exhibiting the strongest growth this year indicates that the country has benefited largely from a growing economic relationship with Russia. In part, this is due to the large wave of Russians that migrated to Georgia first at the onset of the war and then again in September when Russia announced a partial military mobilisation. With its land border offering a viable alternative to the increasingly limited and exorbitant flight options from Russia, a relatively low cost of living, and a lack of visa restrictions, Georgia has become a haven for an estimated 50,000–100,000 Russians who have left their homeland since the war began.

This growing population of Russian migrants has had a marked impact on Georgia's local economy, pushing real estate demand and prices to an all-time high. A

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November report by the investment arm of one of Georgia's largest banks, TBC Capital, found that average rental prices in Tbilisi were up 140 per cent year-on-year in October, meaning rental prices in the capital have more than doubled since the war began.

Remittances, which have long represented a vital lifeline to Georgia's economy, have also been dramatically impacted since the invasion of Ukraine. These money transfers into the country, which were equivalent in value to 13.3 per cent of the country's GDP in 2020, have continued to grow in recent years, as more Georgians have moved abroad to seek out better employment opportunities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of remittances coming from Russia had been steadily declining as more Georgians sought employment in new markets – predominantly in the European Union. Since the onset of full-scale war in Ukraine, however, this trend has been turned on its head as capital from Russia has flooded into Georgia, with the value of money transfers from Russia up a staggering 726 per cent year-on-year in October.

This sharp increase in Russian capital has raised questions around why it is in Georgia and what it is being used for. Beso Namchavadze, the chief economist for Transparency International Georgia, says that this inflow of capital is sizable for Georgia and indicates that these funds are being used for more than just living expenses. "The National Bank of Georgia currently estimates that an additional one billion US dollars of deposits coming from Russia have been infused into Georgia's banking system since the war began. That is substantial for a country of this size, and it indicates that people are moving significant amounts of money out of Russia." This, he notes, could potentially be for real estate purchases or moving business operations, given that the number of Russian businesses registered in Georgia since March is also up tenfold.

> An additional one billion dollars of deposits coming from Russia have been infused into Georgia's banking system since the war began.

"What's a bit concerning", Namchavadze adds, "is that these are only the official numbers of money moving into or through Georgia. We do not have any way to measure how much more money is coming across the border physically or how much is being transferred via crypto assets".

In addition to an infusion of money into Georgia's economy, 2022 also witnessed significant growth in the country's trade sector, due in part to its increased trade relations with its northern neighbour. Data from the first nine months of the year indicates that Georgian exports to Russia were valued at 473 million US dollars, up 11 per cent year-on-year, and that imports from Russia were valued at 1.2 billion, up a whopping 73 per cent compared to the previous year.

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This growth in imports was predominantly fuelled by Georgia's increased purchases of Russian petrol, which Namchavadze says were the result of lower prices as Russia struggled to sell its supply in the global market. "There seemed to be little moral concern from Georgian companies that substituted cheaper Russian petroleum products this year," he says, noting that petrol imports from Russia were five times higher in the first nine months of 2022 compared to the year prior.

Opaque at best

Beyond the well-documented growth of Georgia's economic ties with Russia since it invaded Ukraine, the Georgian Dream-led government has also suffered heavy criticism about its lack of transparency around its party members' ties to Russian business interests. Most obvious among these concerns are those centred on the party's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire and former prime minister who made his fortune in Russia before entering Georgian politics.

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The leak of an audio tape in March 2022, only weeks after the invasion began, reportedly revealed Ivanishvili speaking with sanctioned Russian oligarch Vladimir Yevtushenkov to set up a meeting between his associates and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. This was ultimately meant to facilitate a business deal. This, along with a report released by Transparency International Georgia in April 2022, unmasked a large web of offshore companies and associates controlled by Ivanishvili that hold major stakes in Russian companies. All of this has caused greater suspicion that Ivanishvili is still heavily linked to Moscow and has played a major role in dictating Georgia's soft response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Misgivings around Ivanishvili's deep ties to Moscow have been so overwhelming that the European Parliament passed a resolution in June calling for sanctions to be levied against him for his "personal and business links to the Kremlin", which "determine the position of the current government of Georgia towards sanctions on Russia". This was followed by a resolution of the European People's Party in late November urging that he personally be sanctioned in light of "his role in sabotaging Georgia's European integration and posing a threat to Georgia's and regional security".

> The Georgian Dream has suffered heavy criticism about its lack of transparency around its members' ties to Russian business.

Beyond concerns around the ruling party's de facto leader, further criticism was brought against Georgian Dream after it emerged in the spring of 2022 that the government had auctioned off more than 100,000 hectares of land in Georgia's western Racha-Lechkhumi forest. The winning company, HG Capra Caucasus, is owned by David Khidasheli, the business partner of the sanctioned Russian oligarch Vladimir Yevtushenkov. Critics were quick to point out that the single-bidder auction was held in a non-transparent manner, with the government refusing to release administrative documents related to the proceedings around the auction.

Meanwhile, no example of growing Russian influence in Georgian business is more poignant than that of Borjomi – Georgia's iconic mineral water brand that temporarily shuttered its doors in the spring due to sanctions. The company's majority holder, Alfa Group, owned by sanctioned oligarch Mikhail Fridman, announced at the end of April that it was unable to continue production due to limited access to its bank accounts. In June, Alfa Group transferred 7.7 per cent of its share in the company and two board seats to the Georgian government, decreasing its stake to just shy of a majority. For many, this solution represents the government's less-than-stringent approach to doing business with Russia. It has taken care not to defy international sanctions, yet it has also not endeavoured to take additional steps to further limit Alfa Group's stake in the company. This has facil-

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itated an agreement in which a large share of the company's profits will continue to be paid out to a Russian company owned by a sanctioned oligarch.

Cannot afford not to decrease dependency

Whether or not the Georgian government has violated the international sanctions levied against Russia remains a topic of debate. The government has maintained that it has complied with all international sanctions, a claim supported by the US embassy in Georgia. However, this has been highly disputed by Ukraine, which has accused Tbilisi of assisting Russia in evading sanctions as relations between the countries have grown increasingly sour.

One thing Prime Minister Garibashvili has been clear on is his government's policy against any kind of bilateral sanctions, telling reporters only one day after the invasion of Ukraine that "I want to state clearly and unambiguously, considering our national interests and interests of the people, Georgia does not plan to participate in the financial and economic sanctions, as this would only damage our country and populace more."

And while the government has maintained that it cannot afford to cut economic ties with Russia, many in Georgia argue it cannot afford the alternative. Namchavadze, the chief economist of Transparency International Georgia, says that the country's economic dependence on Russia has long been the subject of manipulation by Moscow. "We have numerous examples of times when Russia used Georgia's economic dependence as a political weapon. In 2006 Russia embargoed our wine and mineral water, which was a huge hit to the market. In 2019 they cancelled commercial flights to the country, majorly disrupting our tourism industry," he says. "Being that dependent on one market is not sustainable for Georgia's economy."

In lieu of a complete cessation of economic ties with Russia, Namchavadze says Georgia needs to focus on diversifying its trade relations. "I don't think we need to stop selling wine in the Russian market," he notes. "In this case, diversification is key. Better utilising our free trade deal with the European Union, focusing our wine exports to new markets in Asia, and pursuing renewable energy projects in the country to decrease our dependency on Russian energy – these are all policies that could better protect our economy from being held hostage in the future."

Otherwise, he says, the implications of growing economic ties will spill into the domestic political sphere. "We have already seen far right and pro-Russian parties seize on this narrative that the only way for Georgia to have economic prosperity is through Russia," Namchavadze notes. "We have also seen the ruling party become

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far more brazen in their rhetorical attacks against the US and certain actors in the EU. Some of these statements would have been unimaginable only a year ago."

As domestic debate rages around the topic of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations on the tail of missing EU candidacy status in June, the question of Georgia's economic dependency on Russia represents far more than just the country's long-term economic security. Double-digit economic growth certainly seems commendable, but for many, this accolade is tarnished by what it may cost Georgia in the future.

Mackenzie Baldinger is a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe* and a political analyst focusing on political extremism and populism in Central and Eastern Europe. She holds a master's degree in International Relations from Central European University and a Master of Arts in European Politics from Leiden University.

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Puzzles of an extremely difficult level

The post-war recovery of Ukraine

MACIEJ MAKULSKI

Soon after it became clear that Russia's brutal aggression on Ukraine was nowhere near the rapid military campaign it had hoped to be, the international debate on the reconstruction of Ukraine started. Backtracking through the focal points of this debate gives us a clue as to where the primary financial and non-financial obstacles lie.

The current phase of Russia's war against Ukraine started on February 24th 2022. Evidently, it marked a turning point in Europe's history, whose consequences we will be seeing in the long years to come. As of January 2023, there are no clear signs suggesting how long the war will last. In fact, there is no end in sight. Nevertheless, alongside the ongoing negotiations on the armament of Ukraine and the next round of sanctions on Russia, there is also a process taking place around establishing the framework for future reconstruction efforts. There is no doubt that without a clear and effective institutional architecture, the recovery will become bogged down in a ton of risks and problems.

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The problem of scale

One of the first questions that many interested stakeholders ask is how much will the post-war reconstruction cost? The fact that the heavy shelling of Ukraine's critical infrastructure and civilian areas continues makes any estimation outdated once it is announced. Nevertheless, it is somehow necessary to at least attempt to estimate the approximate cost. One such attempt, which in fact received quite decent publicity, is the report by the Centre for Economic Policy Research titled "Blueprint for the Reconstruction of Ukraine". It was released as early as April 2022 and at that time the rough estimation of the recovery costs was estimated to be between 200 and 500 billion euros.

Next, the World Bank in cooperation with the EU Commission and Ukraine's government published a joint damage and needs assessment. In this document, the total needs for the reconstruction of the country are estimated to be 349 billion US dollars. The report also points to the top three categories of post-war needs and they include: housing (20 per cent of the reconstruction cost), land decontamination (21 per cent) and transport (21 per cent).

It did not take long before the estimated recovery costs doubled as compared to these two reports. For example, during the first international conference on the recovery of Ukraine held in Lugano in July 2022, Ukraine's government assessments regarding these needs spiked to 750 billion dollars. It is noteworthy that Ukraine has presented a recovery plan that envisions a ten-year-long process, where the needs for 2023–25 account for 350 billion dollars. That number, in fact, corresponds with the estimations presented in the World Bank report.

Another big question is how to manage the recovery process. It is commonly argued that Ukraine's reconstruction will require the establishment of a special international agency much like the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), which was responsible for organising the Marshall Plan in Europe after the Second World War. With consideration for Ukraine's aspiration to obtain EU membership, the issue was already presented to various EU institutions in Brussels. The reaction of the EU Commission came in the form of an eight-page-long communiqué on Ukraine's relief and reconstruction. The document mentions the Rebuild Ukraine Plan as the foundation for a key high-level facility as part of the reconstruction effort. More importantly, the EU has acknowledged its readiness to be "a major part of the overall efforts from the international community in the rebuilding of Ukraine". At the same time, the communiqué stresses that the government in Kyiv will have full ownership of the process and states that the National Council for Recovery will be established by Ukraine's authorities. Lastly, the statement ties the reconstruction process to Ukraine's EU integration, which certainly matches Kyiv's ambitions.

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A shopping mall in Kyiv which was destroyed during a Russian missile strike last March. It is estimated that Ukraine's reconstruction will cost somewhere between 200 and 500 billion euros.

Lack of consistency

As stated before, the Ukraine Recovery Conference, which was the first major international gathering focused on Ukraine's reconstruction, took place in Lugano in July 2022. At this point, Ukraine had already become an official EU candidate (this status was granted to Ukraine and Moldova at the end of June 2022). Those who expected Lugano to bring a road map for the recovery with a clear and understandable institutional set-up were disappointed. Ukraine's National Recovery Plan prepared by the National Recovery Council has not become such a road map. What yet deserves a point of credit is that Ukraine, together with international partners, was able to start drafting the post-war recovery process already during the first months of the invasion. As expected, at that time there was no agreed vision for Ukraine's future on the donors' side.

Lugano thus has exposed the difficulty of bringing the recovery architecture to life. In fact, the Lugano Declaration did not even mention the Rebuild Ukraine facility that the EU proposed in May 2022, showing that high-level decisions are still to be made. Thus, the only thing that the conference in Lugano has contrib-

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uted is the so-called Lugano Principles. And even these are a kind of rather basic set of values that all stakeholders see as a cornerstone of a successful reconstruction of the country. It is yet far from what we could call a solid plan.

Therefore, the pressure to establish an international platform that will manage the reconstruction has been transferred to the organisers of the second major event, which took the form of the Berlin International Expert Conference on the Recovery of Ukraine. It was held in October 2022 in Germany's capital city. However, in the weeks and days before the gathering, it became clear that the expected breakthrough was nowhere near. Thus, the deliveries of the conference can be boiled down to Chancellor Olaf Scholz's words at the opening of the event, which in a way lowered the profile of the conference. Scholz presented it as an expert and not a donor meeting. Thus, the outcome could not mark any breakthrough and no decision regarding the international platform/agency managing the recovery process was made. Only Ursula von den Leyen reiterated the EU's readiness to be a part of the process and run the "secretariat" of the international platform of donors.

The post-conference debate, however, pointed out the most important deficits connected to the event, and especially the lack of high-level US representation, which was seen as a telling sign. Another weakness that was noted was the insufficient engagement of NGOs in the discussions, especially those from Ukraine. This stood in contrast with the Lugano conference, where civil society organisations issued their Lugano Manifesto outlining the standpoint of Ukraine's civil society regarding recovery. Having in mind the role of Ukraine's civil society in the 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity and the eight years of war with Russia in Donbas, it is impossible to imagine the country's reconstruction without the involvement of Ukraine's citizens. However, more than anything else, the conference organised in Berlin exposed that as of now there is not enough eagerness among western leaders to move the topic of Ukraine's reconstruction forward quickly.

However, this event has also brought some slight changes in the tone of the international debate about Ukraine. While before the meeting in Lugano, the EU seemed to be willing to become the major institutional resource in the process, the results of the Berlin Conference suggest that the platform of donors might be established by the G7 in partnership with the EU and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. This setup could evidently bring both opportunities but also some risks. On the one hand, the more global players that are on board, the easier it will be to find financing for the recovery. On the other hand, as stakeholders, all global leaders will be wary of their interests in different parts of the world and the relations they have with countries that are remote from the conflict. The so-called Global South has maintained a generally

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neutral stance on this war. That is why, we can anticipate some difficulties and a slowdown in building a coalition of the willing that would ensure an effective and speedy recovery for Ukraine.

Finally, there has been a clear mismatch between the West and Ukraine with regards to their priorities. Thus, while the representatives of Ukraine in Berlin focused primarily on the urgent needs that the country has faced in winter and as a result the damage done by Russian missiles to critical infrastructure, western leaders and experts talked about long-term rebuilding efforts, sticking to the principles put together in Lugano. It should be added that Ukraine's representatives did not avoid talks on principles, even though their attention is more on the current situation.

Closing this gap is a necessary step to continue talks on Ukraine's recovery. Ukraine's position is understandable, but perhaps Kyiv needs to reformulate the initial timeframe it presented in the National Recovery Plan, which outlined the urgent/resilience phase as taking place in 2022 and the recovery phase in 2023–25. As we are expecting Russia's next large-scale offensive in spring 2023 with no end to the war in sight, it is evident now that more time will be needed for each phase of the reconstruction and that the process will go beyond 2025. The initial, perhaps overly positive, vision of the reconstruction presented by Ukraine could send a misleading signal to some western countries, especially those which are not close to the front line and need more time to comprehend the overall situation.

Where are we?

During the conference in Berlin, von den Leyen said that the donor platform for the recovery of Ukraine should come into existence by the end of 2022 or at the beginning of 2023 at the latest. As of the time of writing, no such body has been created yet. The next international conference on the recovery of Ukraine will be held in London in June 2023. By that time, the war will be in a different phase but the overall damage to Ukraine will be larger than it was when the talks on the reconstruction started. Although seemingly so far the international debate on the recovery of Ukraine has brought more frustration than milestones, it should nonetheless be taken as a valid lesson that will help – let us hope – to reinvigorate the debate in the months to come.

Maciej Makulski is a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe*.

The views expressed by the author are his own.

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A Marshall Plan for Ukraine should prioritise harm done to humans, not buildings

MAKSYM POPOVYCH

The human cost of an armed conflict produces the most damaging and long-lasting societal consequences. Unlike residential buildings or infrastructure, which can be rebuilt through various forms of financial aid, human suffering cannot be remedied by financial assistance alone. Any discussion of a Marshall Plan for Ukraine needs to have a strong element of reparations for all those victims harmed during this past year.

A Marshall Plan for Ukraine is a recurring idea that is regularly featured in policy discussions both within Ukraine and abroad among policymakers, the media and academic circles. In many ways, this is a unique example of preparations to rebuild a war-torn country as that very war still rages on. Planning for reconstruction early is certainly the correct approach and the best evidence of a collective faith in Ukraine's prospects to win the war. We have all seen images of incredibly rapid repairs already being conducted in Ukraine, in particular repairs to the energy infrastructure as Russia continues to target these objects through its strategy of weaponising winter conditions against civilians. From the conference on post-war recovery in Lugano this past summer to specific donor-funded pro-

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jects, Ukraine's western partners have demonstrated their commitment to a Marshall Plan that would go beyond emergency repairs and humanitarian needs, but would also encompass a larger recovery process.

This idea of a Marshall Plan for Ukraine is, however, often understood exclusively in economic terms: as reconstruction of damaged buildings, a fresh start for the Ukrainian economy on the macro-level and support to businesses and the financial sector. The discussions seem to be detached from the human cost of the war: the injured and killed civilians, the torture, ill-treatment, enforced disappearances, rape and sexual violence, summary executions, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and many other gruesome human rights violations and war crimes. At best, human losses get attention from the perspective of justice and accountability (i.e., supporting the investigative efforts of Ukraine's law enforcement to document violations and discussing ideas for international accountability mechanisms, such as the proposal of a special tribunal). This is a short-sighted approach that ignores the need to support and develop the human capital of Ukraine as the utmost priority.

In search of justice

It is at least equally essential – if not critical – to look at Ukraine's recovery through the lens of fulfilling victims' rights. The participation of the victim in the justice process, which can ensure accountability for heinous war crimes, can have reparative value in itself but it should not stop there. A shift of attention from the perpetrator to the victim is urgently needed. In practice, that means that Ukraine, with the support of its international partners, ought to build an effective system of individual and collective reparations for victims of war who continue to suffer tremendous harm and injury to their lives, health, livelihood, dignity, property and an array of basic human rights. This is especially relevant in the Ukrainian context, where effective prosecution of Russian soldiers who committed grave violations of international humanitarian law currently is only possible in the event of the capture of prisoners of war.

Committing a war crime, in principle, waives POW immunity from prosecution for mere participation in hostilities, which is otherwise guaranteed to combatants under international law. Considering that the majority of human rights violations that can qualify as war crimes either take place in Ukraine's occupied territory – notably through the so-called system of "filtration" of undesirables and in places of detention, some reportedly equipped with torture chambers – or are committed by means of long-range artillery, the perpetrators of these crimes are, as a rule of thumb, out of reach of Ukraine's justice system. Although the situation on the

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ground is changing rapidly and the prospects for accountability can improve as Ukraine liberates more territory, it would be naïve to ignore the appalling likelihood that most perpetrators, even in the event of a triumphant Ukrainian victory, will simply flee to Russia and be able to enjoy indefinite impunity.

Besides domestic remedies, Ukraine remains highly motivated to seek international accountability. A number of international fora are being considered, both for discussing the responsibility of Russia as a state (notably, for the crime of aggression) and the criminal accountability of individual perpetrators. The options pursued include the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, the European Court of Human Rights, and even the ambitious idea of an *ad hoc* tribunal or a hybrid judicial mechanism, potentially built on the model of country-specific criminal tribunals such as those that existed for Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the former Yugoslavia and Cambodia.

The legal and practical functioning of these courts is complex and often requires decades before the finalisation of individual cases. In a vivid example, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) convicted Ratko Mladić, former commander of the army of Republika Srpska in Bosnia, of genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war at the end of 2017. This was 25 years after those crimes were committed between 1992 and 1995. The length of the justice process can seem ridiculously unjustified but, in perspective, the ICTY was one of the few tribunals which benefited from a favourable geopolitical consensus in the early 1990s, especially at the level of the United Nations Security Council, where Russia joined other members to vote for the creation of the court. Needless to say, despite the relative success of the ICTY from the point of view of the enforcement of international law, any wait for justice is always too long for the victims.

Right to reparation

Regardless of the military reality on the ground or the political prospects regarding accountability for Russia's brutal aggression, Ukraine and its international partners must dedicate much more attention to the victims of war. Survivors of torture, arbitrary detention, and especially rape and sexual violence hold the right to reparation. Justice is a lengthy process, justifiably so, but it should not delay efforts to satisfy the needs and best interests of the victims. The fulfilment of the right to reparation cannot be made contingent upon the conviction of the perpetrator.

Even more so, the "UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights

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Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law", adopted by the UN General Assembly, recognises that a victim should be considered as such regardless of the *identification* of the perpetrator. The rights of the victim go beyond just access to justice and also involve adequate, effective and prompt reparation for harm suffered. To put it simply, victims of war crimes need to be able to get effective reparation outside any judicial procedures, which are often, unfortunately, more concerned with the fate of the perpetrator than the victim.

Ensuring reparations for Ukrainian victims is a matter for a smart reconstruction and recovery policy.

Besides legal arguments, ensuring reparations for Ukrainian victims is also a matter for a smart reconstruction and recovery policy. Examples of post-conflict recovery, such as in the Western Balkans, where some survivors of sexual violence are only receiving compensation for the harm they suffered decades after the war ended, show that fulfilment of the right of individual reparation often lags behind justice and the physical rebuilding process. There is little prospect of successful transitional justice, reintegration and social cohesion between de-occupied territories and other parts of Ukraine without ensuring that victims of torture, sexual violence and arbitrary detention can regain their sense of justice, redress and even fundamental human dignity through access to reparation.

The human cost of an armed conflict produces the most damaging and long-lasting societal consequences. Unlike residential buildings or infrastructure, which can be rebuilt through various forms of financial aid, human suffering cannot be remedied by financial assistance alone. The United Nations, through reports of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Independent Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, recognised a dire deterioration of all fundamental human rights in Ukraine since February 24th 2022. To take a concrete example of conflict-related sexual violence, this type of violation – often rape and, sometimes, even sexual slavery against civilian women and sexual torture against civilian men in occupied territories, as well as various forms of sexual violence against prisoners of war – does not only cause long-term physical and mental health implications for survivors but disrupts the entire livelihoods of families and communities.

Survivors risk being re-victimised through stigma, the insensitive work of law enforcement, and being ostracised in their own community. Their return to normalcy and a regaining of the sense of belonging in society is often impossible without alleviation of the long-lasting harms suffered as a result of sexual violence. These factors drive victims into displacement within or outside the country, lead to unemployment and the breaking of family ties and, in extreme cases, have even resulted in suicide. As one can imagine, similar dire effects are faced by victims of

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other grave violations – torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention to name a few – which all require a holistic approach to remedies for these victims.

Approaches to compensation

A key condition of effective access to reparation is lowering the standard of eligibility. As recommended by relevant international bodies, for example, the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, the level of evidence required for receiving reparations should never be equated with judicial criteria, such as those used to convict a person in a trial, as it would defy the very purpose of providing prompt and urgent redress for the harm suffered. The design and implementation of reparation programmes must engage survivors through consultations on their needs and priorities, which would give them a sense of agency and rehabilitation. Luckily, the involvement of victims in the policy-making process to determine a form of reparation has a number of positive international precedents. For example, consultations in post-Pinochet Chile with the next of kin of disappeared persons took place on the appropriate form and method of compensation.

