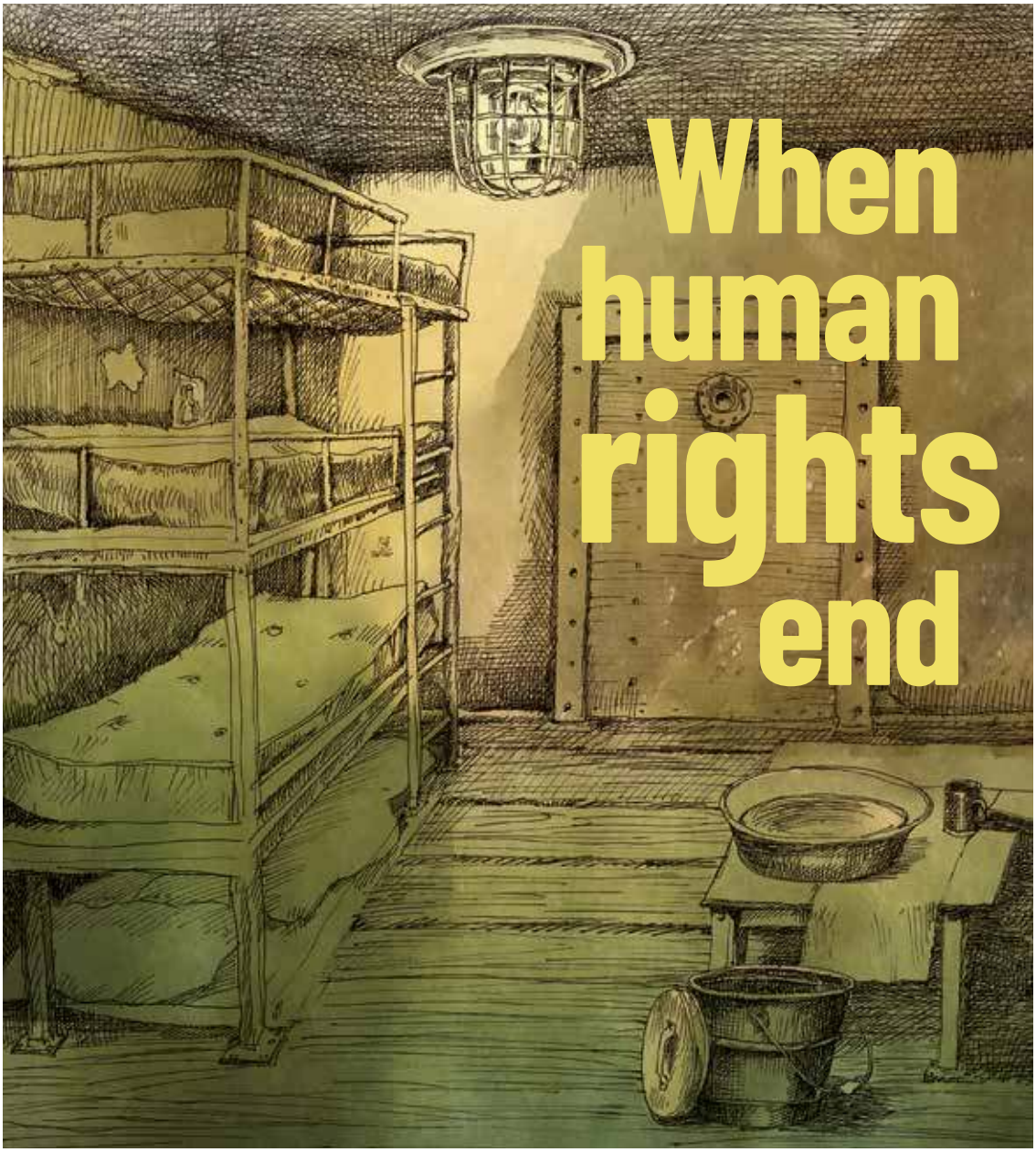
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When human rights end

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Dear Reader,

In 1975, the Helsinki Final Act was signed, marking a landmark moment that introduced human rights into the framework of the international legal and political order. Its significance became even clearer in 1976, when initiatives such as the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, the Lithuanian Helsinki Group and the Moscow Helsinki Group were established to monitor the Soviet state's compliance with its provisions.

These were the first wave of Helsinki monitoring groups, setting a model for later initiatives in other Soviet republics and across Central and Eastern Europe. At the height of the Cold War, these developments affirmed that the treatment of individuals within states was not merely a domestic concern, but a matter of legitimate international interest.