No one can say at this stage – especially as the war continues and reliable information on violations in the occupied territories remains very limited and comes with significant delay – how many Ukrainians have suffered harm and are entitled to reparation. To provide some perspective, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the UN Compensation Commission for Kuwait awarded total compensation in the amount of 52.4 billion US dollars to 1.5 million successful claimants. Even a relatively favourable geopolitical situation for Kuwait required over 30 years of the commission's work to deliver on its compensation payments. Comparisons of human suffering are borderline unethical but the scope of destruction and human harm in Ukraine is likely much greater.

> No one can say at this stage how many Ukrainians have suffered harm and are entitled to reparation.

Another difference with the invasion of Kuwait is the geopolitical perspective. It was the Security Council that acted to establish the compensation commission and create a fund that accumulated percentages of the proceeds from Iraqi petroleum exports to provide reparations to Kuwaiti claimants. The elephant in the room in Ukraine's case is of course that Russia, under the current political leadership, would block any similar resolution by the Security Council. This gruesome reality also significantly complicates Ukraine's determination to establish an international tribunal for Russian aggression. One can certainly hope for a situa-

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tion whereby Russia, following a decisive military defeat, will undergo a profound political and societal transformation and will be forced to cooperate with the international community. However, we cannot make the right to reparation conditional upon those prospects.

Certainly cognizant of these limitations, Ukraine and its allies have chosen an alternative path. In November, they successfully lobbied for a UN General Assembly resolution titled "Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine". The resolution recommended the creation of an international mechanism for compensation of damages and a register of claims of natural and legal persons in Ukraine. While it is not explicitly addressed in the resolution – which would have, otherwise, diminished the political chances of its adoption – the overall idea seems to be to find a legal way to use Russia's sanctioned assets to satisfy claims from Ukraine. While the resolution was adopted by a closer margin of votes (94 in favour, 13 against and 74 abstaining) than the overwhelming support given to earlier resolution ES-11/1 "Aggression against Ukraine", what matters most is that states with large quantities of Russian state and private assets, namely EU countries and the UK, voted in favour. Let us be clear though: the resolution did not establish any concrete mechanism – it was rather a booster shot of international legitimacy for further action by Ukraine's allies, sadly, outside the UN system.

Human-centred approach

What are the next steps then? The United States, United Kingdom, and the European Union have successfully frozen immense Russian assets, most notably of the Russian central bank, but how do we get from freezing to seizing? In nearly one year of war, no example of the effective repurposing of Russian assets towards reparations has appeared. Instead, concerns, completely justifiable, over the protection of sovereign immunity and property rights emerged in countries where assets had been frozen. In this context, international lawyers inevitably fall back in their thinking on the 2012 *Jurisdictional Immunities* judgment by the International Court of Justice, where the court confirmed Germany's state immunity against Italian national courts which had rendered judgments in favour of victims of Nazi-era war crimes. Most importantly regarding where international law stands on the issue, the International Court of Justice unequivocally stated that state immunity is a procedural rule of customary law that does not depend on the gravity of material violations by the state.

How can this legal obstacle be overcome in the absence of an international tribunal and with hardly any prospects for Russia's cooperation? There is no easy

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answer, although one cannot rule out the chances of the development of a new treaty-based regime for the repurposing of Russia's assets to implement its international responsibility vis-à-vis Ukraine. One thing is clear: the process will be long and complex, which defies the notion that victims have the right to *prompt* reparation.

This is where the idea of a Marshall Plan for Ukraine comes in. It is puzzling that western states are so ready to contribute to Ukraine's physical reconstruction of roads, bridges, or energy security but are mostly silent on the question of the right of victims to reparation, in particular through monetary compensation. The failure to address human needs and, thus, invest in the human capital of Ukraine undermines the very idea of the durable and successful revival of the country. Bridges and roads must be rebuilt for Ukrainians to use them, not for financial reporting.

Ukraine already legislates, through separate policy processes, on such diverse matters as the destruction of private houses, compensation to civilians who suffered a disability, and payments in eligible cases of the deprivation of liberty in occupied territories. The successful implementation of these mechanisms would certainly benefit from both technical assistance by partner states and direct financing for different types of reparation. Reparation can take various forms and the choice should be guided by the interests of the victims, determinable through consultations with them. In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its devastating effects on the mental and physical integrity of its victims, rehabilitation, restitution and compensation, including for physical and mental harm, material damages, costs related to medical services, and moral damage, spring to mind as highly relevant and appropriate.

The comprehensive plan for the reconstruction of Ukraine is unthinkable and untenable without a reparations system that would be able to satisfy claims of individuals. This new Marshall Plan needs to revolve around a human-centred approach that places the needs of civilians at the core of the recovery effort. Humanity has come a long way since inter-state reparations and macro-financial assistance for recovery in the aftermath of devastating wars in Europe in the previous century. The year 2023 is high time for setting the international precedent for human-oriented reparations to ensure the recovery of fundamental rights, livelihoods, and human dignity. NEE

Maksym Popovych is a human rights lawyer from Ukraine. He specialises in the situation of human rights and international humanitarian law violations in the territories of Ukraine occupied by the Russian Federation.

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The ongoing process of de-Sovietisation in Eastern Europe

NINO CHANADIRI

The war in Ukraine strengthened the de-Sovietisation process already taking place in Eastern Europe. It has pushed states to further remove the remnants of the Soviet past, including monuments, which are believed to have ideological symbolism and play a significant role in shaping collective identity.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia's actions have been discussed not only as a brutal violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of a neighbouring state, but also as a continuation of Russian imperial policy and a desire to rebuild the Soviet Union. Yet, amidst the war in Ukraine, Eastern Europe showed its powerful counter-desire to be freed from the Soviet past and Russian influence. Countries in the region have supported Ukraine through political, military and humanitarian means and, at the same time, they fight Russian influence within their own societies, banning Russian propaganda and state media. They have also pursued symbolic moves which have ideological meaning.

These moves include removing Soviet monuments from the streets. Ukraine, the Baltic states, Poland and others have made decisions to remove Soviet-era monuments. It will come as no surprise that the decisions had both supporters and opponents in some societies. De-Sovietisation is a long process and it requires systemic and mental transformation, as well as the transformation of values. It seems that the war in Ukraine, and the fact that Russian imperial ambitions are still very

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much alive and posing a threat to neighbouring states, fostered this transformation process in Eastern Europe.

Collective identity and symbolism

It is widely believed that monuments are important in public life. They regenerate the collective memory of events that are important for society. Collective memory on its own plays a key role in shaping collective identity based on shared understandings of past events, symbols and values. Thus, what monuments represent in the streets matters in shaping the collective understanding of history for society.

In the post-Soviet space, the removal of Soviet monuments and symbols has long been an ongoing process. However, in many countries one can still see remnants of the Soviet past in the streets. The removal of monuments has often caused contradicting feelings between different societal groups. If, for some, removing statues of Stalin or Soviet soldiers was seen as a way of distancing themselves from their Soviet past and taking new steps, for others it was still painful due to their sentiments and loyalties towards the Soviet Union and what it represented. A good example is the "Bronze Night" in Estonia in 2007, when the Estonian authorities decided to remove a Soviet soldier statue in Tallinn. The decision was followed by massive clashes between protesters, who destroyed public and private property and attacked the Estonian police. While speaking with Estonians, many of them call this event a "mini-war", which clearly shows that it has left its trace in Estonian collective memory. Estonia was also the subject of cyber-attacks by Russia after the monument's removal, which caused disruptions in banks, the public sector and private institutions and companies. In this regard, Russia views the dismantling of Soviet monuments as a political act and a weakening of its influence.

> What monuments represent in the streets matters in shaping the collective understanding of history for society.

Russia, as the heir to the Soviet Union, continues to exploit such sentiments to strengthen societal divisions in post-Soviet states. Moscow hopes to transform loyalties to the Soviet Union into loyalties towards Russia as their "supporter/protector" in this new era and in the battle of values. These vulnerable groups differ from society to society. In some countries, those are minority groups of ethnic Russians, while in some countries they can just be apologists of Stalin. Such is the case in Georgia, where removing Stalin monuments has always sparked different opinions. There are always small groups who demand that the monuments remain in public spaces.

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Freeing the streets from the Soviet past

The war in Ukraine has made it clear that Russia's imperial ambitions are far from over. The most important takeaway is that if the Russian Army succeeds in Ukraine then no neighbour is safe. This truth has fostered the de-Sovietisation and de-Russification process in many Eastern European countries, which have taken steps to eliminate Soviet statues from public spaces as a sign of ideological distancing from Russia and what it represents.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Kyiv has started demolishing not only Soviet statues but also the statues of Russian kings, queens and other historical figures. Most recently, Ukraine removed the statue of Catherine the Great from Odesa. They are renaming streets dedicated to famous Russian historic figures, changing them to the names of Ukrainian soldiers and supporters of Ukraine. For example, in the outskirts of Odesa, Mayakovsky Street was changed to Boris Johnson Street, to honour the former prime minister of the United Kingdom – a key supporter of Ukraine. Ukrainian officials have explained that these moves are a response to Russia's unjustified war, and that there is no space for friendship left between the two countries when one bombs and invades the other.

Similar decisions have been made in other states as well. According to the official announcement of the government of Estonia, in order to not let Russia "use the past to disturb the peace in Estonia", Tallinn decided to take down Soviet monuments from public spaces, including the highly controversial Narva tank monument. Narva is a city near the border with Russia, with the vast majority of the population speaking Russian as their first language. The decision to remove the tank monument, which symbolised the capture of Narva by the Red Army, has caused protests among the Russian-speaking population. However, the tank was still removed. The Russian government condemned the move, calling it "a war against common history".

Just like in 2007 when Estonia removed the Soviet soldier monument, Estonia again became the subject of cyber-attacks from Russia. Although the cyber-attack was quite strong and extensive, it appeared to be rather ineffective. No major disruptions in the work of different sectors were reported in Estonia.

The Lithuanian government has also made a decision to remove Soviet-era soldier statues from the Antakalnis cemetery, which also did not go without criticism. A group of ethnic Russians from Lithuania approached the United Nations claiming the government was going to destroy the monument and nearby remains. The UN imposed interim measures. However, Lithuania still took down the statues that represented Soviet propaganda. At the same time, officials declared that the graves and tombstones would remain untouched and only the statues would be re-

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Photo: Multipedia / Shutterstock

A Ukrainian flag now sits on top the site of the former monument to Catherine the Great in Odesa.

moved. The Russian side responded that Lithuania is trying to erase "a memory of heroes who at the cost of their lives liberated Lithuania and Europe from Nazism". Similarly, Latvia decided to remove Soviet statues despite the opposition of local ethnic Russians, asserting that the monuments are a symbol of Soviet occupation and in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine can no longer be tolerated.

This trend has been taking place in other parts of the former Soviet bloc as well. Poland has removed several Soviet monuments in light of the war in Ukraine, while the Czech Republic has been renaming streets since last February. Both Poland and Czechia are strong opponents of Russia's war and have been supporting Ukraine politically, declaring Russia a sponsor of terrorism and accusing it of committing genocide against Ukrainians.

Breaking away from the Soviet past

The war in Ukraine gave the Eastern European countries another push to distance themselves from Russia, which poses a security threat to them. This war has gained a deep ideological meaning – it became a conflict between the collective West and Russia. It turned into a clash between values – the free world on the one hand and authoritarian rule and violence on the other. Thus, for countries,

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especially in the neighbourhood of Russia, it has become crucial to determine and declare the camp to which they belong.

In this context, freeing themselves from the legacy of the Soviet past is not only a response to the current situation but also a strategic move for the future. Using this moral imperative, which was strengthened by the war and security threats, Eastern European countries have distanced themselves and their collective identity from the Soviet past. This is subsequently giving them additional chances to free themselves from Russian influence and reinforce the process of the transformation of collective identities, which will be far removed from Soviet sentiments. In other words, they are drawing a clear line between these societies and Russia and declaring their collective belonging to the free western world, which today stands and fights with Ukraine.

It is safe to say that the war in Ukraine strengthened the de-Sovietisation process in Eastern Europe. It pushed states to remove the remnants of the Soviet past, including monuments, which are believed to have ideological symbolism and play a significant role in shaping collective identity. Besides Ukraine, many other states have made the decision to remove Soviet monuments in support of Kyiv and, most importantly, for the sake of clearly underlining their collective values, which are far removed from what the Soviet Union and its heir, Russia, represent. The process has not been as painless as some expected. Yet, it is still moving forward and playing an important role in limiting Russian influence in the region and the world beyond. NEE

Nino Chanadiri is a Georgian analyst focusing on developments in Eastern Europe and beyond. She has conducted analysis for the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

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The outcome of the war is crucial not only for the future of Ukraine

Interview with Arkady Rzegocki, Head of the foreign service of the Polish ministry of foreign affairs. Interviewer: *New Eastern Europe*

NEW EASTERN EUROPE: We would like to start our conversation with an idea that appeared on February 17th 2022, the week before Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine. This was the idea of creating a new British-Polish-Ukrainian cooperation format. As you used to be the Polish ambassador to the United Kingdom, you might have your own perspective on this idea. In fact, initially there were a lot of discussions and a lot of people interested in this format, but we have not heard much about it since.

ARKADY RZEGOCKI: Let me start with the statement that at the moment Polish diplomacy is probably the most active in its history. We have dozens of missions worldwide and we are opening new ones every year. We are also an active member of many international organisations and different formats of international cooperation. One of these formats is indeed the idea of close cooperation between the United Kingdom, Poland and Ukraine. Even before the outbreak of war, cooperation between the UK, Poland and Ukraine within the new "triangle" in the region had intensified. Ukraine is working with Britain to modernise and build new ships for its navy and is building new naval bases. The UK has taken some of the most decisive steps within NATO to strengthen the capabilities of the Ukrainian military. Thanks in part to this cooperation, especially since February 24th 2022, both Poland and the United Kingdom are among the biggest supporters of Ukraine. Poland is a crucial hub for all kinds of help – humanitarian, economic, diplomatic and military. And the UK is a country that understands the threat of the imperialistic and aggressive Russian policies and is also one of Ukraine's biggest supporters. Thus given this perspective, this co-

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operation is quite obvious. On the other hand, a close cooperation between these two countries is nothing new. Poland and the United Kingdom have had a strategic partnership for many years now. We have common interests and are like-minded countries. That is why we cooperate closely, not only in the area of economy, or at the people-to-people level, which is very important, but also in the area of security.

Do you foresee this cooperation to go further after the war?

There is such an idea and there are even members of the Polish parliament working with MPs and lords from the House of Lords on this cooperation to continue and further develop it after the war. The UK and Ukraine also share a community of interests and long-standing defence cooperation. Ukraine, uncertain about the prospect of NATO and EU membership, is strengthening its international position by networking in cooperative formats. "Post-Brexit" Britain has ambitions to play a more important role in international relations and is involved in many directions, including NATO's eastern flank. The truth is that Poland is engaged in supporting Ukraine, and that is why we are trying to mainstream the knowledge about the war in Ukraine, about Ukrainian culture, language, and basic information about Ukraine around the world. We are doing this because, unfortunately, Ukraine is not well-known everywhere. Therefore, this is one of the key tasks of our diplomatic missions to promote Ukraine. We are doing this with the representatives of the Polish diaspora and our Ukrainian, British and other friends. Together we organise cultural events, humanitarian actions and fundraisers, or events at universities.

Could you give us a bigger overview of what Polish diplomacy is currently doing to support Ukraine in its fights against Russian aggression? What are the priorities of the Polish diplomacy and which areas would you say are most important?

First of all, let me say that we are very proud that our embassy stayed in Ukraine at the beginning of the full-scale invasion when the situation was very difficult indeed. We also have a general consulate in Lviv, which is also very active, and recently we have opened a general consulate in Lutsk. Diplomacy, as we know, is always working in the shadows. Thus the truth is that Polish diplomats are behind a lot of the humanitarian help and aid convoys. They assist the NGOs and other institutions who receive aid, travel through Ukraine, get help to the border, etc. Our diplomats in Lviv are working with matters connected to visas or passports and *Karta Polaka* (a document giving special status to individuals who have familial or other close ties to Poland – editor's note) and also help with many individual cases. At the beginning of the war, there was a huge problem with how to help people who were close to the area of the fight, so we provided additional support by bringing

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Photo courtesy of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

food, clothes and medicines. The Polish success in Ukraine is not only the successive aid tranches from the US and the EU, but also giving Ukraine the prospect of EU membership. Poland also held aid conferences for Ukraine and organised debates on the reconstruction of Ukraine. The activity of our diplomacy manifested itself not only in bilateral relations, but also in international fora: EU, NATO, the UN, as well as the OSCE where Poland took advantage of the chairmanship to present its point of view to delegates from around the world.

How about your work in other countries? Is support for Ukraine part of the Polish diplomatic activities in countries such as Germany or France? Do Polish diplomats who are working there focus on bilateral relations or has the war added a new dimension to their work?

As I mentioned before, all Polish missions are now working on the promotion of knowledge and assistance to Ukraine. Of course, diplomats traditionally work with the elites, namely other governments and diplomats; but we know that it is even more important to work with the societies and public opinion in different countries. That is why, our embassies and cultural institutes organise events related to Ukraine, often together with Ukrainians. One of the most important tasks is to mainstream the knowledge about Ukraine and to keep western countries united in this cause. Unfortunately, in some parts of the world

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the knowledge about Ukraine and the Russian aggression is still very small.

We assume you are referring to the so-called Global South. Are you active diplomatically there regarding Ukraine?

Yes, everywhere. As I said, we are doing our best. All our diplomats are working hard in every country. We have about 160 different diplomatic missions. In fact, it does not matter if it is North America, South America or Asia. We are trying to support Ukraine everywhere and inform others about what is happening in Ukraine.

What challenges are we to face in 2023? Do you expect that there will be some kind of Ukraine fatigue in many countries worldwide? Is Poland prepared for the long haul, to continue this type of diplomacy?

Maintenance of support for Ukraine will remain the biggest challenge in 2023 because the outcome of the war is crucial not only for the future of Ukraine but also that of Central and Eastern Europe. This war matters not only to Europe. Its result will shape the whole world, and that is one of the reasons we support Ukraine and want to see Ukraine win. We want Ukraine to survive as a country and a nation. To remain sovereign with full integrity of its territory. This is crucial. If Ukraine does not win, aggressive policies could succeed, and we are worried about that. They would affect not only Poland, but also other countries. That is why we are so eager to help Ukraine, but also that is why we are active and cooperate with many nations. We are active in NATO and within the EU, which are the most important players. But we are also an active leader of the Three Seas Initiative, which is an important project through which 12 countries from the south to the north of Europe can improve their infrastructure and collaboration. We can see that nowadays these kind of projects are more important than ever.

There is another challenge that we have and will continue to have in 2023 and that I want to mention here, namely compensation that Poland should receive from Germany for the damages and crimes that were committed against our country and our people during the Second World War. Our diplomacy is now working on expanding knowledge about the Second World War from the perspective of Central Europe, mostly Poland. We want people to know how many Polish cities were destroyed during that war and how many Polish citizens were killed. Unfortunately, until now there is not enough awareness about these tragedies in many countries around the world.

Has the war in Ukraine given an additional context to it?

Yes, also because when so many Ukrainian war refugees arrived in our country we saw this amazing reaction of the Polish society. This shows how the memory of the times when Poles were war victims came back. Also seeing the images from Mariupol or Bucha, the stories about the destruction of the Pol-

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ish cities by the two totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia) return. In this light, the compensation that we are demanding from the Germans is an unresolved issue. Yet it remains important for Poland, even now decades after the Second World War, to receive this historical justice, and it will be important for Ukraine to receive compensation from Russia after this war.

Let's come back to the current times and the different formats that Poland has been playing an active or leadership role in. For example, as the chair of the OSCE Poland hosted the ministry council in Łódź in November 2022. Russia was not invited to this event and was told not to come, which caused expected tensions. How does Poland use its role in these different formats to adequately respond to Russia's imperialism now?

Regarding other formats, we served as a non-permanent member of the Security Council in the United Nations a few years ago and as a member of the Council on Human Rights in the United Nations. Zbigniew Rau, Poland's foreign minister, served as the chairman of the OSCE last year, which was a very difficult year indeed. In December 2022 our leadership was rounded off with the conference and ministerial meeting that you mentioned. However, there actually was a Russian delegation…

But minister Lavrov did not arrive…

No, he did not because there are European sanctions against him and Poland is one of the countries which supports all of the sanctions against Russia. That was the reason. But in general, all countries were represented on different levels, mostly on the ministerial level.

Above all, Poland is acting in the interests of the entire region by choosing a strategy of distancing Russia. Weeks before Russia's aggression, Poland presented proposals for sectoral and individual restrictions to be adopted by the European Union in connection with Russia's policies, which facilitated and accelerated the introduction of sanctions after February 24th. Polish diplomacy consistently supported the toughest proposals to impose sanctions on Russia, and in subsequent stages presented ideas to expand and tighten them. Some of the Polish proposals gained approval, even if reaching consensus required weeks of arduous negotiations and compromises. Among the most significant were the extension of sanctions on trade in coal, oil and technological sanctions depriving the defence industry of essential components. Poland's international pressure contributed to exclusion of Russia from the Council of Europe. The government also made the decision to freeze Russian assets in the country, including taking control of the Yamal pipeline and reclaiming real estate. Poland has launched its own criminal investigation into Russian war crimes and is working closely with EU partners and the International Criminal Court prosecutor on that issue. Of course a multilateral organisation, like the OSCE,

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faces numerous challenges. Its aim is to foster cooperation, mutual respect, integrity and sovereignty of the countries, but also human rights. Unfortunately, Russia has been destroying the established international order and violating human rights. That is why, it is a huge challenge: how to keep the OSCE together and how it can survive in the current circumstances. You can see that we addressed this issue through our very active leadership. Minister Rau travelled worldwide during his term as the organisation's chair. He also visited Moscow.

Speaking about this visit, can you then tell us what is the state of Polish-Russian relations at the moment? Are there diplomatic contacts between the two states?

Of course we maintain diplomatic contacts. We have an embassy in Moscow and consuls in some cities, even in Irkutsk. However, there is no full-scale diplomatic activity because of the reciprocity between the countries. Some Russian diplomats had to leave Warsaw, and some Polish diplomats were forced to leave Moscow. Still, our ambassadors are in Moscow and the Russian ambassador remains in Warsaw. Indeed, the relations between the two countries are very difficult now and our diplomatic activities are limited, primarily because Poland cannot agree with Russia's aggressive policies towards Ukraine.

Last November in Poland there was an incident when two missiles come into Polish territory and killed two people in a small locality called Przewodów. At first, when the news reached the public there was fear that these missiles had been fired by Russians, which could have been interpreted as an attack on the Polish territory and bring on serious consequences. However, after a while it turned out that these were parts of missiles shot down by Ukrainian anti-missile defence, which changed the interpretation of the event dramatically. Nonetheless, the fact that a missile fell on Polish soil and killed two people revealed, at least to some people, that the war also generates direct risks to Poland and other NATO countries. Are you worried that with a possible escalation of the war it could go beyond Ukraine?

In my view the reaction of the Polish government and society to the incident in Przewodów was that of great responsibility. In the beginning there was indeed a lot of disinformation and fake news, but nobody jumped into the conclusions too fast and the government waited for the investigation results to make any interpretations. I think this was very responsible. It also showed that Poland is treating security-related issues very seriously. The restrained and crisis-coordinated response with NATO partners was praised by the allies. There was an unprecedented consensus in Poland at the time. The government met with the opposition, which helped build cross-party cohesion regarding the response to the incident.

The Polish position is that Ukraine should win the war, which is also the hope of most

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countries in Europe. Logically speaking, if Ukraine wins this war, Russia will lose it. How do you see Poland's role in international affairs, and especially towards Russia, after Ukraine wins the war and Russia loses it?

The war against Ukraine is important for the future of Russia, its political system, maintaining the dependence of the centre over the regions, its economy and security. We do not rule out any scenario. In the short term the most likely scenario in Russia is the further consolidation of the Putin regime. Rather, we must prepare for the long march. It is in Poland's interest to stop the imperial ambitions of its eastern neighbour. We will need many allies and partners to do so, led by the embattled Ukraine. Therefore, this moment of relative unity should be used to promote Polish interests, including the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank, independence from Russia, maintaining sustained military support for Ukraine, supporting Ukraine's EU accession process, deepening regional Polish-Ukrainian cooperation and strengthening the trilateral infrastructure along with maintaining a strong US presence in Central and Eastern Europe.

In my view, Ukraine's victory in this war will also mean a change for the Russian civil society. It will show that it is possible to be a free and democratic country in a post-Soviet space. I hope that in Ukraine people will reform the country so it continues to develop without the oligarchs, without corruption. It is a huge challenge that Ukrainians will be faced with but in my view their success will be a good example for the Russians as well. I do not think that when Ukraine wins, Russia will lose. No, Ukraine's victory will pose a huge incentive for Russia to change.

You are more optimistic than we are…

There is no better way to help Russia than to help Ukraine first. That is why we should not only think about sanctions, but also the norms of international law, the genocide acts and how the perpetrators should get punished after the war. This is the key.

Arkady Rzegocki is the head of the foreign service at the Polish ministry of foreign affairs. He previously served as the Polish ambassador to the United Kingdom. He is also an assistant professor of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

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Lessons of cybersecurity from the war in Ukraine

Russian cyber-operations in Ukraine are decisive, dirty and ruthless, but are they effective? In the first weeks of the Russian aggression, media and security specialists warned that it would set a turning point for the development of cyberwar. At the same time, the consequences of Russian actions were expected to be catastrophic for Ukraine's critical infrastructure and information security. As the first year of Russian aggression has almost passed, it is now a good moment to evaluate whether this is the case.

This special section of *New Eastern Europe* is dedicated to various aspects of cybersecurity, with a particular emphasis on Russian actions in Ukrainian cyberspace. The authors invited from Georgia, Poland, Moldova, and the United States present an interesting mix of perspectives. Dominika Dziwisz and Błażej Sajduk (researchers from the National Security Department at the Jagiellonian University) point out that although cyberattacks in Ukraine are more sophisticated and widespread than many reports recognise, Moscow's primary goal from the beginning was the information warfare in cyberspace. Cybertools are insufficient to capture the land but are incomparable when it comes to competition in the information sphere through which one can attempt to achieve political goals and capture the hearts and minds of people. Similar observations are made by Grigol Julukhidze (director of the Foreign Policy Council, a think tank in Tbilisi), who points out that the war in Ukraine is described as the first full-scale "social media war". In this conflict, social media play a leading role as a source of news, activism, support, opposition and manipulation. A different and human-centric approach to the role of social media is presented by Agnieszka Grzechynka (a researcher at the Institute of Political and Administrative Sciences of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków). She points out that social media should be assessed not only through the prism of their technical functionality but also concerning two other factors: the social realms in which they are used and the competence of the people who use them. Consequently, these are not social media that actually are dangerous but rather leaders and societies who do not understand its peculiarities and are not competent enough to use them consciously. Are we dangerously approaching the Chinese Social Credit System? In

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his article, Adam Reichardt (the editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe*) writes about the dangers to democracy caused by modern digital technologies, such as facial recognition systems. Marina Bzovîi (the executive director of the Moldovan National Association of ICT Companies) describes how the Russian war in cyberspace is affecting the development of Moldova's energy and IT sectors and the challenges faced by Moldovan companies during the Russian aggression.

The research for this publication has been supported by a grant from the Priority Research Area FutureSoc under the Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at the Jagiellonian University.

** None of the articles in the special issue were written by artificial intelligence/ChatGPT. They were all written by human authors from different countries and backgrounds.*

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To war or not to war?

Russia's cyber strategies in Ukraine 2014–22

DOMINIKA DZIWISZ AND BŁAŻEJ SAJDUK

Had Moscow used cyber operations to substitute kinetic operations in February 2022, we would have seen a full-blown cyber war instead of a conventional invasion. In fact, the consequences of the pre-war period were modest and most of the actions taken seemed to be rushed or poorly planned. Russia failed to achieve its strategic objectives using cyber operations and the Kremlin concluded that its only option was to launch a military campaign.

At the 2013 meeting of senior Russian and American defence officials, General Nikolai Makarov ridiculed the lack of information warfare in the US Cyber Command's (USCYBERCOM) mission. In his provocative speech he told his counterparts, "one uses information to destroy nations, not networks" and taunted that the omission of information warfare proves the Americans' ignorance. That was also a clear message about Russian priorities for cyberspace, which were later reflected in Russian strategic documents and also applied in Ukraine in 2022.

Although the war is far from over, until now, "cyber fire" has yet to generate spectacular breakthroughs on the battlefield. At the same time, very few of the dynamics between cyber and military operations have developed as expected. In addition to the attempts to coordinate cyber and kinetic forces at the beginning of the war, we now see the use of these two Russian capabilities independently of each

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other. This might be caused by different goals set for the Russian cyber and kinetic invasion, where cyber is for information warfare and kinetic is for seizing territory. Therefore, it can be assumed that the widely predicted "cyber Pearl Harbour" is not coming, yet also that Russia is not as bad at cyberwarfare as expected. This is mainly because cyber weapons were not suitable for the situation in Ukraine. Following the trials of various cyberspace strategies tested by the Russians in Ukraine from 2014 till today, the Russians adapted their plans and ways of implementing cyber-weapons in Ukraine. This can tell us much about the future of cyberwarfare.

War and non-war in cyberspace

The 2010 Stuxnet worm attack, which was allegedly the result of US-Israeli cooperation, is the best example of using cyber conflict as a substitute for war. It destroyed centrifuges at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility, thus delaying the country's progress towards building a nuclear weapon. The attackers did not need to use military force since the cyber-attacks achieved similar goals. At least since 2014 Russia has been modelling its own activities on this master pattern. It tried implementing a grey zone conflict strategy, including activities in cyberspace, to pressure Kyiv to make concessions. Cyber-tools from the grey zone, including ongoing misinformation and disinformation, informational propaganda, election interference in 2014, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure in 2015, and a cyber-attack that targeted Ukraine's ministries and banks in February 2022, were a form of limited military competition that persisted beyond peace but remained short of full-scale war. The aim of all these activities was to avoid open conflict and serious clashes and, at the same time, achieve strategic goals. Therefore, we may conclude that the Russia-Ukraine conflict before February 24th 2022 was a perfect example of "salami tactics", offering an attractive option for an expansionist power on the cusp of a major war.

Russia failed to achieve its aims using cyber operations, hence the Kremlin decided its only option was to launch the invasion.

Despite some spectacular successes, for example releasing a piece of devastating malware called NotPetya in 2017 or the unprecedented hacking of Ukraine's power grid in 2016, the Kremlin decided that the grey zone strategy was insufficient to satisfy its great power aspirations and consequently decided to engage in a military invasion of Ukraine. Assuming that Moscow had used cyber operations to substitute kinetic operations, we should have seen a full-blown cyber war instead of a conventional invasion. In fact, the consequences of the pre-war period were modest, and most of

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the actions taken seemed to be rushed or poorly planned. Russia failed to achieve its strategic objectives using cyber operations and the Kremlin concluded that its only option was to launch a military campaign.

Using cyber-tools directly

Offensive actions in cyberspace can be divided into two categories: those that directly complement the war effort on the frontline and those that indirectly affect the outcome of an armed conflict. To be relevant for conventional forces, the first one must be synchronised in time and place with what is happening in the real world on the ground. A report published by Microsoft in April 2022 pointed to Russian attempts to coordinate activities in cyberspace with kinetic ones. A series of what seems to be hastily compiled Wipers, a class of malicious software that deletes files on infected computers, were the main tool of the attack, but their effectiveness was not confirmed. Up until now, the only publicly known serious cyber incident that took place simultaneously with the launch of the Russian ground invasion was against Viasat, the company that provides satellite internet for Ukraine and Europe. As a result, the communications of the Ukrainian military forces were severely limited, but only until Starlink agreed to provide its communication services to Ukraine.

Activities in cyberspace aimed at disrupting or damaging enemy communications systems are a result of long preparations for such an attack. First, the attacker needs to find access to the system and this process is time consuming. The attacker also needs appropriate tools, especially access to vulnerabilities which will allow one to launch an attack. Moreover, once a cyber-attack is detected, the vulnerabilities that enabled it are quickly patched and reusing them becomes ineffective. This fact distinguishes conventional weapons, which are generally reusable, from cyber weapons, the use of which each time limits their effectiveness in future attacks. A firearm may serve as an example. If one wants to use it, all he or she needs to do is to aim and pull the trigger. The weapon then will fire, and the effect will be seen immediately. As a result, due to the very different nature of the two types of weapons, coordination of their mutual actions on a battlefield is extremely difficult. This may hint at why the role of offensive actions in cyberspace during the Russian invasion of Ukraine was limited.

To achieve its goals in Ukraine, Russia chose conventional strikes on critical infrastructure over cyber-attacks. The explanation as to why indiscriminate bombing remains the Kremlin's preferred tactic can be found in cost-effect reasoning. It is beneficial for the Russian army to use proven methods of hitting targets, in-

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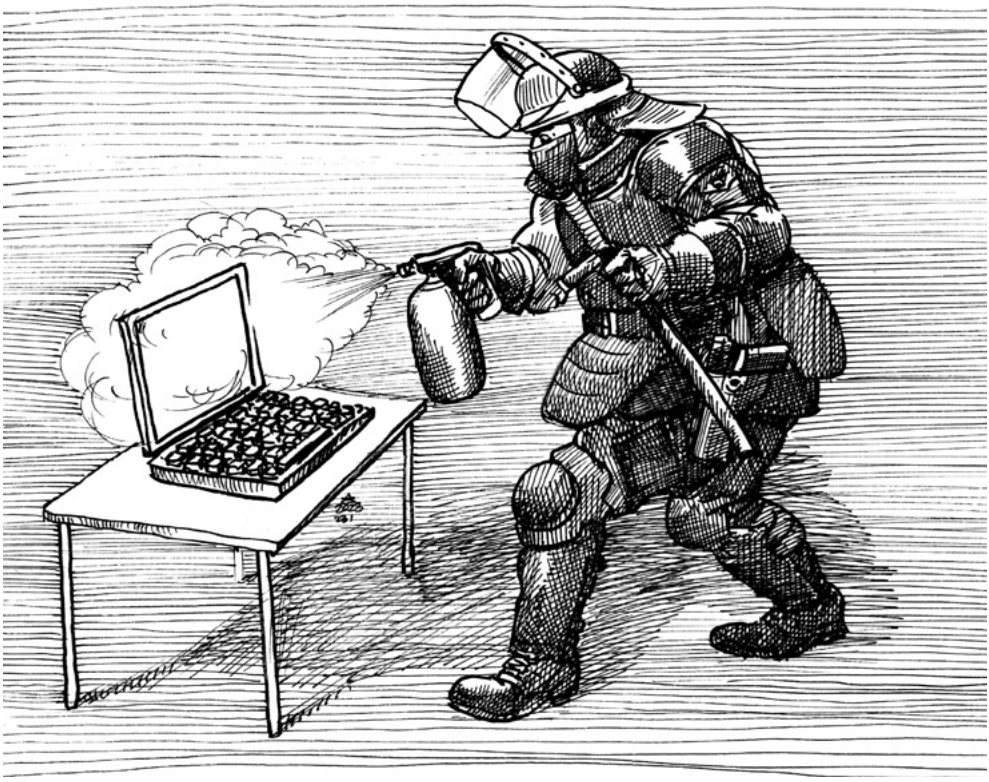

cluding cruise missiles or cheap Iranian drones, rather than investing time and resources in uncertain cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure. From the course of the war, it can be concluded that so far Russian hackers have not deployed any new cyber-weapon and probably regret that at present they cannot repeat cyber-attacks on Ukrainian power plants like those from 2015 and 2016, or the NotPetya attack from 2017. Yet as mentioned earlier, once a cyber-weapon is used and detected, it no longer becomes effective.

Using cyber-tools indirectly

To support the war effort, the cyber domain can also be used indirectly, and two roles are important here: cyberespionage ("cyberint") and information operations aimed at influencing the society of another country. Intelligence activities in cyberspace are the key elements of the daily activities of each state's secret services. The goal is to steal secret information from enemy systems. However, the desire to remain undetected causes cyberint operations to stretch over time.

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During the war in Ukraine, cyberspace is used by both parties for intelligence purposes. The Russian secret services have documented instances of successful operations in the past, including the notorious SolarWinds cyber-attack in December 2020, when at least 200 of the largest global companies and several US federal agencies were infiltrated. Intelligence activities also take place during the operation in Ukraine. In April, Microsoft noted the extensive activity of Russian hackers who tried to obtain secret information and credentials from Ukrainian institutions. However, it can be concluded that like the ground offensive, Russian services have not yet achieved any spectacular success in the field of cyber espionage. At least, any achievement which would have had an impact on the course of the conflict.

Like the ground offensive, Russia has not yet achieved any spectacular success in the field of cyber espionage.

Information and psychological operations are the second field in which cyberspace activities can indirectly support the war effort, however, they seem to be the first option for Russia. Currently, more than five billion people have access to the internet, or 63 per cent of the world's population. This makes the internet a perfect place for propaganda activities and the longer a society is exposed to cyber influence, the more effective it becomes. It is estimated that English-language websites with pro-Kremlin propaganda are visited 60 to 80 million times a month in the US, which is as often as the *Wall Street Journal*. Russia has long pursued this type of action, but also in this field, it is difficult to indicate unequivocal successes that would have an impact on the strategic dimension of the so-called "special operation". Although they are not as spectacular as offensive actions, it seems that psychological operations will be the dominant way of using cyberspace to support Russian military operations in Ukraine.

What we have learned

The Ukraine invasion is a year in, yet the answer to the question on how the Russians have used their cyber potential is neither simple nor easy. However, some conclusions can be drawn already. Firstly, coordination across domains is demanding even for the most advanced militaries. Cyber-attacks are both more time consuming and planning intensive than traditional ones. They require sophisticated reconnaissance to find vulnerabilities to be exploited. After using a vulnerability once, the attacker must search for a new one and start the process all over again. Considering that the Russians hoped for a quick victory in Ukraine, they were unprepared for sophisticated cyber operations that would complement the tasks in

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the field. Frankly speaking, Russian military actions in Ukraine show the problem of coordinating actions in one single domain, let alone coordinating two domains.

Secondly, the Russians are aware that cyberspace is most useful in pursuing informational goals, such as gathering intelligence to get better insights about the conduct of war, creating and delivering disinformation, promoting chaos or winning diplomatic debates. In Russian thinking, cyber-tools are not sufficient to capture the nation but are best to use to compete in the information sphere, through which one can attempt to win political goals and capture the hearts and minds of people. When the goal is to seize territory, the kinetic forces are more efficient. Therefore, there are different goals for the Russian cyber and kinetic invasion of Ukraine.

Thirdly, it is very likely that, under pressure from western countries, the Russian Federation will look for an adequate response. In this situation, the cyber domain is perhaps the best-suited option for retaliatory actions against foreign sanctions. In addition to information warfare, Russia may also use all kinds of ransomware attacks to improve its finances.

Finally, the problems related to coordinating cyber and kinetic activities might stem from the fact that the Russian army is centrally managed, and it gives no room for greater autonomy for lower-ranking commanders. Consequently, communication problems appear between specific commands. Apparently, the Russians did not learn from the Iraqi experience of General Stanley McChrystal, who transformed the US Joint Special Operations Command from a pyramid hierarchy to a web of teams with him at the centre. Furthermore, adopting a model of "radical transparency" has made communications crystal clear from the top to the bottom of the command and across it to develop a shared awareness of the situation.

Taking everything into account, (as of now) cyber is not going to replace traditional forms of combat, but according to the recent reports, cyber-attacks in Ukraine are more sophisticated and widespread than many recognise. Therefore, in the future, different patterns of behaviour may appear. NEE

Dominika Dziwisz is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Her research focuses on US cybersecurity policies, critical infrastructure protection and the relationship between big data and human rights.

Błażej Sajduk is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. His research interests focus on the role of new technologies and international security (practically 5G and Artificial Intelligence).

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Putin's hidden war

How the Kremlin is bombing us on the internet

GRIGOL JULUKHIDZE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been characterised as the first full-scale "social media war". Russia uses social media to not only spread propaganda but also the "fog of war". Its efforts aim to both demonise Ukraine in the West and strengthen Russian support for the war.

War propaganda is the deliberate use of factual or fictitious information to sway public opinion and trigger strong feelings like fear, hatred, guilt, adulation or outrage. It has been a crucial tactic of battle throughout history and has evolved into a "necessity" of warfare that can take many different shapes. Even if Russian claims of significant successes over "Ukrainian Nazis" may be mocked in the West, these strategies have been very successful within Russia and among supporters of the country. Apart from the military component of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has noticeably intensified its psychological and information operations both inside and outside the country.

Moscow's propaganda aims

The propagandistic aspect of Russia's "special military operation" is one of the key points of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine. On the one hand, Moscow actively disseminates fake news; and on the other, it is trying to keep up the image of an

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"unbeaten empire". Its specific goals include: the dissolution of relations between Ukraine and its strategic partners; the paralysis of decision-making processes in European and NATO structures; the creation of various myths, such as that the United States is going to start World War Three and Central and Eastern European countries will be used as shields; the spread of different false doctrines, such as that the post-Soviet space is the "natural" and legitimate Russian area of influence; discrediting the Eastern Partnership states using the Orthodox Church, NGOs, and foundations; presenting Ukraine as an aggressor and a fascist regime; and promoting the image of an invincible Russia.

Russia has made efforts to control information in all of the former Soviet Union countries that speak Russian.

Making predictions during the ongoing war is risky and, in most cases, useless. However, it should be noted that by November 2022, the only war Putin is winning is inside Russia. Thanks to the active coordination of the security services and a fully controlled media, as well as the absence of political opposition and an effective civil society, more than 75 per cent of Russians support the "special military operation".

Over the course of Putin's more than 20 years in power, Russia has meticulously bolstered its defences against what it sees as its most potent foe – the West. This has been accomplished by restricting the country's press freedom and indoctrinating its population with propaganda that is even more cynical than that of the Soviet era. Additionally, it has made an effort to control the flow of information in all the former Soviet Union countries that speak Russian. At the same time, Russia has developed strong offensive capabilities by infiltrating European policy-making and media institutions and building a potent cyberwarfare arsenal. "While Moscow remains a fortress to policy-makers in the West, the Iron Curtain has been replaced by a one-way mirror through which the Kremlin can carefully observe the West while remaining completely invisible and inscrutable," wrote the Georgian politician Salome Samadashvili already back in 2015.

Social media war

Russia has developed a new method for disseminating false material covertly to potentially billions of individuals. As a report by US-based intelligence firm Nisos indicates, Russia is now utilising the social media platform Telegram to help it get around indicators that its material is Moscow-backed propaganda on digital platforms like Twitter. Researchers discovered a Telegram channel that was being used as a digital library for thousands of videos that were then translated into up

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to 18 different languages, including English, Spanish, Arabic, French, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Persian and Chinese.

According to Nisos, once the videos are on Telegram, they may be downloaded and shared on Twitter and other social media platforms without any evidence that they were created by Russian state-affiliated media. This implies that Kremlin propaganda could circulate without being detected by major social media platforms that have made an effort to reduce disinformation on their networks. The Telegram group claims to be sponsored by RT and states in its description that it is working to "break the information blockage around the events in Ukraine".

Reframing the war's history is the overall objective that is consistent with Russian propaganda goals. The videos on the channel all present the same narrative from various perspectives, stating that the Russian military is kindly helping a Ukrainian population that is under siege from a dishonest, murderous government full of neo-Nazi terrorists.

Margarita Simonyan, editor in chief of RT, claimed that the Telegram group was a component of the "people's information militia" that has helped propagate pro-Russian viewpoints around the globe since it first debuted in April 2022. This is a result of the western blockade of state-owned Russian media outlets, including RT, on websites like YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been characterised as the first full-scale "social media war". Due to the digital revolution, the conflict also blazes new trails in other areas. The information infrastructure of Ukraine is attacked through cyberwar methods. At the same time, social media is used to spread the "fog of war". Wars of choice are crimes in and of themselves, and when the crime scene cannot be hidden (as in the case of the atrocities in Bucha), an effort is made to cast doubt on what is observed.

Since users started disseminating information in real time, especially on the "WarTok" channel, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has also been referred to as "the world's first TikTok war". Even if there are some authentic accounts on the app, misinformation is a major source of concern. A recent analysis discovered that within 40 minutes of signing up for the service, new users are exposed to false information.

Southern Front

One organisation, whose name translates as "Southern Front", produces and disseminates pro-Putin propaganda on YouTube, Telegram and through a website that targets regions that were recently under Russian control. The Southern Front news site issued its first message on the first day of the Russian invasion of

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Ukraine, and now has numerous reporters who produce stories every day. It frequently publishes videos that make wrongful assumptions. Most reports assert that a "peaceful existence" has been created in regions that are occupied. The programme frequently promotes articles that defend Russia's incursion. On the day of the invasion, the Southern Front's Telegram message to its then 25 subscribers declared: "Vladimir Putin announced the launch of a special operation to demilitarise and de-Nazify the territory of Ukraine!" In another video, a reporter claims to have visited a library where she saw multiple instances of books with "Nazi emblems". The screen does not show any proof. The books that are visible on camera are written by contemporary Ukrainian authors and cover actual historical occurrences like the Battle of Ilovaisk.

Another issue in this war is the blocking of the internet by Russia. The first thing that the Russians do when they occupy Ukrainian territories is cut off the networks. The struggle for control of the internet in Ukraine demonstrates how both sides see access to the internet as a vital tool in a 21st-century conflict. An essential part of the war effort has been the consistent flow of images and videos from Ukraine, which have given the entire world a front-row seat to the invasion. As a result of Russia's moves to block access to mobile and internet networks, those living under occupation in Ukraine were left in an information vacuum, which Russia filled with its own propaganda. Much of the proof of the crimes committed by Russian troops in the seized territories throughout the war has just recently come to light.

Russia has made numerous efforts to regulate the flow of information. Since the start of the invasion, Russian troops have taken control of more than 5,000 base stations belonging to Ukrainian telecom companies and destroyed or damaged more than 65,000 kilometres of fibre-optic internet links, according to Ukraine's special communications service. Additionally, 18 broadcast antennas that transmitted radio and television signals were destroyed by Russian soldiers. Russia appears to have redirected online traffic through its own providers in several southern Ukrainian regions, subjecting them to the huge Kremlin network of surveillance and control.

New narratives, old methods

The new propaganda that is being disseminated on social media and in the news has also made unfounded claims that the Ukrainian government intends to demolish a dam on its own land. This effort aims to both demonise Ukraine in the West and strengthen Russian support for the war. The Kremlin's propaganda has gotten significantly more vicious since the invasion first began. Russian government representatives have avoided open criticism of the Ukrainian political system in the

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past. However, once the violence began, they began to describe it as "neo-Nazi" and "criminal". In fact, Putin used the word "junta" for the first time since 2014 in his speech on February 24th. At the time, he had been using it to suggest the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian government and to contrast it with the "fraternal" people of Ukraine.

By asserting that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" with a shared past and future, such a juxtaposition has historically been used as an excuse to meddle in Ukraine's internal affairs. Disinformation is currently being spread in many different ways against the Ukrainian state. Russian propaganda disseminates false information about Ukraine's intentions, including its "plans" to rebuild its nuclear arsenal, develop biological weapons that can target specific ethnic groups, "drown" Russia purposefully in synthetic drugs, and outlaw the use of the Russian language in daily life. The key difference from the pre-war era is that Vladimir Putin and other members of the Russian state's highest echelons are considerably more engaged in spreading false information.

Additionally, blatantly neo-imperial narratives are also being used more frequently by the Russian authorities. At the 2022 St Petersburg International Economic Forum, for instance, Putin addressed the young attendees and noted that since Peter the Great's time, Russia's foreign policy mission remains unchanged: to retake and fortify the original Russian lands. Alexander Kuznetsov, the Russian Federation's permanent ambassador to UNESCO, echoed him when he told his compatriots that several times throughout history, "the people of Russia … brought together the original Russian territory and took fraternal peoples under its protection."

Such language is not only directed at the older generation of Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, many of whom still harbour nostalgic memories of the Soviet era of "stability and greatness". Indeed, Putin and his allies have likely anticipated that Moscow's military aggressiveness against Ukraine could inspire other nations to use force. By doing so, the Kremlin might purposefully keep the international scene tense and perhaps push Washington to its breaking point. China has undertaken air and sea manoeuvres close to Taiwan in recent months, threatening to ignite a war if the island proclaims its independence. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, has heightened tensions with neighbouring Greece, by accusing Athens of discriminating against Turkish communities in Rhodes and Kos and admonishing the country to demilitarise islands in the Aegean.

> Russia's foreign policy mission remains unchanged: to retake and fortify the original Russian lands.

Despite the constant transformation of Russian propaganda and its disinformation machine, the Kremlin's modus operandi remains the same. Overall, it does not

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matter how unbelievable the information is, as long as various conspiracies and emotionally-charged narratives are continuously disseminated without providing any evidence. If the fake information is debunked, Moscow denies any connection and blames others.

The thousands of pro-Russian trolls, bots, useful idiots and agents of influence do not stop repeating messages that are easily memorable for millions of uncritical and poorly-informed individuals. The vulnerability of these people is the main ally of Russia, which does not change its approach and follows the line that it had chosen many decades ago – lie as much as possible until people no longer believe anything.

Grigol Julukhidze is the director of the Foreign Policy Council, a think tank in Tbilisi. He specialises in security studies and propaganda research. He is also a lecturer at Ilia State University.

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Friend or foe?

The role of social media during Russia's war in Ukraine

AGNIESZKA GRZECHYNKA

In the era of social divisions, public disputes and widespread polarisation of views, one phenomenon seems indisputable – social media has become an important element of life both in the private and public spheres. Understanding the peculiarities of these tools has also become an important social and business skill. Yet should social media management be considered a political and military competence as well? The Russian war in Ukraine suggests a positive answer. The terms "like", "share", "click", "comment", "tweet" or "swipe" have begun to have serious consequences and are – literally – a weapon of mass (media) destruction.

The original idea and assumptions which lay at the foundation of social media's creation obviously did not take into account today's far-reaching goals. Tools, which are now often used as powerful political and military weapons, were supposed to facilitate people's communication. In the 1960s, this was the goal set by the creators of the PLATO platform, which allowed for the exchange of information between users of connected terminals. Almost a decade later, Ray Tomlinson sent the first e-mail and the 1980s brought another breakthrough – the birth of chat programmes.

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However, it was the era of the mass internet (the 1990s) that truly enabled the development of numerous virtual tools. New platforms and apps not only allowed for the exchange of simple messages, but also the building of specific communities and interest groups. These, in turn, were commonly used to satisfy various higher-order needs: social, esteem, self-actualisation, creativity and entertainment.

Era 5.0

The multitude of emerging portals and applications quickly began to take over further spheres of public life, turning into key tools of marketing, public relations and sales, as well as in the education and public administration sectors. Is this phenomenon surprising? Not at all – but only if we properly understand the tools' potential and see the opportunities generated by them. Social media helps us to build a brand and shape its desired image, guarantee recognition, reach an almost unlimited audience, reduce promotion costs, and maintain contact with a precisely defined target group. It has also helped us build relationships, strengthen our commitment, and build an advocacy system. Moreover – which is particularly important in the political context – these realities have a significant, real impact on human behaviour.

The widespread availability and intuitive operation methods of these tools, which are an advantage both for active content creators and content recipients, have resulted in 4.74 billion users around the world today (which translates to 59.3 per cent of the entire global population). This is an enormous group with great importance, able to influence the shape of public life around the world. How many of them, however, use these tools consciously? What percentage of this group is aware of potential threats – not only stemming from hacker attacks or identity theft, but also from the potential scale of disinformation? How many are aware that social media impact translates into real actions and can change the balance of social and political power – not only on a regional, but even a global scale?

These questions become particularly relevant in the context of the current political unrest and war in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, which additionally overlap with the evolution of social trends, referred to as "Era 5.0". The phrase, originally referring to developments in the marketing industry, means a complete change in the perception of reality by modern man. Human behaviour is now driven by both the widespread development of modern technologies (automation, artificial intelligence, the "Internet of Things" or augmented reality), as well as by the growing reluctance to confide in both mass media and the traditional authorities. Consumers stopped trusting not only advertisements and commercials, but also

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representatives of previously respected professions. Instead, they have begun to have confidence in people that they believe are similar to themselves, often blindly relying on their judgment in situations where information chaos makes it difficult to make an independent decision.

As a consequence, online influencers received "a powerful weapon", allowing them to impact the behaviour of the masses on an almost unlimited scale. The number of "social media followers" of such an "opinion leader" is often treated as a sufficient confirmation of his/her credibility. This, together with the common human habit of reacting emotionally and thoughtlessly to encountered content, creates favourable conditions for campaigns using manipulation techniques and propaganda.

e-propaganda?

Russia's attack on Ukraine started a war on many fronts, among which the information sphere became one of the most important. From the first days of the war, both sides of the conflict started to use online social networks for both information and disinformation activities. And although this is not a new phenomenon (after all, the parties to any contemporary conflict, whether armed, political or social, act in a similar way), it was the war in Ukraine that clearly showed how different social media approaches translate into different results. It would be an exaggeration to say that both parties implement strictly prepared social strategies, but two intentional (and opposing) models of operation can be clearly identified.

The first of the two models – the Russian one – seems to be based on solutions, almost directly transferred from classic disinformation campaigns implemented by the Kremlin in the offline sphere for decades. In the period before the aggression, the Kremlin's propaganda activities targeted mainly Russian citizens, and the narrative actions taken against them were meant to reinforce social support for the armed forces. The rhetoric of fear, creating a sense of threat, presenting one's own country as a victim, and clearly identifying "the enemy" have become inseparable elements of Russian media broadcasts.

Proven tools and solutions were used, including state-owned television, for which more than 115 billion roubles were allocated from the state budget in 2022 alone. However, in the context of the phenomena mentioned earlier, it is no longer possible to look at information/disinformation activities only through the prism of the tools that have been used in previous decades. Traditional media – especially television – which until now played a key role in information campaigns, raises less interest (and trust) among populations. Television broadcasts can therefore reach only certain social groups (elderly people and those who are digitally

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excluded for other reasons), which nowadays turns out to be insufficient. As a result, social media became an excellent alternative, guaranteeing both a wider reach and the anonymity of the sender, as well as greater efficiency (content published on social media is often perceived as being more authentic and less manipulated than official, state messages).

As expected, Russian social media is regularly flooded with photos and videos, showing the alleged brutality of the regime's opponents. At the same time, the content – reportedly recorded by so-called "ordinary citizens" – was meant to inspire greater trust and generate emotional reactions. The number of publications increased as the war progressed, keeping the narrative that Russia was successfully carrying out defence and liberation activities in the disputed areas (and that its presence was greeted and welcomed by the local population). Both the form and the content of those messages clearly suggested that their recipients were to be, once again, the citizens of Russia, and this time also the confused citizens of Ukraine, who have less access to independent sources of information. The only messages that seemed to be targeting "the outside world" (i.e., the international community) were aimed at creating an atmosphere of fear and chaos.

Social media content was evidently created to hit the weak spots of specific regional markets, including Poland (where numerous fake news stories have appeared to scare Polish citizens and discourage involvement in the ongoing conflict). The key party vulnerable to such disinformation campaigns largely involved ordinary citizens, almost literally bombarded with misleading messages concerning "the lack of fuel", "possible energy blackouts" and "social threats resulting from helping Ukrainians". The Russian social communication model involved almost no factual information, and further target groups (other countries or international organisations) were not taken into account. The narrative was based almost exclusively on the rhetoric of threat and was promoted through the widespread use of "troll farms". The often incoherent attempt to transfer old propaganda mechanisms to new media (on a 1:1 scale), made it impossible to use the many functionalities of social media. In turn, these were successfully utilised by the Ukrainians.

V is for viral

One indicator of the effectiveness of activities on social media, especially in the era of "marketing 5.0", is their viral potential, a feature specific to digital tools. Content spontaneously shared by other network users generates gigantic reach and has a much greater impact on recipients than official, one-way and top-down messages. This is due to the aforementioned importance of the argument of advocacy

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and people's trust in recommendations generated within a horizontal communication model (based on dialogue where partners in the process are equal in their status; unlike the vertical model, where the sender of the message is superior to the recipient). Of course, for content to become viral, it must meet certain conditions. It should be attractive to the recipient due to its substantive value, real meaning, high emotionality or entertaining character. It seems that the Ukrainians are well aware of this fact, and are therefore basing most of their social media activities on viral content.

In addition to strictly informative messages in the form of reports, addressed to both the state's citizens and the international community, online communication was dominated by viral content. The recording of the conversation between the defenders of Snake Island and Russian soldiers became a symbol of heroism, and the phrase "Russian warship, *idi na khuy*" became a popular saying, used to create numerous memes. It is worth noting that nowadays this type of content plays an important informative role, and the meaning of memes has long gone beyond the entertainment dimension. A similar goal was achieved by the publication of recordings showing the theft of Russian military equipment by representatives of the Ukrainian Roma community. The graphics and texts created on the basis of this information, although humorous, achieved a very important goal: they strengthened belief in the invincibility of the Ukrainian army and the complete ineffectiveness of the aggressor's forces.

Content based on values such as heroism, patriotism, honour and sacrifice has huge viral potential.

Content based on values such as heroism, patriotism, honour and sacrifice also had huge viral potential. Both photos and videos published on social media by the defenders of Ukraine showed ordinary citizens taking up arms, helping those in need, saving animals. All of these messages found fertile ground in society and generated gigantic reach, strengthening the official message. This, in turn, was very clearly and consistently presented by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who also made perfect use of social media. Unlike Vladimir Putin, he communicated with the public using a horizontal model, which not only helped build his reputation as the head of state in times of war, but also created an image of the "ordinary citizen" who remains close to the people and their problems. Zelenskyy's personal brand undoubtedly benefited from the publication of motivational recordings and photographs, which – even without additional explanations – were designed to confirm his dedication, steadfastness and strength. It seems that the purpose of such actions was primarily to maintain high morale among the citizens of the occupied regions of Ukraine, but they also helped to gain the support of the international community. Viral and emotional

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content proved to be successful even in relation to people who do not follow official broadcasts and do not analyse current political events.

Domino effect

Likes, comments and shares, which are closely associated with the use of social media, are often equated with the effectiveness of social content. In fact, measures of the reach of a given publication are meaningless if they fail to take into account real action. A conscious, strategic presence on social media – whether in the sphere of business or politics – should have one fundamental goal: to provoke real engagement. Again, it seems that only the Ukrainian side understands this fact, as it translated into numerous, bottom-up forms of help offered to Ukrainian refugees by citizens of neighbouring countries.

Once again, social media turned out to be a great, independent tool allowing for coordinating activities. The potential of these tools has been proven many times during political and social events (among which it is worth mentioning the most recent ones: the Catalan secession attempt, the Women's Strike in Poland or the current revolution in Iran). Social media helps us to coordinate activities, to communicate and associate beyond censorship, and develop effective early warning tools. In the initial phase of hostilities in Ukraine, social media allowed for the organisation of help for refugees, facilitated the recognition of the needs of the Ukrainian population, and helped to distribute various forms of support. The power of social media remains undeniable, but it should be noted that the "domino effect" generated by universal access to digital tools can turn out to be a double-edged sword.

Susceptibility to simple arguments and hierarchies of social legitimacy, emotional reactions, and the aforementioned lack of trust in the power of authorities, mean that a significant part of social media users do not have any competence to defend themselves against a wave of disinformation. The enthusiasm with which societies have become involved in helping refugees can very easily transform into a feeling of reluctance (and in extreme situations even active aggression towards a specific group or nation). Lack of awareness of the consequences of online actions can also turn out to be a serious security threat (hence, in the early stages of the war, citizens were asked not to photograph and spontaneously share photos of passing military equipment, which could make it easier to locate these objects).

Friend or foe? An effective channel of communication and social mobilisation or a dangerous propaganda tool? How should we perceive social media in the context of the war in Ukraine? These tools undoubtedly have great potential and an

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unprecedented social impact. However, they should be assessed not only through the prism of their technical functionality, but also with regards to two other factors: the social realms in which they are used and the competence of the people who use them (both content creators and recipients). Adopting military rhetoric, it is worth recalling that it is not the gun that kills, but the man who pulls the trigger. Similarly, it is not social media that is dangerous – but rather leaders and societies who do not understand its peculiarities and are not competent enough to use them in a conscious way.

Agnieszka Grzechynka is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political and Administrative Sciences of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków. She researches the use of social media and new technologies in the process of building the image of personal brands, companies, institutions, regions and countries. She is the author of the monograph *Lean Social Media. Lean Approach to Brand Management on Social Media*.

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The threat of digital surveillance

ADAM REICHARDT

Surveillance is nothing new when it comes to authoritarian regimes as it has always been a tool to keep control and maintain order. The rise of digital technologies, however, has made it easier for regimes to monitor and control their populations. But it is not only autocratic governments which have adopted these technologies, adding to the risk of the decline of democracy and freedom.

In July 2021 the international investigative journalist collective known as the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, or OCCRP, revealed that governments around the world – mostly autocratic – were using special highly sophisticated software to spy on journalists, human rights activists, diplomats, politicians and even government officials. The investigation, titled the Pegasus Project, analysed a list of 50,000 phone numbers which was attained by Amnesty International. The phone numbers were allegedly a list of targets for the spyware programme called "Pegasus", developed by the NSO Group, an Israeli software and cyber intelligence company. OCCRP's Pegasus Project enlisted 80 journalists, representing 17 media organisations around the world, to take part in the investigation.

As a result, the OCCRP released a series of stories which highlighted specific targets of this software, some of whom were oblivious to the fact that they were being spied on. The NSO Group, for its part, has denied any wrongdoing, insisting that it sells the software only to governments which are meant to use it for law enforcement and monitoring terrorist activities. Needless to say, the countries abusing this software for invasive purposes were rather more authoritarian than

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democratic. The list included countries like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, but also Hungary – a member of the European Union as well as NATO. Even more troubling, it soon turned out that even more EU countries were using the software. In the end, the OCCRP investigation brings to light the dangers of surveillance technology as it relates to freedom of speech and democracy.

Big brother is watching

Surveillance is nothing new when it comes to authoritarian regimes as it has always been a tool to keep control and maintain order. In the most extreme cases of the totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union (especially under Stalin), or North Korea, surveillance is employed by the regime on a mass scale to locate, control and eliminate any opponent or threat to those in power. One can imagine intelligence agents following an oppositionist, gathering information, creating files, using blackmail or even violence as tools of surveillance. However, these methods are time and resource consuming and can be recognised among the astute targets of surveillance.

One of the more sophisticated tools that has become popular is facial recognition technology.

Technology has always been a key component of surveillance and the dangers of using technology for oppressive purposes is also well known. In George Orwell's *1984*, published in 1949, the author already imagined what a totalitarian future could look like. The slogan "big brother is watching you" became iconic; and at the same time prophetic. And while the technology to read thoughts – and pursue thought-crimes – thankfully does not exist, many others similar to Orwell's prediction do, and are used exactly for surveillance purposes. What is more, many of them are not only employed by authoritarian regimes.

One of the more sophisticated technologies that has become extremely popular is facial recognition technology. Privacy International, an NGO which promotes human rights and digital privacy, defines facial recognition as technology used to identify, authenticate, verify or categorise an individual. Agencies using facial recognition technologies capture an individual's facial image and compare it to databases or watchlists. Facial recognition technologies are used widely by law enforcement agencies in most countries to aid in investigations or locate wanted or missing individuals. We see facial recognition also used by private companies for marketing or as a part of its services – for example Google Photos has sophisticated recognition software which makes it easier to categorise pictures based on a person's face.

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Yet, as individuals are constantly taking selfies and posting them online via social media, the potential for abuse is quite high. In 2020 it was revealed that one company, Clearview AI, had technology which combed every corner of the internet and was building secret profiles of individuals' faces which could be used for surveillance purposes. Initially the company had claimed that their database was only accessible for law enforcement in North America, however further investigations revealed that it was used by private companies as well as more authoritarian governments such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Clearview AI has since claimed that it has cut all ties with non-law enforcement agencies and has made efforts to redeem itself, becoming more transparent regarding the clients it works with. One interesting use of the Clearview AI database has been its cooperation with Ukraine during Russia's full-scale invasion. On its website, Clearview describes how Ukrainian officials use the database in checkpoint security, locating missing persons, investigating war crimes, identifying the deceased and, above all, recognising Russian infiltrators, soldiers and collaborators.

Watch your step

While facial recognition remains largely a tool to investigate crime in more democratic states, the People's Republic of China utilises it as a key component of its surveillance activities. In 2019, one Chinese facial recognition company accidentally exposed its database online, giving a glimpse into the scale of China's population surveillance. The exposure illustrated how the company, SenseNets, based in Shenzhen, kept files on more than 2.5 million people, which included not just faces and names, but also ID card numbers, home addresses, birthdays and all recent locations the company's software had placed any one of the individuals. The software works in real time; and within 24 hours, the time the database was exposed, the SenseNets programme logged more than 6.8 million locations.

The Chinese government, which has over 540 million surveillance cameras throughout the country monitoring its citizens' every move, has even used its surveillance technology to directly monitor, rate and punish social behaviour. The infamous "social credit system", announced first in 2014, is a massive surveillance system which tracks every individual with the aim being touted as a way to keep social order and understand who the government can trust. The system monitors people's actions in public, how they interact with others and whether they obey simple rules (like crossing the street at a crosswalk). Based on this activity the system provides a score to the individual. While China had hoped to launch the system nationwide in 2020, the pandemic and other setbacks have limited its roll-out.

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However, some analysts have claimed that the social credit score is used in decisions made for individuals – such as whether they can travel, have access to high-speed internet, own property or receive a loan.

Like many western countries, the Chinese government also used surveillance technologies to monitor COVID-19, but took it one step further in its enforcement of its unpopular zero-COVID policy. Real time data was collected and analysed not only on patients and the localisation of the spread of the virus, but also on those taking part in mass demonstrations calling for an end to the strict health policy. The surveillance takes place online as well, as police monitor group chats on social media – like Telegram, WeChat or Weibo. As Human Rights Watch recently reported, the surveillance of Chinese citizens goes well beyond facial recognition or mobile phone tracking, revealing it to be one of the most sophisticated surveillance regimes in the world, using technology to collect voice samples, DNA, iris scans and even people's social habits, to have a virtual picture of every individual in society. The data is often used in crackdowns against opposition, as in the above-mentioned zero-COVID protests, but also in the repressions against the Uyghurs in the province of Xinjiang.

Who spies on us?

Another key technology which is being used by governments, authoritarian or not, is spyware. This technology aims to exploit vulnerabilities in computers and mobile devices in order to access them and monitor a user's activities. The most well-known case of spyware is the NSO's software Pegasus as described at the onset of this article. Pegasus infiltrates a mobile device and is able to monitor all types of communication – including encrypted messaging. The programme monitors keystrokes, which can give access to web activity, text messages and passwords. It also is able to access the device's microphone and camera – enabling the observer to listen and see what the unwitting user is saying and doing.

The Pegasus Project revealed this new unprecedented level of access and surveillance that governments, mostly authoritarian, are using to suppress opposition, especially among journalists. The investigation highlighted the story of Khadija Ismayilova, an investigative journalist from Azerbaijan, whose iPhone was among the more than 1,000 phone numbers allegedly infected with the Pegasus software from that country. Many of the numbers were directly related to Ismayilova, either her family, friends or colleagues, demonstrating that the government was interested in not just monitoring her and her activities, but also those who were associated with her.

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The case was similar for Szablosc Panyi, a Hungarian journalist with *Direkt36* – an independent Hungarian investigative journalism platform. In the course of the OCCRP's investigation, it was discovered that Panyi's phone number was also on the list obtained by Amnesty International. Panyi's phone was forensically analysed and it was found that the spyware was present between April and November 2019. The analysis also confirmed that Pegasus was no longer on his phone after that time. In his story published by OCCRP, Panyi admitted that he was not too surprised by the fact he was being monitored. "I wrote many stories on topics related to national security: espionage, arms deals, high-level diplomatic talks with the United States, Russia, or China," he said at that time. "I came to understand this world and got used to its peculiar atmosphere. From time to time, I was vilified in pro-Orbán media, labelled as an agent of the CIA or George Soros, but I never really cared. I also reconciled myself to the possibility that the Hungarian state could surveil my communications, especially because I received multiple friendly warnings that I could be a subject of surveillance."

However, the Pegasus saga has not ended since the OCCRP's bombshell report in 2021. As part of the response to the investigation, the European Parliament set up a special committee "to investigate the use of Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware". Its final report, released in November 2022, states that the NSO Group has sold its Pegasus software to 14 countries in the European Union. Among the cases, the highest profile were Hungary and Poland. The report also notes that the NSO Group revoked the licence from two of the EU countries (Poland possibly one of them) for misuse of the software. The report also provides specific details on how each country came to purchase and utilise Pegasus or other spyware programmes like Predator. The report also describes how European governments used the software and who were their targets and victims. Other countries which were found to use spyware go beyond the usual suspects of Hungary and Poland; it also includes, among others, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy and Austria. In the case of Estonia, the report states that Russian officials interfered in Estonia's use of Pegasus claiming it would be used against Russian phone numbers. Apparently, the Israeli defence ministry blocked Estonia from using Pegasus on Russian numbers for the sake of Israeli-Russian relations.

Digital safety

The European Parliament investigation illustrates that surveillance technology is not only used by authoritarian regimes, but also by democratic governments often in the name but not in the practice of national security. Upon its release last

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month, the lead member of the European Parliament inquiry, Sophie in 't Veld (the Netherlands), stated that "all [EU] member states have spyware at their disposal, whether they admit it or not". Certainly, citizens need to be more aware of the dangers of digital surveillance technologies, including those used against them by their own states. And while what has been discovered in Europe is certainly a significant scandal, it pales in comparison to the level seen in authoritarian countries like China or Russia. Nevertheless, it does pose a threat to the core of democracy in Europe. "Democracy isn't about elections. Russia has elections. Democracy is about countervailing power," the Dutch MEP in 't Veld said. "Once it's gone, democracy ends."

Public transparency and understanding the risks to democracy is certainly a good first step in the right direction. However, addressing the issue should be done in a more comprehensive and institutional manner. Privacy International, in their testimony to the European Parliament committee, argued that the "transfer of surveillance [technologies] should be made conditional to an appropriate legal framework and effective safeguards – including independent authorisation and oversight procedures, as well as appropriate remedial mechanisms" and that such technologies should also be subject to "an adequate human rights impact and risk assessments". In other words, the European Union could and should find ways to develop a regulatory framework to protect its citizens from abuses – which would put the EU far apart from authoritarian regimes also using such technologies for control and power.

On the individual level, a greater focus by civil society organisations on digital literacy and personal security can also go a long way in protecting societies before a comprehensive legal framework is adopted. Workshops and programmes for users to teach even simple tips – like regularly updating and resetting mobile devices, or using two-factor authentication – would help promote safety and understanding of risks of cyber-attacks. Without basic knowledge of digital safety, it can be relatively simple for ill-intended groups or individuals to take advantage of easy targets. Hence, like in any other field, strengthening our own security in the digital sphere ultimately strengthens the resilience of democratic societies. NEE

Adam Reichardt is the editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe* and the co-host of the *Talk Eastern Europe* podcast. He is also the director of the Warsaw Euro-Atlantic Summer Academy, an annual summer school which focuses on security and digital affairs at the College of Europe in Natolin (Warsaw).

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Moldova is being forced to adapt to hybrid warfare

MARINA BZOVÎI

Russia's war against Ukraine proved to the world that battles do not happen only on the ground; they are also taking place online. After Russia's invasion on February 24th, its neighbours, including Moldova, began facing many challenges: an economic crisis, a refugee influx, an energy crisis and even cyber-attacks.

The date of February 24th 2022 completely changed the life of the whole world, and definitely changed Moldova. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is spreading to this neighbouring country, even though direct attacks are not yet happening. The war in Ukraine has affected all processes in Moldova, especially in the economic sphere, and includes: increased inflation, disruption of all supply chains, the energy crisis, disinformation, propaganda, instability in society and above all, challenges to cybersecurity.

Economic and energy crisis in numbers

In terms of numbers Moldova now faces inflation above 30 per cent. Gas is particularly important here, which has a 56 per cent share in the total energy supply and was 100 per cent imported from Russia via Ukraine, until the war. Since the war started, Russia's Gazprom (holding also 50 per cent of the shares in the

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Moldovagaz company), cut supplies to Moldova by 57 per cent, while raising the price of supply. For a regular consumer the price has increased on average by 600 per cent, while the gas provided by Russia is only enough to cover the needs of Transnistria, the Russian-supported breakaway republic. Now the government is buying gas from the European market, albeit at much higher prices, to ensure the gas needs of the country, as well as for state reserves.

Electricity generation in Moldova is also highly dependent on gas. About 70 per cent of electricity is produced by the Transnistria-based MGRES power plant. Thirty per cent of Moldovan electricity was bought from Ukraine, for clear reasons that is not happening anymore. Due to the emergency synchronisation with ENTSO-E on March 16th, Moldova is now able to import electricity not only from Ukraine, but also from Romania, which has increased the stability of the system.

The missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure put Moldova's electricity system in danger as well.

In order to ensure the country's supply of electricity the government has decided to give all the gas received from Gazprom to Transnistria (which does not pay anything for it), while the rest of the country basically receives the gas purchased from other sources, yet at a higher price. The electricity price has stabilised a bit now after doubling for consumers early in autumn, but Moldova faces energy shutdowns when Ukrainian power plants are attacked. Even if the emergency synchronisation was completed successfully, Moldova is still linked to Ukraine's electricity system. The missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure put Moldova's electricity system in danger as well. In the end, due to the energy crisis the economy and the population are facing a lot of struggles, whereas Russia is using gas supplies as an instrument of blackmail and pressure on the Moldovan government. However, it is important to understand this pressure and how it can be used to disinform the population and increase instability.

Disinformation and fake news

The economic crisis is already causing a lot of pressure in the society, but another important issue remains – disinformation. According to local experts, mass media in Moldova is currently facing internal and external disinformation, related also to the concentration of media ownership in the country. The relationship between the concentration of media ownership and disinformation is relevant because the public is manipulated and misinformed according to the interests of those in control of mass media. Under these conditions, misinformation has the

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power to influence the decisions of the audience and can change the opinion of a citizen regarding a particular subject.

According to a report prepared by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, two types of media were found in Moldova and they both have distinct approaches. The first category includes the press, which, as soon as Russia's military aggression in Ukraine began, covered the events non-stop, in detail, based on official information and the broadcasting of footage from the battlefield. They are mainly considered independent sources of information. The second includes media institutions which, in the first phase of the war (February-March 2022), almost completely avoided covering the events in Ukraine, as if nothing was happening, and later (April-June) started to discuss the subject by presenting Russia in a positive light. These are the pro-Russian media outlets that directly or indirectly broadcast Moscow's narratives.

However, the growth of fake news and disinformation remains a significant risk. The authorities in Chișinău have taken some measures in this regard – they have adopted laws to combat disinformation and they have blocked some online platforms that spread fake news and disinformation. Yet, these actions have been reactive rather than strategic or proactive, and according to some experts have often circumvented laws and regulations on access to information and democratic principles during these exceptional circumstances.

A historic decision for the country's mass media was made last December. Six television stations had their broadcast licences suspended because they reflected the events in Moldova and the war in Ukraine in a tendentious and manipulative manner. The decision was taken by the Commission for Exceptional Situations and is valid during the state of emergency (60 days, however, most probably it will be extended). A similar measure was adopted at the level of the European Union, targeting four Russian TV stations.

The latest developments in Chișinău suggest that Moldova seems to have become the target of a hybrid war. According to the Intelligence and Security Service's (SIS) Director Musteață Alexandru, "a good part" of Russia's agents of influence are responsible for the hybrid war taking place in the Republic of Moldova. The informational war is extraordinarily aggressive and widely seen in manipulation and forgery. At the same time, there are people from the socio-political sector, so-called agents of influence who try to influence public opinion by using fake news and manipulations. "From what we already know, we see how all things are coordinated from one centre, from Moscow," Musteață declared.

According to other media experts Moscow regularly draws up special instructions for the media it controls, indicating how the war in Ukraine and related events should be covered. The instructions are sent to officials, public figures, pro-Kremlin bloggers and contain the messages they must use in their public appearances. In

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some instructions analysed by journalists with Meduza, among the lines sent to the propagandists is one about the "New World Order", and the press must convey to the audience the idea that the countries of the former USSR would do well to "avoid the example of Ukraine" and not damage their relations with Russia. Moldova and its President Maia Sandu are also shown as a negative example. Other sources suggest that the government should negotiate with Russia for better prices for gas and electricity and never fight back.

In Moldova, fake news and propaganda do not stop at TV channels, radio, or online media. They are spread also on social media and other sources, like Telegram channels. While the authorities can suspend licences for television stations and block web sites, there are not many instruments against disinformation on social media.

Cybersecurity in Moldova

The war proved to the world that battles do not happen only on the ground; they are now also happening online. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, neighbouring countries started to face many challenges, such as an economic crisis, a refugee influx, an energy crisis and surprisingly even cyber-attacks.

Cybersecurity has definitely become a huge topic of interest in Moldova in the last year. Public and private organisations in various sectors worldwide now openly acknowledge that cyber-attacks are one of the most prevalent and high impact risks they face. In May and August Moldova suffered several attempted cyber-attacks. According to tech experts almost all DDoS attacks come from Russia. On August 25th the Information Technology and Cyber Security Service (STISC) noted several attempted cyber-attacks on information systems of state importance.

The target of the attacks focused on around 80 IT systems, platforms and public portals. The nature of the attacks is usually complex, focusing on various vectors and having a continuous adaptive character to the response measures undertaken. All attempts to compromise any systems have been reported to law enforcement and generally the impact on the operation of the IT systems was limited. The attacks have continued sporadically throughout the year. These cyber-attack attempts are aimed at causing the unavailability of the state's information resources by sending a large number of connection requests or a large volume of data. This subsequently overloads the processing resources of the information systems.

According to preliminary analysis, the attacks are carried out from outside of Moldova, from IP addresses located in different countries, from compromised equipment and networks – a typical situation for such cyber incidents. The STISC,

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together with the targeted authorities and law enforcement institutions, work to counter such attacks and minimise their impact on the functioning of government information systems. They also try to uncover the identities of the people involved. Moldova as a country has been able to withstand the cyberattacks. No leaks were announced, services remain available for citizens and the teams both in the private and public sector are doing an incredible job overall.

Moldova has proven able to withstand recent cyber-attacks with online services remaining available for citizens.

In response to the cyber-attacks the government at the end of December published a draft law for public consultations regarding the EU's Network and Systems Directive 2 for Moldova. Discussions concerning cybersecurity policies have been taking place for a while, probably for more than two years. Therefore, the idea of transposing the NIS Directive in Moldova is not new and was a long-standing goal of the government. The draft law provides details on a new body specialised in cybersecurity, a list of sectors and activities subject to cybersecurity obligations, reporting obligations and other transposition details.

In cybersecurity the thirst for tech skills is growing both in the private and public sectors. The biggest challenge remains human resources. The war continues to make Moldovans flee the country for a more secure place for their families. Other Moldovans look for more flexible, reliable or better paid jobs in light of the economic crisis. Among the people leaving the country we can find journalists, former governmental officials and even tech specialists. On the bright side, the diaspora is engaging with the needs of the country more than ever along with other development partners. The aim is to help Moldova move towards a more secure future. However, a lot of work and risks still lie ahead. NEE

Marina Bzovîi is the executive director of the Moldovan National Association of ICT Companies. An umbrella association established in 2006 and uniting 94 companies, it has become a major player in Moldova's associative sector representing the voice of the ICT industry.

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An independent Georgia or a Tiflis governorate?

WOJCIECH WOJTASIEWICZ

Today's Georgia is a country of contradictions. While most of the population has come out in support of Ukraine, the country has experienced a great amount of migration from Russia since the war. This, combined with a government uncertain of its foreign policy, has made Georgia's future all the more unclear.

Russian migrants have arrived in Georgia in two waves. The first wave took place in March 2022 right after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The second wave took place in late September 2022, after Vladimir Putin announced "partial" mobilisation. They waited in long lines, often for hours, at the Larsi checkpoint. According to various data, there are between 70,000 to 200,000 Russians living in Georgia right now, some estimate that this figure is even higher. It seems that the Georgian authorities do not have full control over how many Russians have arrived in their country. The key question that emerges is why did they choose Georgia, where almost 20 per cent of the territory is occupied by Russia? Other questions also need to be asked, such as what is the reaction of the Georgians to these new residents of their state? And are these newcomers here to stay or will they return home once the war in Ukraine is over? Finally, what impact does this new Russian migration have on Georgia's economy and security?

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Walls speak

Upon my arrival in Tbilisi I notice a small boy at the airport who is greeting his family with a bouquet of yellow and blue flowers. On the next day as I take my first stroll into the city, I see many signs on the walls. A 20-minute walk from my friends' flat to the central metro station, Rustaveli, is "decorated" with dozens of signs with anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian slogans: f*** Russia, f*** Putin, *Slava Ukraini*, Ukraine is Georgia is Ukraine, Putin *Khuylo*. Ukrainian flags fly throughout the city; along the entirety of Rustaveli Avenue (Tbilisi's main street) and in the old town.

This massive support for Ukrainians and their resistance against Russia contrasts with the large number of Russians whom you can meet on the streets of Georgia's capital and in shops and restaurants. Russian can be heard everywhere. Even if you do not hear the language, you can tell – from the faces – who is Georgian and who is not. Some of those who are not are of course Belarusians or Ukrainians. They have also fled their countries due to the Russian aggression. They are also using Russian as their language of communication.

A recent survey by the International Republican Institute finds that 78 per cent of Georgians are against visa-free entry for Russians to Georgia, as well as giving them the opportunity to open up businesses and purchase real estate. Yet, despite that, cases of open aggression against Russians are rarely seen. In reality it is the opposite, it seems that in public, people sometimes even try to communicate with Russians in their language.

High prices

Nevertheless, a sense of silent tension can be felt in the interactions between Georgians and Russians. Evidently, a majority of Georgians are not happy with the large number of Russians who have relocated to their country. Mainly because they still remember the 2008 Russian aggression and occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (the so-called South Ossetia). But they also experience a huge increase in prices, which is a result of the large migration of Russians to Georgia. Rent increases have been especially stressful for students who come from different cities and regions to study at one of Tbilisi's many universities. In this academic year, many of them could not afford to rent a place, which is a problem in a country where public student housing is almost non-existent. Thus, the only beneficiaries of the increase in rent prices are landlords, who make up a small portion of the Georgian population.

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Prices in restaurants are also very high. Compared to last year, prices have increased by almost 30 per cent. A simple *khachapuri*, for example, costs almost seven euros, and a similar price is charged for a simple cucumber and tomato salad. To make matters worse, there is the whopping 18 per cent unemployment rate, which is based on official government data. In reality, unemployment is much higher and hidden by a large number of those who are self-employed in agriculture or small businesses and who therefore do not have stable income.

At the same time, since March 2022 many Russians have started to become rooted in Georgia. They have been renting or buying flats, setting up businesses, and bringing their families to the country. Many ordinary Georgians, but also Georgian experts, believe this is happening because of the pro-Russian position of the current Georgian government. This is how Raba Osheinik, a Russian oppositionist living in Tbilisi, explained the situation to me: "At first you would think that the activities of the Georgian Dream government are in contrast to the plans of Vladimir Putin, who may not like the fact that his people are fleeing the mobilisation and moving to a neighbouring state. However, there are so many Russians that the Kremlin will have no problems in finding the 300,000 men to meet its mobilisation goals. Those who leave Russia are people whom the regime cannot count on anyways … they do not support the authorities. Yet, among them you can also find agents of influence who could get activated at a certain time and start raising the issue of the maltreatment of Russians in Georgia, that their rights are being breached. And this could be a pretext to start a military intervention here."

A majority of Georgians are not happy with the large number of Russians who have relocated to their country.

Opposition in exile

As a result of the large inflow of Russians to Georgia, the cultural and food map of Tbilisi has changed. It now has many new places established and run by Russians. I visited a few of them, including some bookshops and bars but also some assistance and training centres. All of them are run by young people (aged 20 to 30) who had been in the opposition in Russia. Some of them had thought about leaving their country even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The majority were also involved in some kind of assistance work for Ukrainian refugees.

The first place that I visited was a bookshop called "Dissident". This name seems to be a bit of an exaggeration nonetheless. It is actually a book stand in the upper

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part of the Vake district. For the moment, there are not many books for sale there, but you can drink some coffee at a table outside. There I met 32-year-old Valentina who came from Tomsk and 21-year-old Fedya who came here from Moscow. They arrived in Tbilisi in March, right after the full-scale invasion. For a long time, they had been against Vladimir Putin's regime and opposed the political system in Russia.

"Shortly after my arrival in Tbilisi I registered my firm here. It took me very little time. With state civil servants I communicated in English," explains Valentina. When I asked them if they had encountered any reluctance on the part of ordinary Georgians, they said no.

"Georgians see a difference between the Russian authorities, whom they hate, and ordinary Russians. They do not cross us out because of our nationality," Valentina says.

"We took part in a few anti-war demonstrations in Tbilisi. However, I must admit that few Russians participated. Many people are still afraid, even though they have already left Russia. They do not know if they will have to return to the country at some point, or not. If somebody saw their photo during protests, they could face serious problems," Fedya adds. In addition to working in the bookshop to make ends meet, he also teaches online.

Fedya shows no mercy to today's Russia: "Our state is weak. Special forces could not even effectively eliminate Alexei Navalny. The same is with our army. The regime was saying that Russia's army is the second largest in the world, while in reality they cannot win against the Ukrainians and in fact our military is losing face."

"The situation is really tragic," Valentina adds. "The families of young boys who are mobilised and sent to the frontline are now buying clothes for them because the army has no money for that." However, in her view the war is not to be won by the Russian side. A change needs to take place in the Kremlin. Putin will be removed from power and a new regime will come. Whether it will be better or worse, nobody knows today.

Neither of them knows how long they will stay in Georgia or whether they will be able to return home. They cannot say what their future will be like. They live day to day and remain in a state of limbo. "Ukrainians will hate us for a long time," Valentina concludes. "I fear that I will never go to Kyiv in my life, even though I would really like to."

Activism and entrepreneurship

As I leave the "Dissident" bookshop, I make my way to Rustaveli metro station. There I find more Russian places. One of them is a bookshop called "Auditoria". It

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was opened by a group of Russian migrants only four months ago. On the shelves are mostly Russian-language books with a clear anti-regime message. In addition, the owners of the bookshop organise numerous meetings with specialists in different areas: history, medicine, astrophysics, or philosophy. Next door is a bar called "Easy Art". Its windows are decorated with three flags – a Georgian flag, a Belarusian opposition (white-red-white) flag and a Ukrainian flag. Inside, I meet three Russians. One of them is the owner, while the other two are her employees. The bar has been operating for two months now. But it is more than a place where you can get something to eat or drink. It also acts as a sort of community centre. The locale offers yoga, English classes and thematic group meetings. The founder is a dark-skinned 27-year-old Russian woman from Moscow. She has been living in Georgia for a year and a half now. She decided to move here long before the war. She got to like Tbilisi when she came here on vacation. Her father comes from Congo, but he lived for many years in Paris. There he married a Russian woman and moved to Russia.

"One of the reasons I decided to leave Russia was the discrimination I had experienced because of my skin colour. I was picked on in school … sometimes people were taking photos of me in the metro. I was treated as a weirdo," she says, not wanting to reveal her name.

She has two employees: 24-year-old Katya from Krasnodar and 24-year-old Zhenya from St Petersburg. In addition to her work at the bar, Katya also makes money as an online English tutor. Zhenya, when he lived in Russia, worked as a manager for LPP, a Polish clothes producer and owner of the popular clothing chain "Reserved". Once western sanctions were introduced against Russia, his company shut down operations.

"In Russia people do not know what democracy is all about. They are fearful. They think only about themselves and how to survive in unfavourable living conditions. That is why they are not protesting against the regime. The majority of the society is passive. They are under the influence of propaganda, even if they have access to other sources of information," Katya says.

"Western sanctions are simply full of holes. Many western companies have returned to Russia and reopened their shops there, but under changed names," Zhenya adds. He also notes that prices in Russia are much higher, "but they have been growing for many years now and people just became used to difficult living conditions", he admits.

Katya and Zhenya say that they decided to come to Georgia because they could only afford to move to this country. Had their financial situation allowed them, they would have emigrated to the West. The advantage of moving to Georgia was that they could easily set up a business here.

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The third Russian bookshop that I visited in Tbilisi is called "Itaka". It was opened long before the Russian aggression in Ukraine. It is located in an old and quite neglected building. You can enter it through a courtyard, where you climb up a set of stairs. The balcony is decorated with two flags: Ukrainian and the white-blue-white (Russian opposition) flag. In the bookshop are books on various topics. Here I meet 25-year-old Yana, who is a Russian citizen of Ukrainian origin. She was born in a village near Mykolaiv. She left Ukraine when she was four and moved to Russia together with her parents.

"In our village unemployment was huge. All men were alcoholics. My mother forced my father to leave and look for work elsewhere," she tells me. The last two years of her stay in Russia were spent in St Petersburg. There she participated in opposition protests and published anti-regime posts on social media. Professionally, she worked on projects for autistic children and in a school.

"Russia's aggression in Ukraine divided my family as well. My mother believes Russian propaganda and talks about the Ukrainian Nazis. My father, on the other hand, is pro-Ukrainian. He speaks badly about the Russians. My grandparents and other relatives are still in Ukraine," she says.

Katya and Zhenya say that they decided to come to Georgia because they could only afford to move there.

Yana arrived in Tbilisi in January, before the war. She also works for organisations helping Ukrainians. "Since the war started, I have participated in many activities aimed at helping Ukrainians. I am terrified seeing what has been taking place in Ukraine. I fear that there will be another wave of refugees, should the Russians continue to bomb electric power plants and there will be no heating or electricity in the winter," she says.

Finding ways to help

After the visits to the bookshops, I go to a different part of Tbilisi's old town. It is called Sololaki. I climb up its winding streets. In the end, I reach a building which is decorated with a white-blue-white flag. This is the headquarters of two organisations: "House" and "Emigration for Action". Inside I find a small café and a few people working on their laptops. From time to time they make phone calls. Eavesdropping, I conclude that they are working for a distributor of medical products. I am approached by 28-year-old Danilo, who graduated from St Petersburg University with a degree in international relations. Back home he worked as a project coordinator for a German non-profit organisation. However, when his or-

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ganisation was kicked out of Russia he moved to Tbilisi. Together with his friends he rented a place here and started helping Ukrainians.

"Our work is financed with donations. We don't have any sponsors. To a large extent we collect medical products for Ukrainian refugees who came to Tbilisi, as well as Ukrainians who stayed in their country. By now, we have managed to process around 3,000 orders for medical products and some of these orders were quite large," Danilo tells me.

In addition, Emigration for Action helped Russians escape after the partial mobilisation was announced. They would head to the Larsi border checkpoint, offer tea and provide brochures about Georgia. They include basic information about Georgia and its occupied territories, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, but also about the police's attitude towards citizens (which is different than in Russia) and some language advice, as for example to try to speak English or Georgian.

"For over a month we have also been running a shelter for Russians who had no money to rent a place in Tbilisi. Not all men who flee mobilisation are well off," Danilo explains. "In addition, we organised many discussions on political, social and cultural topics and during these events we would collect money to support our activities, which are now coordinated by five people. We also work with dozens of volunteers. They are mostly Russian."

Emigration for Action helps Russians escape the partial mobilisation, offering information and advice about Georgia.

Danilo fears that the conflict in Ukraine will last for a very long time. Mainly because Russia still has strong military reserves, in the form of people, financial resources and weapons which are necessary to continue the war.

"I would like to return to St Petersburg but only when it is safe," he says as we finish our conversation. He then gives me a tour of the headquarters of "House". In a large room, where discussions take place, we see a meeting of coordinators who are now planning their next activities. He then takes me downstairs, to the basement, to show me where medical supplies are stored.

Two blocks away is the "Koshini" bar, which I visit in the evening. Standing in front of it I can see the Trinity Cathedral and the monument of Mother Georgia all lit up. In the bar, which has an amazing view over Tbilisi, I meet 29-year-old Artem from St Petersburg. His look is intriguing. He has long hair and is dressed in a loose outfit, wearing large chains on his wrists. He arrived here two weeks after the war had started. However, earlier he was already planning to open a bar here. Many of his friends had moved to Georgia for political reasons. In St Petersburg he also worked in a restaurant and participated in many demonstrations against Putin's regime.

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Photo: Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

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The Itaka bookshop opened long before the Russian aggression in Ukraine. It is located in an old and quite neglected building. You can enter it through a courtyard where the balcony is decorated with two flags: Ukrainian and the white-blue-white (Russian opposition) flag.

Photo: Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

Inside the Itaka bookshop, one can find older but also newer books published in Russian, including the most recent biography of Boris Nemtsov, Putin's opponent who was murdered near the Kremlin a few years ago.

Photo: Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

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УЧИСЬ ВИДЕТЬ
HEARTSTREAM
Жак Пурсель
ХРИЗАЛА
ЛЮБОВЬ МОЯ
ТАЙМ МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ
Что такое 2 Кто такой
КОЛЫБЕЛЬНАЯ
ГОЛОСЕК ДЖАНКИ
Жак Пурсель
сценарии власти
ИВАН СЕРОВ
МИЛЫЙ КАНС, ДОРОГОЙ ПЕТР
АХИЛЛ И ЧЕРЕПАХА БАХИЛ
ОГИЛВИ о рекламе
РАБОТА
ВЛАСТЬ И ТЕЛО
ДЖАНКИ ПИСЬМА ЯХЕ
КОЛЛАПС
NOW MUCH QUEER WORK!
Арно Шмидт
Гениальные воры
Голливудский стандарт
КОНСТАНТАЙН
HITLER STALIN

In Tbilisi, anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian signs can be found almost everywhere.

Photo: Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

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Photo: Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

"In the beginning there were six of us. Now in 'Koshini' there are 20 people on the staff. This is a meeting place for Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians who have escaped from their countries because of the Russian aggression. We would like this place to serve as a space for them where they could form a community," Artem says.

"Koshini" and its people offer assistance to refugees and cooperate with various non-governmental organisations, including "Volunteers Tbilisi". "Our cooperation with Georgians is more difficult. Serious problems emerge when my compatriots show their colonial superiority towards the Georgians, especially when they automatically start using the Russian language assuming that every Georgian knows it." Artem is sceptical about the effectiveness of peaceful protests. He has had ten years of experience with them in St Petersburg and sees that they have brought no results. That is why he thinks that taking part in protest actions is a symbolic gesture, which may be of importance, but he prefers concrete activities, such as fundraising. He helps Ukrainians in Tbilisi, arranges accommodation for them and transfers them money for aid.

Hybrid regime

At the end of my stay in Tbilisi I met with some experts. The first one is Bidzina Lebanidze from the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) and Friedrich Schiller University of Jena. "The arrival of so many Russians to Georgia is clearly a politically hot topic. Many Georgians are not happy with what has been taking place in the last months. They remember all too well the 2008 Russian aggression. The trauma of this experience exists until today. Such a large inflow of Russian citizens to our country for sure has an impact on Georgia's security," he says as we chatted during an academic conference organised at the Tbilisi State University.

He also adds that the massive presence of Russians in Georgia has economic consequences. Initially, it gave an impulse to the Georgian economy, especially during the first refugee wave in March 2022. However, those who arrived at that time were mostly IT specialists. Their presence in Georgia had a positive effect on the country's GDP. Conversely, the Russians who arrived in late September were those who had escaped from mobilisation. Quite often they had lower professional skills. Their limited financial resources have also dried up and now they are searching for jobs. And this is something that the Georgian state cannot provide them.

"Another negative consequence of the inflow of such large numbers of Russians is a huge increase in the cost of basic grocery products as well as an increase in rent in all large cities in Georgia," he tells me. When asked why the Georgian government allowed for such a large inflow of Russians, Lebanidze pointed to two main

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factors. First, Georgian Dream is scared of any confrontation with Russia. Closing the borders would mean breaching the current policy of appeasing the neighbour to the north. Second, the Georgian government possibly saw economic benefits in the massive Russian migration.

At the end of the day, I head to the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, which is located near the Georgian parliament. There I meet Giorgi Badridze, who is the former ambassador to Turkey and the United Kingdom.

"There are measurable indicators showing the impact of this large migration of Russians to Georgia. First, their arrival directly translates into inflation, especially the increase of basic products and rent in large cities. The Georgian government does not call these Russians migrants or refugees, but tourists. It compares the current numbers with the data from previous years when the number of real tourists from Russia was indeed large. However, back then tourists were coming to Georgia for a short time. They would spend money here and go back home. This time Russians do not know when they will be able or will want to go back. Many of them do not plan to return at all," Badridze explains. He also added that the arrival of so many Russians was possible thanks to the visa-free regime which was introduced by the previous government to attract foreign tourists to Georgia. However, the circumstances have changed with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Thus, Badridze is of the opinion that Georgia may follow the steps of Belarus when Russia was using it to find ways to avoid western sanctions. Maintaining the current liberal policy at the border, also regarding the transport of goods, shows the real intensions of the Georgian Dream government. This is the policy of not irritating Russia.

"To understand this policy we need to look at the political system that we currently have in Georgia," Badridze argues. "In the previous decade Georgia was labelled as a hybrid regime, meaning one that is not fully democratic, but rather going in the democratic direction. And this is how Georgia's system is described even today. However, today the situation is different, as Georgia is going in the opposite direction. The majority of institutions and politicians from the ruling camp are not accountable to their voters but to one man – Bidzina Ivanishvili. All of them work for this one individual. And his main goal is to maintain power, while Mikhail Saakashvili's goal was Georgia's integration with the West. Thus for Ivanishvili it would be best if Georgia disappeared from the international radar. As he stressed that Georgia should not be an object of dispute between the West and Russia."

Badridze adds that if Georgia stops being present on the international scene, it will become an easy target for Russia's imperial aspirations. The oligarch's interests are in direct contrast with Georgia's national interests. Evidently, a state that is poor and whose people are leaving it to find employment elsewhere, is much easier and cheaper to control.

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And there is one more serious issue Badridze raises. "The arrival of Russians not only brings social and economic problems, but is also a threat to Georgia's security. Let me remind you that Crimea was also taken over by soldiers who arrived there as 'tourists'," he says.

At the end of our talk, Badridze outlines some really bleak scenarios for Georgia. In his view, the country's "oligarchisation" will only increase as will Georgia's dependence on Russia. Thus, it is unlikely that Georgia will receive candidate status for the EU because its government is not fulfilling the requirements.

Bleak outlook

After the meeting, I take the steep Chitadze Street and turn onto Rustaveli Avenue. In front of the parliament building I see a small group of people with Georgian and Ukrainian flags. They are also holding photographs of Saakashvili and Putin. They tell me that they are protesting the war in Ukraine, Russian migration and calling for the release of the former president of Georgia. The group is very small indeed. It shows to me that the majority of Georgians have come to terms with the new reality and focus on their lives.

Formally, Georgia is an independent state. Officially its aim is integration with the European Union and NATO. In 2014 it signed an EU Association Agreement which included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. In reality, however, the country faces numerous crises. Georgian politics is also deeply polarised. The opposition accuses the ruling party of electoral fraud. Georgian Dream arrests opposition leaders. Georgian voters are tired of both sides.

The economic problems in the country continue to get worse. The Georgian economy was first hit hard by the pandemic and now by the large inflow of Russians which generates inflation. The economic problems and visa-free travel to the EU explain why many Georgians have decided to move to Europe to find work. Some of them will not come back, which will contribute to the depopulation of the country.

Georgia's NATO membership perspective is also quite remote. EU integration was more realistic, but when the window of opportunity was unexpectedly opened after Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine and Moldova used it skilfully while Georgia lost momentum. There are no indications that the Georgian government has been able to fulfil the 12 recommendations that were outlined for it by the European Commission to achieve candidate status, even though the government argues it has.

Georgia does not maintain formal diplomatic ties with Russia; yet, the idea of the reintegration of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali is a political fiction. The Georgian

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authorities are doing everything they can in order not to annoy Moscow. This has resulted in the termination of such projects as the Anaklia deep sea port, which could have strengthened Georgia economically and geopolitically. Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream are accused by the opposition and some parts of the expert community of being pro-Russian, which is not necessarily unfounded.

It certainly seems that Georgia is no longer interested in reforms aimed at integration with the West. From today's perspective, this is a poor country drifting into Russia's sphere of influence. It is thus more justified to fear that it will turn into something like the historical Tiflis Governorate and not become a wealthy Caucasian Switzerland, with little prospect of a breakthrough on the horizon.

I spent my last evening in the house of my Georgian friend who lives on the outskirts of Tbilisi – in the depressing Soviet-era district of Vazisiubiani. His mother offers us some Georgian treats and we enjoy a nice and warm family atmosphere. However, at a certain point, our conversation moves to international matters.

"Things will only get worse. I am expecting that prices will continue to grow. Already now I am counting every lari and am not buying many products in the shops," my friend's mother tells me. "I fear another war and that Russian tanks will again come to Georgia. When I am thinking about the atrocities that took place in Bucha or Irpin, I get goose bumps all over." Let us hope she is wrong. NEE

Wojciech Wojtasiewicz is a Polish journalist and regular contributor to the Polish *Nowa Europa Wschodnia*. He has been published in *Polityka*, *Krytyka Polityczna*, *Newsweek Polska*, *Onet* and *Open Democracy*, among others.

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Back home to the warzone

Emotions of displacement among returning Ukrainian migrants

OLENA YERMAKOVA

One third of the Ukrainian population is displaced – over eight million abroad and at least five and a half million internally, constituting the biggest forced displacement in Europe since the Second World War. Curiously, around one third of those who had fled after February 24th 2022 have already returned, with the International Organisation for Migration putting the number as high as six million. Yet, they returned, against all odds.

The full-scale war in Ukraine and the refugee influx that followed sent shockwaves throughout Europe. However, a large number of refugees coming back also caught many by surprise. They returned despite the war still raging throughout the country, and despite receiving an unprecedentedly warm welcome. Myself also being puzzled, I looked for answers and found a couple of think tank papers. The analysts meticulously present statistics and draw maps and graphs. There are survey data responses and discussions on the size of welfare payments, the distribution of housing and other resources for the refugees. Still, I am not convinced. When examining the statistics of millions, a person inevitably gets lost. Hence, I set out to look at the individual behind the digits.

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Three women agreed to share their stories with me: Nataliya – a young mother from Lutsk in the west of Ukraine; Oksana – a mother of adult children from Sumy, an eastern region that was under occupation; and Sofiya – a young single professional from Kyiv (all the names were changed to help protect their identity). I asked them why they returned? The three women had very different circumstances and journeys, but they did have one thing in common – no fear and no regrets.

Journey home

It is 9:00am on a rainy November day in Warsaw. The bus station is empty, except for two old-fashioned looking Ukraine-bound buses. Two kids drag small suitcases through the puddles behind their mum who is hurrying to one of the buses with papers in hand. From another side, a young woman rushes to the bus with two buns and a bottle of water in her hands. The snacks are for her grandma; who is about to make the journey home – but she is refusing to take them. I board the bus too and find it nearly empty – a relief with 11 hours of travel ahead, albeit a distance of a mere 400 kilometres. There is no faster way. The only planes flying in Ukrainian skies since February are fighter jets.

> The large number of Ukrainian refugees returning home has caught many by surprise.

As the bus makes stops in smaller towns on the road eastwards, it fills up quickly and eventually gets so full that a few people are standing. It turned out that the grandma from the platform in Warsaw was heading to Kovel, in north-western Ukraine.

"Why did you leave? There is no war in Kovel," another passenger asks the elderly lady.

"What are you saying – it's scary just to hear!" the grandma laments.

"I shall see," I think to myself. I am heading to my hometown which is in the same region. It is the first time I am returning home after fleeing at the end of February. I feel scared as the bus rolls closer towards the Ukrainian border. I do not fear so much for my safety, rather to see my country at war. And because I have spent most of this time abroad, I am afraid that I will not know how to act if something happens.

The bus has a hard time getting through to the border checkpoint. It barely manages to manoeuvre past a dozen kilometres of trucks parked on both sides of the road. This is what happens when the ports are blocked. Eventually, the bus rolls onto Ukrainian soil. The very first sight is a barricade. I break into tears. This is it,

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welcome home, I think to myself. I am not sure if these are tears of joy from being home at last or tears of pain from seeing what it has become.

For those who stayed these sights became white noise. We who left, we imagine our hometowns the way they were in peace time, ruthlessly pushing out the images of how we saw them last – in the chaos and terror of the first days of the invasion. I realise now this is what actually scared me about returning – to feel those emotions again. The last time I stood by our house was when I said goodbye forever to my parents and drove away past a tractor digging trenches where flowerbeds used to be at a checkpoint today, waving goodbye to male friends on duty. It is scary to voluntarily repeat the worst day of your life.

The last time I stood by my house was when I said goodbye forever to my parents.

After we cross the border it seems that there is nothing but total darkness, at only 5:00pm. Once we reach the first town I am relieved to see a few Christmas lights – there is light and life after all! As the bus turns the corner, a billboard appears with a portrait of a young man next to a 1991 map of Ukraine and a slogan: "The heroes fallen for Ukraine – forever in our memory". The soldier looks younger than me. The next day, it was announced that Christmas lights are forbidden in the Kyiv region this year.

First impressions

Driving down a heavily fortified road, I finally arrive at my destination. I absorb everything I can make sense of in the darkness, investigating the changes. I am relieved to find things looking much less scary than the last time. After spending some time with my family I begin my interviews.

"I must cook while I am speaking to you, otherwise, I will either be hungry or we won't manage to have an interview," Oksana from Sumy says after we connect on video. Electricity is rare these days; one must use the window of opportunity efficiently. She is active in the kitchen but somehow manages to focus on answering my questions with very well-structured thoughts.

She shares her impressions upon coming back home "compared to Europe, lit up and beautiful". "I noticed that the small refurbishing, like a fresh coat of paint on a staircase, was not done this summer and the city has decayed a little. You notice that now people are busy with other things."

"The city was very unlike the place I had left: few people on the streets, one would hear a lot of English because of foreign journalists and many if not most establishments were closed. Plus, there are air-raid sirens. So on the first day, my

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Photo: Olena Yermakova

Being a refugee is a story of total loss. Leaving home means you are losing your future in the form you planned and dreamed.

impression was – it is too early, I will not be able to make it here. I live alone and I did not understand how I could feel safe," Sofiya from Kyiv says. It is early May, and she just returned from Berlin.

I go to see my third respondent, Nataliya, in person. As I am waiting for a taxi, the application sends a notification – keep your documents ready in case the car is stopped at a checkpoint. I am reminded how this seemingly normalised life is full of the signs of war. "Only hits, only victory", the slogan on the radio strengthens the feeling, but together with a song by Skryabin it cheers me up and reminds me that I cannot afford to be down about it right now.

When asked what triggered their decision to return, none of the women mentioned any objective material factors. Each of them expressed gratitude to their host countries and families. "As long as I live I will not forget it," Nataliya tells me, her eyebrows raised in awe when describing how an entire Polish village, halfway between Lublin and Warsaw, was offering help and even buying toys for her five-year-old son when she could not afford much.

Nonetheless, for each of my interlocutors, the decision to return was well-reasoned, unswerving and final. The arguments they gave were entirely emotional rather than practical. "There is no strong logic here really," Sofiya says with a laugh. "You just have this emotional longing, a feeling inside that you want to be here."

Bread-and-butter issues do matter. Undeniably, it is hard to live in a foreign community without a job or sufficient health insurance. But after all, what is the rationality of returning to the grounds of the biggest war in Europe in decades,

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where civilians are terrorised routinely? All rational arguments, all survival and self-preservation instincts, point clearly against it. Perhaps in times of war, when nothing is more fragile than material things, which can be destroyed in seconds and lives lost without warning, it is the immaterial that comes to the foreground? Three emotional themes prevailed across the women's responses: purpose, loneliness and a desire to regain control.

The search for purpose

The first thing that each woman occupied herself with after reaching safety was volunteering. "We can't just be sitting around," Nataliya told her sister after settling temporarily with her son in a gym/office room of a big house that became an impromptu shelter for fleeing mothers. There, they help their host family pack and send humanitarian aid for territorial defence. Others demonstrated and assisted refugees. Perhaps this is the result of survivor's guilt a mental condition that many Ukrainians are now intimately familiar with. However, the volunteering could not change this feeling.

Oksana is a child psychologist who fled Sumy first to Kraków and then to Canada, where her children live. Even after the liberation of the region, kindergartens remained working online – the danger persisted since the city is a mere 40 kilometres from the Russian border. "When the children went back in person, I needed to return, or otherwise quit my job. I realised that since my English is not great, I could work physically. But I studied a lot, and I have experience, I can be more useful if I work in my profession," Oksana explains. She adds that she could not do her job in a different language and cultural context. Working with Ukrainian refugees was not an option either. "I believe that in Ukraine help is needed more than for those in Canada. Yes, they also need psychologists to help the children adapt to new surroundings. But I myself have not adapted. I would need time before I could help others." She describes how she was taking calls at 2:00am because of the nine-hour time difference. "Once children went back to kindergarten, I was receiving calls from the mums of kids who stutter, with whom I had been working before the war. They kept asking, when will I be back. I realised that I was needed there." So in mid-October Oksana returned home.

Sofiya only intended to pay Kyiv a short visit – to help a documentary maker and pack her things. But within several days, she came to a realisation. "Yes, there is danger, there are these unpleasant aspects of war," she jokes, "and city life is affected. At the same time, there is something I lacked in Germany – an understanding of how I can help the situation, what I can contribute for Ukraine to win."

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Sofiya explains somewhat apologetically that she tried in Berlin. She met with local activists hoping to find an initiative to join. "When you are on the ground, it is easier," she admits. She knew she had to find reasons to justify the great risk of returning: "So I rationalised my decision, I told myself I will gain valuable experience working with a journalist in de-occupied areas – I saw a lot of mission in this job." But she admits that this reasoning was secondary to her longing to just come home. "This is psychological. After returning, for the first time in months, I felt 'I am enough'. In Kyiv, I would simply eat in a café, but it made me feel almost like a hero, because I was spending money in a country that needs it, where it is essential to pay taxes, to keep the economy going, so that people can keep their jobs … It made me part of something bigger." Indeed, on the ground, serving the cause is not an errand to run in a designated place and on a schedule. Your very presence is an act of resistance.

Regaining control

Being a refugee is a story of total loss. Leaving home means you are losing your future in the form you planned and dreamed. Not being able to come back home means you lost your past. As such, the world as you knew it has collapsed in a heartbeat. You have collapsed too. You were an adult, capable, respected, confident, with property and a social network to fall back on. You did everything right and reached a certain social standing. You controlled your life. Now you are completely dependent on the goodwill of other people.

> The label of a refugee and the experience of being one is a role you never feel good nor comfortable in.

"This is not how you ever imagined travel. I went abroad to study, to do internships, and probably to prove to myself and others that Ukrainians are capable, that we can communicate as equals. And when you are fleeing and you are a refugee…" Sofiya pauses for a second, "actually this word, 'refugee', just like the word 'war', it was so difficult to get used to them. In the beginning, it was difficult to even pronounce. I remember speaking to other Ukrainians in Berlin, who were saying no, we're not refugees, we're more like forced migrants." Sofiya laughs and adds, "the denial was so blatant it was almost funny but sad. So even though as refugees we were treated very well and I have nothing concretely to complain about, you still feel inferior, weaker, smaller, a victim. This reinforces the feeling of powerlessness, which consumes you anyway when there's war and you cannot control anything. The label of a refugee and the experience of being one, even if it's

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as smooth as it could be, which it was, it's still not a role you feel good and comfortable in." Indeed, many describe feeling like a child again who has not learnt to properly speak the language of adults, a foreign language, thus being helpless and reliant on others for basic things.

The key thing about fleeing is that it is a journey people did not prepare for. The shock of the full-scale invasion cannot be overstated. Major life decisions – should I stay or should I go start a life in a different country – were made within hours, sometimes minutes and were often left to chance and contingency.

"We got across the border, called a former classmate asking if we can go to hers at least to rest, at least something after 12 hours at the border, which was simply horrible. She agreed without question. More people came there too. We were all just sitting in shock, thinking what are we doing here, why do we even have to flee our homes?" Nataliya tells me. She did not want to leave, just like each of my interviewees, but her mother insisted. On the evening of February 24th, her father drove Nataliya with her son and younger sister to the border. But they could not reach it, a traffic jam spanned 12 kilometres.

"In two hours we moved maybe 500 metres, maybe not even that, I don't remember precisely because we were all so shocked," Nataliya adds. "Mum, who decided to accompany us to the border, said, "let's walk". I thought, how good that I took the kid's scooter. This was past midnight. We wrapped ourselves in blankets, and started walking. We did not have much to carry, only backpacks because we did not know where we would end up, we didn't know anything at all."

The knowledge, the realisation of what just happened and what that choice entailed, comes only later, after you reach safety and the adrenaline subsides. The scale of change and loss is so all-embracing that from the outside it is difficult to imagine, and from the inside, it is difficult to process. At first, you have to recover from the traumatic experience of fleeing itself, which, as Sofiya tells me, "wasn't really your choice". And after that, you start wanting to take back control of your life.

"Everything is amazing there, but mentally I was not prepared for Canada," Oksana recalls. "At 5:00am on the third day of the so-called green corridor my younger daughter calls me and says 'Mum, my classmate is going by car right now. Quick, get up and leave!' So I grabbed a backpack and left." Oksana did not manage to flee earlier – on the first day women with small children and the disabled had priority to evacuate, on the second day the road was jammed and it was too far to walk on the icy road – no public transport operated. It took them three days to reach the west of Ukraine, from where Oksana made it to Kraków by train. Like Nataliya and Sofiya, she ended up by accident where she never expected to be. "The plan was to get to Poland, and for my kids to come see me there." But as she was making her way, Canada simplified the visa procedures for Ukrainians and the plan

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changed – Oksana's daughters insisted that she came to Canada. "I just wanted to calm them down and see them, so I ended up in Edmonton." Disoriented, each of them wanted their lives back. "I needed to go back to make sure Kyiv is still standing, that it is not over for me there," Sofiya says.

The paradox is that at home, despite being unsafe physically, many find psychological safety which seems unattainable in a new environment. This security comes from familiarity, and it gives people the feeling of control which enables them to navigate life at war, whereas in exile they feel like handicapped observers of the tragedy unfolding.

"One way or another, you are living through a war in the background. Abroad, you read the news and worry. I was much more anxious in Berlin … On the spot, you mentally prepare an action plan on what to do and where to hide. You follow instructions, taking steps to overcome danger, and it reassures you that there's always something you can do. It is an illusion of control that works." Sofiya adds a disclaimer. "But many cannot afford it. For instance, those with little children, health conditions, or low tolerance to air raids."

Oksana describes how after arriving in Edmonton she was walking a street in bloom. "I saw a dandelion's shadow on the pavement and could relate. I felt just as transparent, fragile, undefined and detached from everything. This is a tough mental state to be in." In contrast, she says she is at ease now. "I did not need to adapt when I returned, I am in my comfort zone."

Loneliness and collectiveness

"In the end, we're strangers in a strange land," Nataliya explains her thinking when in Poland. "Home pulled me back. I know that here I have my mum, I have my husband. Who needs me over there?" Family reunification is rightfully cited as the major reason for returns. However, the loneliness that migrants experience is not only about missing your loved ones, it is also about missing your people as such – a wider community to belong to and to define yourself within. To ground yourself amidst rapid changes, it helps to be surrounded by people who share your sense of reality, which creates mental security too.

"Here I do not feel lonely, even though most of my friends have left the city. I am surrounded by people who are going through the same experience. You're here out of choice and feel a sense of belonging, which is crucial," Sofiya shares.

"In Vilnius or Warsaw, it seems that every second café displays Ukrainian symbols and collects tips to support Ukraine. In Berlin, this was not the case. This lack of visual solidarity created a feeling of loneliness, which I think is extremely danger-

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ous when you're experiencing such a big trauma," she adds. "I remember being really hurt by the fact that Russian rallies were allowed, with symbols of the so-called people's republics … shortly after one of them, I was heading to a demonstration, wrapped in a Ukrainian flag and I felt really scared. Scared of being attacked and unsure if the police would protect me. This is not okay…" Suddenly, Sofiya stops and sheds a tear. I feel at a loss as to how to comfort her but she quickly continues. She mentions trying to explain being bothered by the rallies to a German friend who did not see a problem and explained that he considered it part of the democratic process to allow all sides to protest. "It's like talking to a wall, which also responds with all these beautiful words, twisting the values, which we are defending at the moment. And you feel this loneliness, because", her voice trembles, "you are not understood, and your pain is not fully shared. They say they do, they are ready to support you in many ways, like with shelter and welfare. But on the strategic level, they are not ready. When there are no real timely actions to treat the root causes rather than the symptoms, there is no certainty that this country, this society, understands your and your people's struggle, and is ready to change the situation… I guess I just expected more from Germany."

Many refugees I spoke with over the past months describe a feeling of living in parallel realities.

Many refugees I spoke with over the past months describe a feeling of living in parallel realities compared to their surroundings. Neighbours wish you a good morning with a smile, while you are fighting off tears because the morning was anything but good – missiles hit your hometown, you cannot reach loved ones. While you are mourning, the people around you are throwing parties and shooting off fireworks, which trigger your PTSD. They ask you less about how you are coping, and offer less help. You do not blame them. Their lives go on, and you know it is normal. But yours does not, and that hurts.

In contrast, Sofiya describes the ease of volunteering in Kyiv: "You do it together with ardent people, who are all in the same boat. You see the goal ahead – victory – and understand how to move towards it. Plus you feel that you're not rowing the boat on your own, and that's very important. I think that was the main factor why I decided to stay."

No fear and relentless hope

I conducted my interviews in November 2022, after Russia started terrorising civilians with mass missile strikes on critical infrastructure, leaving them without

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electricity, heating and water. I asked if they regret their return now. Each answered without hesitating – "definitely not".

"I realise that anything can happen, but in this complete instability all around, now I have at least certainty in knowing where I live and what I do," Sofiya says. Partly, they are reassured because they know they have the right to leave again. Ukrainian refugees benefit from unprecedented opportunities for mobility which made a huge difference in this crisis. Oksana now has a three-year visa to Canada, so she has found comfort in the thought that she can see her daughters again.

"Our host family told us that if anything happens we are always welcome," Nataliya tells me, and adds with a laugh, "we responded that we'll be waiting for them to come visit us when the war is over." Oksana summarises: "I am Ukrainian, so I am better here. With my mentality, my principles, I fit in here and here I feel more useful. And when a person feels useful, she is happier."

I ask them if they are afraid of a nuclear disaster, another invasion or just of the freezing winter – all possible scenarios. "What scares me much more is news about possible mass evacuations of three million Kyivans – it terrifies me that I may be left without a choice," Sofiya responds. As for the rest, her answer is "I stopped being afraid". "Not that I believe there's no threat. I think I just ran out of fear. Although after the attacks of October 10th (missile strikes on the centre of Kyiv– editor's note) I often feel anxious. When it comes to blackouts, I try to accept that the winter will be extremely severe, which was to be expected when dealing with a terrorist state." She, like others, has stockpiled candles, torches, warm clothing and food. "Still, there are places with generators, you can find power. Yes, it's difficult, time and energy consuming. But you can join efforts with others going through the same thing. It's an open question whether I can endure it all, but I will try."

Ukrainian refugees benefit from unprecedented opportunities for mobility which made a huge difference in this crisis.

Oksana shares the attitude. "I'm not worried for the things I can control – neither the cold, nor the hunger. Even during a nuclear strike one can survive if one knows how to behave. I even bought a protective suit in Canada, I thought about it. But the things I cannot control scare me. Like the fact that orcs (a pejorative term to refer to Russian soldiers – editor's note) are standing at the border and if they come again, our boys will fight till death. This I fear…" The electricity goes out just as she is finishing her sentence. But Oksana assures me she is fine, she has been through the blackouts in the 1990s too. "I was a pioneer, I was a member of the Komsomol, and then I was told I might as well eat my Komsomol card because the USSR fell apart. So you know, such is our generation that it's difficult to scare us, we've seen it all."

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"The only fear is an attack from Belarus, we're a border region," Nataliya tells me. "But we know that if that happens – they will fail. We know what our girls and boys are like!" I ask Nataliya, "Like what?" She responds warmly: "Strong, independent, unbreakable. This I know for sure." I clarify by asking, "so you're not afraid because you believe in the Armed Forces of Ukraine?"

"Yes!" she says and laughs briefly. But then she makes a serious face, "But this is really so. I am only afraid that it will drag on, because our boys are dying there."

I ask if there was anything that would make them leave again. Each of them does not exclude this possibility completely, but keeps it as a last resort. "I am not ready to start my life anew elsewhere, to part ways with my previous life because my previous life has changed enough as it is. I long for stability and normality. Besides, I see a purpose in what I am doing here now," Sofiya says. She now helps fundraise for humanitarian and military aid. "And to be honest", she adds, "this does not happen to me often. Earlier I struggled to find meaning. Now that I found it I don't want to lose it."

"Returning to work, or even when neighbours met me, it felt as if I was a ray of sunshine," Oksana shares. "For those who stayed all along, when I came back, especially from distant Canada, they thought, 'well if even she returned then definitely all will return to normal'. Near-strangers were hugging me. People were really glad to see me, and it's not about me, it's because my return gave them hope." We finish the interview since the internet may soon be disconnected. I only ask if she wants to add anything. The voice from the dark screen adds, "I only wish you to hold on too, everything will be great!" I am amazed by her truly unbreakable spirit.

An open ending

"Everyone wants to come back home!" my parents respond emotionally when I ask why their acquaintances returned. "They left out of fear and to save their children, not because they wanted to." I realise how key the word "forced" is in the phrase "forced displacement", and that the right to return is as important as the right to leave.

As I am writing this text in early December, the blackouts significantly worsened, and the mayor of Kyiv confirmed preparations for possible, albeit unlikely, evacuations. I read about such events with worry for the brave people I interviewed. I hope they do not have to go through it all again.

Unlike them, I leave once more. "When do we meet again?" mum asks me. Christmas? I am unsure. Planning is one of those subtle things that disappeared from our lives after February 24th. As I wait for my delayed bus in a mall, a si-

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ren goes off, and within a blink of an eye, this visual normality of a crowded mall shatters. Stores close within seconds, crowds run down the immobile escalators.

On the bus again, watching videos of the liberation of Kherson, I do not even notice that we have made it to the border. Glancing down I see a Ukrainian border guard in uniform holding a weapon. Suddenly and counterintuitively, I feel a little scared to cross to the other side, because he will no longer be there to protect me. Here, although there is no such thing as safety, you feel protected by everyone, by everything. As we pass the barricade, tears well up again. I am not sure if they are tears of relief that my trip was safe, tears of joy for Kherson, or tears of sadness that I will no longer be here to share in the experience with my people, to feel alive in this togetherness which amid all the death and depression is lifesaving. We cross, and the bus rolls into fields of emptiness.

Olena Yermakova is a junior visiting fellow at IWM Vienna and a PhD candidate at Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

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This play is a political and social reflection

An interview with Ishbel Szatrawska, a Polish writer and playwright. Interviewer: Łukasz Dąbrowiecki

ŁUKASZ DĄBROWIECKI: Your drama titled "The Life and Death of Mr. Hersh Libkin of Sacramento, CA" is unique, firstly, because dramas are rarely printed in book form before they are staged.

ISHBEL SZATRAWSKA: In Poland, yes.

But also because many readers perceive it in a cinematic way. I myself got the impression that it has the dynamics of an American movie from the 1990s. Am I correct in seeing it as a product of your fascination with cinema?

There is no denying that all the dramas that I have written have, at least in part, these cinema-style dynamics. I attended film studies at the Jagiellonian University for a while and film school for two years. Film was my first love, while theatre came second, and sort of by chance. After high school, I was wondering whether to apply to the famous Polish film school in Łódź. Finally, I decided to do theatre studies in Kraków at the Jagiellonian University, which was also interesting and inspiring.

So my spotting of cinema influence in your theatre work is not unjustified?

Indeed, I have this tendency. My master's thesis was about Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. I believe that in American theatre plays we can see a lot of cinema influence. Even Broadway musicals show some elements of film script. I also value the rules of Hollywood scripts and that is why the narratives in my plays may indeed give the impression of them being cinematic. The association with the 1990s is also correct. In one of the blurbs there is even a reference to Quentin Tarantino. I guess it's because I grew up on this cinema, that's one thing. Tarantino is an absolute idol for me, his dialogues are quick and instantly answered. The opening scene of *Reservoir Dogs*, with the eight crooks sitting around the table at a coffee shop, is brilliantly done. It's hard to say that I

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follow his example, but certainly he was very inspiring for me.

You might be inspired by American cinema, but your story originates in Central Europe…

This is absolutely a story from Central Europe. The origin of this play is such that the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw announced a call for a script. At first I did not want to write plays that would deal with Jewish issues. This is because of my work and activism in Jewish organisations. I was scared that I would be pigeonholed. However, after the call had been announced I got a phone call from my friend from the Jewish community who said: "Isha, you have to write this play because if not you, then who?" And he convinced me. At the same time, I got in touch with the Polish publisher, "Wydawnictwo Cyranka", which expressed interest in the text. I had to choose between the theatre's call and the publisher and I opted for the latter, also because it promotes minority writers.

Your art is also in different ways a minority manifesto. First of all, it is a Jewish diaspora manifesto. This is how I interpret it: "stop treating us as somebody foreign to this society, as kind of a historical artefact used for example on the theatre stage." Your presentation of the story of a Jew in Łódź is done in such a way that we can all see ourselves there. This makes it a universal story and as such it goes beyond the minority discourse.

First, I wanted to show that those of us who represent minorities do not want to be treated in stereotypical ways. This is very important for us. Second, I wanted to somehow expand the presentation of Jews in Polish culture so it is not played over and over again in the same way. And here I am not only talking about theatre. I am thinking about all areas of Polish culture. Maybe not only Polish. Stereotypes about Jews can be found also in other European cultures, and also in American culture. To some extent I play with these stereotypes and I put my protagonists in situations that are relevant for the Jewish diaspora. Among them is McCarthyism, but also the establishment of the state of Israel, or the so-called "Judeo-Communism". Nobody wants to be seen through the prism of stereotypes, regardless of whether we are Poles, Jews, Germans or Ukrainians.

Is this play about Jewishness? Or is it about emigration? I can see that it also includes a manifesto about contemporary times, as if it was taken from your Facebook wall…

Indeed, this play is a bit about everything. To put it very directly and not spoil the plot for the readers I can say that there is a very distinct trace which appears in the text two or three times – it is the name of Yom Kippur. I use it not only to place my protagonists in a specific cultural context, but because in ancient Israel, until the fall of the Jerusalem temple, there was a ritual performed by the rabbi which was not entirely Jew-

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Photo by: Izabella Górska | Górscy Fotografia

ish and which probably had originated in Babylon and had older polytheistic roots, which are older than Judaism itself. This ritual remains unclear until today. It entailed the lottery of two goats; one was selected "for the Lord" and one "for Azazel", meaning one goat was released into the wilderness, taking with it all sins and impurities, while the other was sacrificed. After this ritual we have the term "scapegoat". And here we are back to my play. In the last scene, during the encounter with the Native American chief, who says that the best moment in the Torah is when the Israelis are looking at the Promised Land, but they do not enter it, can also be treated as some kind of a manifesto and interpreted in different ways. An anarchist would say that as long as there is a state, there is always violence and there will always be a scapegoat. A realist or pragmatist would say that there is no such thing as an ideal state and that is why we have to do whatever we can to make the one we have more inclusive, non-repressive, adequate to our needs and just.

I have to admit that the key to the interpretation that you have presented surprised me a bit.

Maybe because it is both clear and not so clear. You do not need to have large knowledge of Judaism to understand it. In every dictionary when you look up the term Yom Kippur, you will find ref-

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erences to the scapegoat ritual. But what made me think was that it was not performed after the fall of the state of ancient Israel. And this is symbolic indeed. This ritual disappeared. After the fall of the temple the statehood also collapsed into pieces. For me this was important food for thought. As long as there was a state, this ritual existed, even if performed in its most abridged (minimalist) form.

Paradoxically, it reached perfection in Christian Europe. I am not talking here about burning witches, Jews, heretics, and others, but about the crusades, but about a form of balancing between what was seen as a norm and what was seen as different – the other. This otherness had to be cursed so that those who are the norm could say that their society looks like how they want it to look because they got rid of what did not match it ideologically. Modern Europe in this regard is the same.

In that case whose scapegoat is your main protagonist, Hersh? Is he the scapegoat of the European culture?

Not only. He also suffered during the McCarthy era. Had he stayed in Poland, he would have experienced the tragic fate of those Jews who were expelled from our country by the communist authorities in 1968. In the play we learn about this from the telephone conversation Hersh had with his sister.

Let me add here for those who still will be reading it yet. The telephone conversations between Hersh in Sacramento and his friend, a communist activist in Poland, that did not seem possible back then, became justified as the play rolls out. Especially when reality starts to play tricks. At the same time, I have to say that Libkin's speedy career in Hollywood seems more surprising.

His transformation from an immigrant to a film actor is indeed a certain biographical shortcut. But at that time such stories were not entirely impossible. A waitress could get hired as an actress because a producer thought that her face fit his script. The whole Hollywood dream was built around such stories. My first idea was to build a model Jewish biography. I wanted to combine all kinds of small stories, which could look stereotypical at first glance, and build something non-stereotypical out of them. In my research I found connecting points between hundreds of testimonies of people who had survived the Shoah. That is why I wanted to somehow recreate that human experience and at the same time overcome it.

Let me stress that this is not a historical play. It takes place in the post-war period indeed, but the message is actually very contemporary.

I mentioned the idea of the scapegoat, which is dominating but also hidden in this play. I don't want to sound too pompous but this play is a political and social reflection. For example, the scene with Hersh and his daughters makes reference to our times, which in the Polish context, means homopho-

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bia. This applies not only to the society, which like the Polish case is divided and diverse, but also the practices of the state, namely the official anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and institutional homophobia.

In your play, apart from some background actors, there are in fact no heterosexual men. Would you say it is some kind of Tarantino-like flip of reality to administer symbolic justice?

It is not that simple. In their majority, people from the post-war generation had families and children and did not talk much about their sexual orientation. They were doomed to be shut in the closet. Many lived the way society wanted them to. This, of course, is nothing new. There are many analyses that compare antisemitism and homophobia, which both can lead people to hide that they are Jewish or non-heteronormative. That is why the topic of being an actor who is pretending to be somebody else, also in real life and not only on the stage, is repeated in the play and is important.

The protagonist hides on many levels. He is a man who wants to be seen, who wants to perform on the stage, but at the same time he is forced to hide his roots and sexual orientation to the point that his desires are subject to substitution. Thus the scene at the furniture store where he plays a salesman…

This was actually the most difficult scene for me to construct and I struggled a lot with it. It is meant to say that societies are artificially tailored to one pattern; yet when you look at individuals you will see that there are no people who fit that pattern entirety. We always break out of this pattern and somehow stand out. To some degree we are all non-heteronormative. You do not need to be gay or Jewish or have any other minority identity. My intention was to create a protagonist who would be different but at the same time generate positive emotions. I wanted the readers of my drama, also those who are not Jewish or non-heteronormative, to have, for at least a moment, a sort of *"Je suis Hersh"* feeling. In other words, I wanted them to identify, for at least a short moment, with some aspects of the protagonist's life.

I believe you succeeded in this regard, which is the big value of your play, which also in a way presents some stories that here, in Central Europe, we know from our family history or books. And now thanks to your play somebody who lives in Sacramento, which is in the title of the play, can also identify with the protagonist. Was this a deliberate attempt on your part?

I come from the territory of former East Prussia. Now it is called Warmia and Mazury and belongs to Poland, but some parts of the former East Prussia are now outside Poland. I do not want to sound like a revisionist, though. My family relocated here. On my mother's side, my ancestors were peasants from central Poland and they got their education in post-war communist Poland. My father's family comes from the Be-

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larusian-Lithuanian borderlands. They have a very mixed background and were very poor actually. I say we are a mixed breed. I lived with my parents until I turned 19 and to be honest at that time I did not realise what impact this mixed family background had on me. That is why I also do not believe in any borders. I think this concept is very fluid. There were some locals in the region I grew up, of course, and they lived mostly in small localities. Overall, I don't like this term: native residents. It is used to describe these people but to me it generates these…

Ethnic associations?

Ethnic yes, but it is also used to replace terms such as "German" or "Mazurian". But when you think about it, there is no good term to describe the people who lived in Eastern Prussia. When you think of who were they, you see that they were a bit German, a bit Polish, a bit Lithuanian. It was one big melting pot, which I like and identify with. Thus, for me any calls for "pure Polishness" or pure anything, as a matter of fact, are plain absurd. Since 1945 my ancestors from Lithuania lived next door to Kashubians and people who were relocated from central and southern Poland. As a result, many of our family stories are mixed, as we all lived in formerly German or Jewish cities.

On many levels your drama is a reflection on this identity. So what is your identity as an author of this play?

The truth is that it also took me many years to start seeing myself as a person from the borderlands. This may sound a bit strange as I live in Kraków, which I consider to be a very Polish city. And I have learnt to love it, although with some difficulty. I still do not consider myself a local here and I will not call myself a Cracovian. However, I do consider myself to be a person of the borderlands, as I was born in a place where different worlds, cultures and religions met and intermingled. This was my life which included celebrating different traditions, even when they referred to the same holidays. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, but also the earlier refugee crisis, not only in Poland but in Europe as well, I can see that the Polish state has not only disappointed us but also impedes help, which I also touch upon in my play. I can thus say that while at the state level Poland did not stand up to the task, we cannot forget about the deplorable words uttered by Jarosław Kaczyński, who said that refugees from the Middle East spread parasites and bring diseases; at the individual level Poland has shown empathy in its response.

You have finished working on your next text. This time it is not a theatre drama. Can you tell me what it is about?

At a certain moment I started to become fascinated with the history of East Prussia, but also this part of it which is now Russian and belongs to the Kaliningrad Oblast. Thus, in my literary work I now go back to my native land,

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my *Heimat* so to speak. I still cover some of the same topics, but not Jewish ones. I am now focusing on the period of the Red Army offensive in 1945 and what took place there after the war. What I have in mind is the almost complete population exchange. I also look into the time of the Polish People's Republic and today's times. This will be a novel about three generations. But make no mistake about it: I am not writing a new version of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks.* For my personal use I coined the term of an "anti-family anti-saga". And it has to be like that as the plot takes place in East Prussia where everything is inside out. The book is to be published this year, but I am still waiting for the collective process of editing and proofreading.

Ishbel Szatrawska is a Polish writer, born in Olsztyn, and now residing in Kraków. She debuted with *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear* which was published in an e-anthology titled "Our Voice" by the Helena Modrzejewska National Stary Theatre in Kraków. In 2022 her *The Life and Death of Mr. Hersh Libkin from Sacramento, CA* was published by Wydawnictwo Cyranka and was nominated to the prestigious Polish award "Paszporty Polityki" in the category "literature".

Łukasz Dąbrowiecki is a Polish journalist, columnist and writer.

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Geopolitics, history and memory games

Jumping from the 20th to the 21st century

GEORGES MINK

The geopolitical conceptions of Vladimir Putin are strikingly reminiscent of the visions of Friedrich Ratzel, Karl Haushofer and especially Joseph Stalin. Putin basically thinks the same things as these figures but needs more justification. This is where a "memory masquerade" comes in, involving Nazism, racism, antisemitism and a reminder of the origins of Russia's greatness. The portfolio of historical and memorial references does not stop at European history for Russia.

On June 28th 2005 the Warsaw-based Batory Foundation organised a conference titled "Memory and Foreign Policy". During this event, Bronisław Geremek, a historian and Poland's former minister of foreign affairs, asked a question as to whether collective memory is part of foreign policy. His answer was the following: "I think it is a part of international relations, for example when governments protest when national dignity is attacked. Of course, it is a part of international negotiations, for example to open access to archives … but all this is only marginal in foreign policy." We shall see whether this marginality of memory is true today.

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A cold shower

Since February 24th 2022, Putin's outrageous distortion of Ukrainian history to justify the full-scale aggression against Ukraine raises questions about the relationship between Russian geopolitical permanence and historical justification; and thus, what international law and world order mean to the Kremlin. Indeed, since that fateful date, we have seen a kind of "globalisation of bilateralism" that has imposed itself as the new world order. If Putin's historical revisionist vision was necessary for him, like a fuse to ignite the war, very quickly the historical argument gave way to the voice of armed and nuclear threats. The whole world was inevitably involved, either because of the blocking of food exports, gas or fertiliser supplies, or because of the support of the West for Ukraine in terms of military equipment. At the same time, some autocratic countries also supported Russia. Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, through his communication strategy, has largely contributed to the Europeanisation and globalisation of his country's cause. Since then, one wonders what role and what effectiveness historical revisionism and historical memory games can have in Putin's strategy.

The Russian aggression was like a cold shower for our optimism as citizens of the European haven of peace.

The Russian aggression was like a cold shower for our optimism as citizens of the European haven of peace established during the last quarter of the 20th century. In Putin's words, according to his essay published in July 2021 titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", he argues that ninth-century Kyivan Rus' is the integral foundation of a people for whom the Ukrainian capital, this "mother of Russian cities", is the cradle. "Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are the heirs of the ancient Rus,'" Putin wrote, "which was the largest country in Europe … History has decided that the centre of reunification, which continued the tradition of the ancient Russian state, should become Moscow". Therefore, Moscow is no longer the "Third Rome", but the "new Kyiv". In the year 988 it was the conversion of the Grand Prince of Kyiv Volodymyr the Great to Byzantine Christianity that sealed the spiritual fate of Russia. We can thus formulate a hypothesis that 11 centuries later, Putin's reason for waging war against Ukraine is motivated by an absurd dream: to restore this original empire.

However, is this assumption "real" enough to make the Russians rally around the idea of a reconquest? Is it not too abstract as a memory reference? Evidently, Putin's geopolitics needs a historical narrative that is not only based on a collective cultural memory but also on reactive memory. It is about the memories of witnesses, therefore still alive in the memory of the elders.

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Geopolitical thinking

This design must be subjected to an analysis that blends the concept of geopolitics with that of the uses of history and historical memory. The second question which must be asked at this point is whether we can, or should, observe a break in the evolution of the uses of memory between the 20th and 21st centuries? A conceptual clarification is necessary here – we cannot speak of memory geopolitics but rather of a "memorial component" of geopolitical strategy. This observation requires us to look at the meaning of words, their narrative history and their relevance to factual history.

When we founded the journal *Geopolitics* in France in 1981 one of its founders, General Pierre Gallois, provided us with a definition of geopolitics to which we have adhered for the 40 years of our journal's existence. It stated that "geopolitics is a combination of political science and geography, but it also consists of a study of the relations that exist between the conduct of a power policy carried out at the international level and the geographical framework in which it is exercised." At that time, we were of course in the midst of an international crisis linked to the epic of the Polish *Solidarność* and the declaration of martial law by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. At that moment, memory studies were absent from the geopolitical approach, even if the most astute analysts associated the idea of a more or less static mental map of "world communism versus western democracy" with the European geographical space.

At its birth at the beginning of the 20th century, geopolitical thinking was based on a sort of Darwinian theory, pitting weak states against strong ones. It was dominated by the thought of Friedrich Ratzel, who believed that the driving force behind the formation of states was the struggle for "living space". The person who most inspired Germany's geopolitical strategies in the early 20th century was a geographer and senior officer named General Karl Haushofer, who was in close contact with Nazi party leaders. His relations with Nazi dignitaries such as Rudolph Hess ultimately gave him access to Adolf Hitler. Haushofer's geopolitical concept of reconfiguring Germany's living space, claiming to be a victim of the Treaty of Versailles, became the inspiration for war.

At roughly the same time, the Soviet geopolitical strategy of territorial conquest was developed, sanctified by the messianic theory of the inevitable world revolution, notably by Lenin. It resulted in the failure of the Polish-Soviet War in 1921, contrary to Bolshevik plans. We can illustratively say that the meeting of these two geopolitical approaches resulted first in the 1922 Rapallo Treaty (with its secret clause of military collaboration) and then the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. After the victory in 1945, Stalin outlined his wish to surround himself with a se-

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curity belt around the only socialist state, obsessed by the memory of the threats posed to the young Bolshevik revolution by the western countries supporting the White Russian armies. Here, he was already justifying the conquest of the USSR's neighbouring states with history, interpreted in his own way. In Stalinist rhetoric, the conquest was camouflaged by the notion of "friendly countries", friends forced to refuse the Marshall Plan and accept the COMECON and the Warsaw Pact. All this shows that geopolitical concepts are indeed closely linked to the historical context and configuration of political geography, as well as strategic constructions produced by the actors of international relations.

Obliteration of traumas

In the immediate post-war period, efforts were made to forget painful memories by adjusting historical and memory narratives to the idea of the necessary obliteration of traumas, as the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur would have said. Memorial actions subsequently fluctuated between over-valuing memory or obliteration. The political dictate of memory obliteration is illustrated in the 1946 words of Sir Winston Churchill, which are now presented by the House of European History on one of its walls in Brussels, where we can read: "We must all turn our backs upon the horror of the past. We must look to the future."

Following the failure of Hitler's project, the world order was frozen by the Cold War from 1948 to 1989. This can be summed up as a paradox formulated by the sociologist and specialist in international relations, Raymond Aron, who said that "Peace is impossible, war is improbable." At that time wars were far away, located in former colonies. Western and Eastern Europe lived in the Aronian paradox of the period of nuclear deterrence. History was taking place on the periphery of the western world and the memory of the history of the Second World War was repressed and pushed into the unconscious among its victims.

The last decades of the Cold War – between the 1970s and the 1980s – saw the emergence of polymorphous manifestations of memory. Paradigmatic studies were multiplying. These processes were just beginning to have an impact on geopolitics and the state of international relations. In these years, it was above all in the spaces of the nation states that national memorial undertakings were concentrated. In the West, the ongoing construction of Europe required a reconciliation of memories between the driving countries of this process, France and Germany. This process's apotheosis was seen during the 1984 meeting of Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand, who stood hand in hand in front of the tombs of the soldiers of the two nations involved in the Battle of Verdun. Between East and West, the

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first signs of Polish-German reconciliation appeared with a letter from the Polish bishops to their German counterparts in 1965, and the beginning of the "diplomacy of forgiveness", with Willy Brandt kneeling in front of the Warsaw Ghetto monument in 1970. This is the period when the spirit of reconciliation reigned and when memory games served their most constructive purpose.

Soviet Russia, on the other hand, is full of various memory claims from within. This began very briefly during the so-called thaw of 1956, then widely in dissident literature, culminating in the Gulag phenomenon, under the major impact of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Here, memory helped civil society to reveal the historical truth of Soviet crimes.

The discursive sources of Putinism are obsessively aimed at two targets: the idea of empire and the apology of war.

In the West, as if by memory dissonance, among the young Germans of the 1968 generation, there is a demand to account for the crimes committed by their forgetful grandparents. This was met by the revival of "historical negationism" in Western Europe, which focused on challenging the universally accepted narrative of the Holocaust, with the denial of the existence of the gas chambers. In France, the academic world was shaken, notably by the activism of the negationist academic, Robert Faurisson, as well as, in a different way, by the controversy provoked by Hannah Arendt around the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Soon Germany will be confronted with a historians' quarrel (*Historikerstreit*) regarding the relativisation of the origins of Nazism with the work of Ernest Nolte on the one hand, and on the other, demands to denounce the Nazi criminals who found refuge in postwar Germany with the blessing of the Allies.

It is interesting to look at official state memory policies in the Soviet Union because it helps us to understand the turn of memory from the 20th to the 21st century. Despite, or because of, the primacy of Marxist-Leninist ideology, Soviet propaganda sought to consolidate a militaristic model in the collective memory. The discursive sources of Putinism, as diverse as they are, are obsessively aimed at two targets: the idea of empire and the apology of war. This is the common background of Sovietism, "orthodox" imperialism, Russian conservatism, Pan-Slavism, and Eurasianism. Putin can utilise this ideological mishmash because the collective memory of the Russians who support him was already pre-formed in the USSR and only then consolidated by the propaganda under Putin's rule. The education of the Soviet citizens consisted of military preparation, their lives were spent in various military-patriotic associations. The calendar was filled with military holidays, honouring the fighters of the Great Patriotic War was a civic obligation. It was as if the Russian collective memory had been militarised.

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State intrusion

The 1990s and the first years of the 21st century saw an intensification of the exchange of blows between the actors representing the interests of national or state groups that considered themselves to have been robbed by the Second World War. In the field of memory, the battle for adjustment between Russia and the countries liberated from the communist bloc took place, symbolically illustrated by discussions on the asymmetry of the EU's memorial legitimisation, on the necessary requalification of communism as a totalitarian regime in the same way as Hitler's regime. This battle resulted in an attempt to move from singular histories in a single museum narrative towards a transnational vision in a European House of History. Several transnational initiatives attacked the general design of the permanent exhibition in Brussels as ideological, Hegelian and neo-Marxist.

These entrepreneurs of memory achieved real legislative success in the EU parliament. In 2009 the European Parliament established August 23rd as a day dedicated to commemorating the victims of the two totalitarian regimes. In line with this, several EU member states banned elements of communist propaganda along with Nazi symbols. August 23rd is a strong symbol, as it was the date of the signing in 1939 of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, with its secret protocol postulating the invasion of Poland by the two totalitarian countries.

This episode of European history remains to this day the most mobilising point in international memory relations between Russia and western historians, especially in declaring when the war began for the Russians. In May 2009 Dmitry Medvedev, then Russian president, elevated history to the level of an attribute of national "sovereignty" in the face of these symbolic initiatives by the EU and the Council of Europe to equate Stalinism (and even communism) with Nazism. On the 70th anniversary of the onset of the Second World War and the German-Soviet pact, which Europe was preparing to commemorate, Medvedev said: "One should not call black what is white, call one who was defending himself the aggressor…" These words were accompanied by the creation of a presidential commission to fight against the falsification of history. Many Russian historians protested at the time against the likely pressure of this supervisory body which, under the pretext of "tracking down and countering erroneous interpretations of history abroad", would make the arbitrariness of political censorship official. The banning of the Memorial Association under a law that allows a local NGO to be classified as foreign-sponsored and therefore a foreign agent has definitely corroborated these

August 23rd is a strong symbol, as it was the date of the signing in 1939 of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

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fears. In fact, this phenomenon of state intrusion into the field of history is omnipresent in many societies.

The different regimes regarding the uses of memory coexist during the post-Cold War era. On the one hand, commissions of historians have multiplied, such as the one led by Anatoly Torkunov and Adam Rotfeld. This has an optimistic message to neutralise contentious points in Polish-Russian history, including the recognition of the elimination of Polish elites by Stalin's NKVD in Katyń. Another commission of Polish and Ukrainian historians has tried to neutralise fanciful or differentiated historical interpretations of the Volhynia massacre and Operation Vistula, trying to quantify the number of victims on both sides and to understand the reasons for the massacres.

On the societal level, installation artists have commemorated the painful past surrounding the demise of almost the entire Jewish community in Poland with the intention of civic awareness and memorialisation. For example, this can be seen in the outdoor installation of a public bench with a kippah and the inscription "I/we miss you Jew" by Rafał Betlejewski. On the other hand, on July 20th 2013 in the small Polish town of Radymno, near Przemyśl, inhabitants went so far as to stage a grisly reconstruction of the Ukrainian attack and massacre of Polish villagers in the Volhynia region during the Second World War, with the effect of aggravating Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Revisionist mobilising discourse

It is in this period, at the turn of the 21st century, that we feel the need to reflect upon the concepts proper to political sociology, which include both the games of memory actors and their undertakings regarding the internationalisation of memory strategies. But first, to better define the concepts we need, let us go back to Putin's historical strategy. Today, Putin appears to be a great continuator of the visions of Ratzel, Haushofer and especially Stalin. In reality, Putin basically thinks the same things but needs more justification. This is where a "memory masquerade" comes in, involving Nazism, racism, antisemitism and the reminder of the origins of Russia's greatness.

The portfolio of historical and memorial references does not stop at European history for Russia. Since Putin's speech to the audience of sad and empty-looking regime beneficiaries, except for the infantile excitement of Ramzan Kadyrov, on September 30th 2022, after the counting of the so-called democratic referenda, to announce the annexation of the four oblasts of Ukraine, the Russian president has been emphasising a clash of civilisations in the style of Samuel P. Huntington.

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He reminds the Russian generation that lived under Soviet rule of its dominant ideology: the accusations against the colonialist West with the American devil and his axiological degeneracies as a main topic. However, the core of the revisionist mobilising discourse is not the thousand-year-old history of Russia, such as that recounted by Putin at the beginning of the invasion in February 2022, nor that of the clash of civilisations. At the centre of the memorial device is the "Great Patriotic War".

In the early 2000s, and even more so since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, a memory offensive has taken place around the "Great Patriotic War" against Nazism of 1941–45, to the point that it is now a kind of mystical cult. In fact, in order to justify the reconstitution of the empire by military means, Putin must not only have his army and generals behind him but also the population as a whole. It is a question of building legitimacy by resorting to the historical vision. Putin's geopolitics of Russian conquest has nothing to do with historical truth verified by the academic approach. What counts is the mobilising effectiveness of the narrative.

In order to achieve this effect, a certain type of memory must be used – a reactive memory of the Russians. This is the memory of the Second World War. The Great Patriotic War is not a *lieu de mémoire,* even if it has several locations, such as the Battle of Stalingrad or the Soviet flag planted on the Reichstag in Berlin. It is rather, as I used to say, a "memory deposit". Through its metaphorical connotations, this concept is more than *lieux de mémoire.* It is in fact a stock of resources that can be recycled in the present political or geopolitical stakes. Various actors draw on these deposits for the symbolic materials needed to encourage action.

In the case of the Great Patriotic War, this is the living memory. This material is based, as Adam Michnik metaphorically put it, on the "egoism of pain" connected to the human costs suffered by the Soviets, and on the exaltation of pride in victorious sacrifice. Although there remains an obstacle to these uses by Putin, namely the controversy over when the Great Patriotic War actually began and what actually happened between 1939 and 1941. Yet the Putin narrative does not need to explain itself to the Russian population. Exploiting this memory deposit is enough to gain the support of around 80 per cent of the population for his strategy of including Ukraine in the empire.

Almost 20 years later, towards the middle of the 21st century, Professor Geremek's observation has become obsolete. Collective memory is summoned not to support diplomatic negotiation but, to paraphrase Karl von Clausewitz, to justify a particular foreign policy by other means – that is by war and the geopolitics of territorial expansion. But we can also see that while Putin only needed historical justifications to explain the launch of a geopolitical adventure, when the guns started shooting, his memorial discourse became muddled and incoherent. Per-

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haps because remembering the tribute of blood paid by the Russian and Ukrainian parts of the population between 1941 and 1945 encouraged a reflection on the meaning of today's sufferings, thanks to the Russian and Ukrainian blood that is shed abundantly in the war against Ukraine. This potentially risks turning the Russian population against the geopolitics of conquest and its memory make-up. But this is unfortunately only another hypothesis.

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Georges Mink is permanent professor at the College of Europe in Natolin and Emeritus Director of Research at the Institut des Sciences Sociales du Politique (CNRS, France) and Université de Paris X, Nanterre. He is also a former president of the International Council for Central and East European Studies (2015–2021). He is a sociologist and political scientist specializing in Central and Eastern Europe. His most recent books include *La Pologne au coeur de l'Europe, de 1914 à ces jours*, *Histoire politique et conflits de mémoire*, Paris, Buchet Chastel, 2015; *Polska w sercu Europy, od 1914 do czasow najnowszych, historia polityczna i konflikty pamieci*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 2017. He is also a member of *New Eastern Europe*'s editorial board.

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How well-brought up girls became unbeatable warriors

The path from battle glory to modern feminism

ANDRZEJ ZARĘBA

The role of women in conflict is often viewed as being on the home front, far away from the front lines of battle. Despite this, the story of Poland's struggle for independence in the First World War would not be complete without acknowledging the selfless activities undertaken by female volunteers.

One hundred and ten years ago war again came to the vicinity of the city of Kraków. What is now perceived in the West as an unparalleled tragedy, the near collapse of a civilisation and a catastrophe of lost youth was perceived then as a different story, on the verge of three empires: German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian. The outbreak of war marked the end of an unbelievable stability which had lasted more or less since the compromising political treaty conference in Vienna in 1815, with only a short interval for the so-called "Hundred Days" campaign with the Battle of Waterloo in June of the same year – a battle which marked the end of the epic connected to the revolutionary export of Napoleonic civilisation.

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On the plains of Eastern Europe there was another element of repression – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was divided by three neighbouring monarchies and began its life as a spiritual phantom, killed just when it was coming to life as a constitutional monarchy, which could (in theory) have brought modern national identity and cooperation to the many peoples comprising the state – Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Jews and Germans, not to mention the Polish majority with its very complicated social strata.

Revolution in the air

A series of tragic uprisings and riots in towns which were acclaimed political centres were, one by one, drowned in blood, which only caused more political oppression around the years 1830, 1846, 1849 and 1862. The final year, which corresponds with the American Civil War, represented the start of the last gasp of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's legacy. This date is also important as it marked the end of the agrarian serf system in the Russian Empire. Reforms were enforced directly as a means of pacifying a potential insurgency in the country among the peasant farmers. The main question for Poland in this era was how to gain much-needed victory. Knowing that "God likes to side with bigger battalions", victory would depend on the mobilisation of the masses. The first sign of opportunity for the nation emerged with the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904.

In the wider perspective, the Polish independence movement was divided along the line separating romanticism and realism. Russia dominated the region and the new century brought it economic prosperity – a vast territory with an absolutist regime backing hardcore capitalism. Russia acted as a great magnet, attracting business from around the world – it had everything that California or Alaska offered, minus various western-style "scruples". There was no free press, but there was freedom in the maltreatment of the lower class.

The Polish economic elites under Russian rule came to accept their reality. Moreover, they saw a chance to integrate their territories under the rule of the Romanovs. They profited from the possibilities provided by the statist regime. The only condition was that they could not be openly interested in politics.

The socialist movement, however, was split and frustrated. One part of it, under the charismatic leadership of Józef Piłsudski, stayed loyal to the heritage of the last major movement against the Russian Empire – the January Uprising in 1863. Piłsudski became obsessed with repeating this history, but learning how to proceed proved difficult. A combat section of the Polish Socialist Party took part in an unsuccessful revolution in 1904–05. Piłsudski later travelled even to Tokyo in

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the hope of convincing Japanese intelligence that a vast Polish uprising was inevitable. But this was all in vain.

The last safe haven was found then in the border fortress of Kraków. Piłsudski found refuge in a flat at Number 10 Szlak Street (the present-day address is Szlak 33, right across the street from the editorial offices of *New Eastern Europe* – editor's note). A whole bunch of revolutionaries joined him. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was very different from the Russian one. Although one of the three partitioning powers, since 1867 it was strictly a constitutional monarchy. The rule of law prevailed. Standards were so high (especially when compared to Russia) that a radical terrorist revolutionary named Ludwik Waryński was put on trial for political activities in Kraków, only to be found innocent on almost all charges except for the illegal use of a false identity card.

Kraków was unique with its loose atmosphere of the late art nouveau, activity in the fields of visual arts, theatre and politics, and a relatively free populace. There was no open suffrage movement like that in Great Britain, but women did play an active role in socialist activities which were – thanks to Piłsudski – now closely connected with another plan for an uprising. Right-wing action was also based on local activities, but possessed a lot more reservations towards the role of women. Both parts created their own military branches. Women were inevitably necessary to keep the newly (subtle and vulnerable) created machine going. The state of the empire let the citizens bear and keep arms, even providing them access to military facilities, but the rest was the citizens' own burden. As small steps are the best guarantee of change, including women as a solid part of society was important, even though this was unwelcome by the majority of conservatives.

Women were constantly alert as liaisons, couriers and food providers. They repaired uniforms. They shared the same fate as revolutionaries of all kinds – terrorist actions would not be possible without their assistance – while covert actions were important where bomb plots or assassinations are concerned. Women were also more than half the population. There was only one clear exception – women were generally excluded from combat duties. Overall, there were no plans to organise and train female combat units.

A fortress and a refuge

When the First World War became inevitable, between June 28th and July 28th 1914, tensions grew in the city and the nearby countryside. Kraków lies just on the region's political tectonic plates. Controlled by the Austrian administration, it had been fortified since 1848, when Vienna decided to end the unusual independence

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Photo: Polona Biblioteka Narodowa / public domain

Zofia Zawisza was one of the main figures in the auxiliary women's services of the Volunteer Rifle Group.

of the Kraków Republic. Just two years earlier, Russian expeditionary forces had marched and paraded in Błonie Park (a large field in the city which is there today as it was 200 years ago), celebrating their helpful hand which crushed the Hungarian uprising and thus saved the Habsburg possessions.

Yet, Vienna had no illusions – the Russian "ally" was too strong and there were intractable obstacles in political philosophy. Investment in defences quickened after the Crimean War, when Vienna openly betrayed the statist regime. The Russians never forgot this. Kraków became more and more fortified around the city centre, creating a complete enclosure which not only served to defend against an unexpected attack, but also as an intelligence centre and troop base. In the 1910s the city became also a refuge for the expelled revolutionaries and radicals who managed to flee from the Russian Empire. Among them were Vladimir Lenin and his wife as well as the head of the Soviet security organisation Felix Dzerzhinsky and Ioseb Dzhugashvili (later known as Stalin).

The Polish insurgent machinery started slowly to move in this period. Zofia Zawisza was one of the main figures in the auxiliary women's services of the Volunteer Rifle Group. She resided in her family manor in Goszyce outside the city, near the border with the Russian Empire. At the beginning of the war, the Russians had left the border area and even though the everyday junction between the city and its nearby Russian neighbourhood had been busy, now every obstacle disappeared as if the long-lived dream of a united republic of Poland had come true.

The riflewomen were employed as scouts. Their capabilities were unique. Though not numerous, their unit never exceeded 30 members, most were quite well educated. Their family backgrounds gave them understanding of several languages. The Polish patriotic movement was based on two groups – the hard-working proletariat and the working intelligentsia, which consisted of former small gentry forced to labour after political repressions deprived them of their land rights. But still some could prevail in these circumstances and were deeply rooted among

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the chain of small manors in the country. This would prove a very important factor during the first months of the unprecedented war. The other was simply natural – eloquent, nice-looking, charming girls who could work the guards much easier than aggressive looking young males. As aforementioned, women also had the ability to understand and speak foreign languages. Zawisza was fluent in German, Russian and French (as well as her native Polish).

Although the revolutionary movement had been constantly preparing for action, a sudden change in politics took the activists by surprise. The Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia exactly one month after the Sarajevo assassination. The leaders of the Polish movement were taken by surprise and forced to undertake some serious improvisation. Yet, the goal became clear – a popular national uprising. Spreading such information was not so easy in the early 20th century and plans had to be made in secret, and according to whatever information and even gossip was available.

The network reaches further

In this moment of history there were five to six female members within the structure. They were in charge of medical support and paramedic services. They organised local tailor workshops, producing uniforms (they had a different cut than ordinary Austrian army outfits), repairing trousers and collecting gifts. What may have seemed like trivial aspects which do not often get enough attention from military historians proved essential as no army could operate without such basic logistics. The main problem of the volunteer army was a lack of services. Every man wanted to be a hero. Thus, the burden of maintenance was put on the shoulders of the women.

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One reconnaissance force was made up of seven troops, the so-called Belina's Seven, who were proven riders high in patriotic spirits, but lacking horses. They hired standard horse-drawn carts (*dorożka*), packed up their arms and armour and moved across the border one August evening. Goszyce was their meeting point where plans were made, corrected and riding horses acquired. In Goszyce carts were then paid in order to return to Kraków. The women in the manor kept the cavalry in high spirits – troops were provided with operation information, food and sleep. Their main goal was preparing information before the uprising spread in the vicinity. The leaders had hoped that the march of the riflemen would spark the fire.

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The women were the only means of communication in much less than real time. Reports were brought through the border back to Kraków and again to the cavalry patrol. All of them were familiar with horsemanship. They knew the country and the locals. In that way, their cart did not arouse suspicions, even the Russian local police did not take notice.

At the same time, everything hung on their accuracy and precise observations. They would visit the commander at a flat belonging to a socialist delegate to the Viennese parliament, Ignacy Daszyński which was converted into the improvised headquarters of the uprising. Piłsudski fascinated women with his charm – a male force combined with sensitivity. The women would report on the situation on the newly-opened front. After the meeting the women packed leaflets announcing the uprising, bought as much first aid gear as they could carry and galloped to the farm in Goszyce, then on to Jędrzejów. In the meantime, the Russians disappeared and only the Kraków Fortress checkpoints blocked the road. The brave girls were quickly allowed through as Polish conscripts were manning the checkpoints. On the other side, they met only one man still in Russian police uniform, apparently lost. He tried not to take notice.

In Jędrzejów the conscript commission fled before the volunteer cavalry detachment could execute the order to blow up the facility and burn the conscript list. No man's land reached now far north almost to Kielce – the main city in the southern part of Russian territory. Around this time, the first combat victim, a Russian policeman, was shot and killed on the spot when the troops met police on the country roads. For now, the city of Słomniki was liberated by the revolutionary troops and their indispensable women volunteers. Zofia Zawisza organised new orders. The troops were hungry; they carried no rations of their own.

The women were the only means of communication, everything hung on their accuracy and precise observations.

The main marching column of the uprising's riflemen slowly moved towards their main goal – the city of Kielce. They were supported by a chain of manor houses. It was quite a paradox – a popular uprising organised by a socialist party was supported by the remnants of the upper class with their subtle chain of family and societal ties. All of the struggle was concentrated along the main roads which lead not only to Kielce, but further north, to Warsaw – the centre of the Russian military machine in the Polish Kingdom. After decades of political and national oppression, there were countless islands of independent society, still remaining against all odds. Yet the spark of insurgency had not ignited the flame among a majority of the masses. Key elements of the modern society remained loyal to the Russian regime – the Catholic upper clergy and political right.

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On August 12th 1914 the first elements of the combat group of left radicals entered Kielce. Their female reconnaissance teams were there prior, thanks to their family connections, easily finding comfortable lodgings. They were the eyes and ears of the insurgent army. But now all was clear. The masses stayed calm, willing to act. The volunteers prepared for a long, bitter and costly war. The women organised a truly professional intelligence network. Their intelligence and message delivery system would soon reach deep inside the Russian heartland. Thus, the empire lost ground due to a most innovative, creative and educated population suddenly organising spontaneously and rejecting the Russian administration. These well-educated women fought passionately for their cause. Even though the Russian army was the most numerous in Europe, its archenemies included not just the German-speaking empires, but also the feminists doing their part in the struggle for national freedom. NEE

Andrzej Zaręba is the illustrator for *New Eastern Europe*.

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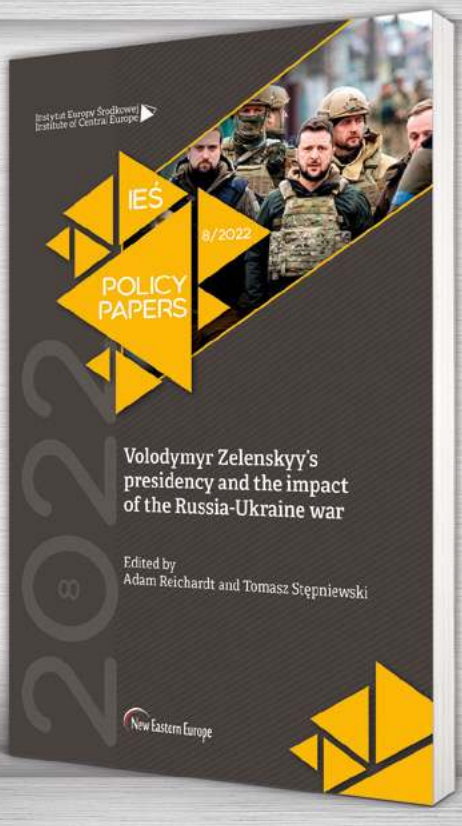

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