Today, as that very principle comes under strain, this legacy feels more relevant than ever. Major powers are increasingly abandoning decades of multilateralism, reverting instead to a geopolitical logic where might makes right. This shift has many dimensions that cannot be ignored. Among the most consequential is the growing tendency to subordinate human rights to national interests and the securitization of state policy. This trend is not confined to distant powers; it is increasingly visible across Europe as well.

In this issue, we pose a fundamental question: do human rights still matter? Our answer is unequivocal: they do. Yet, we have asked our contributors to examine this question within a broader and more complex context. Can multilateral institutions tasked with promoting human rights endure in the current climate? Where are the most serious violations occurring? And how is the concept of human rights evolving in our region?

Beyond this central theme, the issue explores the role of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran in the context of the US-Israeli conflict with Iran. We also examine the debate over whether Ukraine should hold elections during wartime – an issue that touches on the very nature of democracy under existential threat.

Finally, we present a series of stories on Armenia, offering insight into the country's domestic and social dynamics ahead of its upcoming elections in June.

As always, we invite you to visit our website for the latest commentary and analysis, and to subscribe to our weekly newsletter, *Brief Eastern Europe*. We also encourage you to listen to or watch our podcast, *Talk Eastern Europe*, now available on YouTube.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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When human rights defenders are imprisoned, it is a litmus test for democracy

An interview with Ales Bialiatski, human rights defender, Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Belarusian political prisoner. Interviewer: Nasta Zakharevich

NASTA ZAKHAREVICH: Let me start with the most important thing: how are you feeling? In the very first hours after your release, you said you will recover and return to work. Have you managed to start working yet?

ALES BIALIATSKI: From day one, I had to get up to speed. The first period after the release is stressful, because when you are incarcerated you exist within certain parameters: every day is the same and then every year is the same … And then with a release a sharp change occurs. People experience this release differently. Thus, there needs to be some kind of transition period. We can see that sometimes such sharp changes have a negative effect on people's health. That is what happened, for example, in the case of Mikola Statkevich [a Belarusian opposition politician and long-time critic of Alyaksandr Lukashenka; he has spent many years in prison on politically motivated charges – editor's note]. He later suffered a stroke, which I would largely attribute to this abrupt change in circumstances. He was placed under enormous psychological strain by the very prospect of regaining his freedom, only to find himself, just a few hours later, back in the uncertainty of imprisonment and facing a 14-year sentence.

The rehabilitation period takes a different time for different people. I had already had experience from my previous incarceration, so in a way I knew what to expect. And whether you like it or not, you must go through this adaptation period. It doesn't take a day or a week. After my first sentence it was only after six months that I felt that I was back to normal and when the prison experience was returning to me only in my dreams. The same thing is happening

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now, even though the overall situation is completely different. Yet despite the increased attention that I am now receiving, I'm doing ordinary things. I go for walks with my wife. I cook. I am simply doing the things that I was deprived of for several years. And it turns out that if you don't hold a phone in your hands for four years, you have to learn how to use it again. Every day I am learning something new about what took place during these past four years. For someone living an ordinary life, this accumulation of knowledge comes gradually, a little bit each day. But in a case such as mine, in a relatively short time, you find out many things that have a deep effect on you. For example, that some close friends from my student days passed away while I was in prison.

Much of the human rights work in Belarus used to happen "in the field". Now it is impossible to go to courts or work within the country at all. What does Belarusian human rights advocacy look like now?

It remains focused on the same areas we have always worked on – providing assistance to victims of political repression, gathering information on human rights violations in Belarus, and analysing these developments. The last point includes writing analytical reports, monthly and annual reviews, but also organizing meetings during which we explain what's happening in Belarus to interested institutions and organizations, as well as people who can influence this situation. Strategically, of course, we're targeting one point, hoping that our work will nevertheless help change the human rights situation in Belarus for the better. This is our goal, which we've always had.

The number of legal appeals to us has not decreased. Last year our lawyers handled more than 500 cases, and this figure applies only to those who worked in the central office. If we take into account regional offices, whose staff were likewise forced to leave Belarus, the overall number would be roughly twice as high. People contact us from both within Belarus and abroad. Every month, people are forced to flee the country under various threats. Political prisoners are released after completing their sentences and find themselves under constant surveillance and pressure from such institutions as the police or the KGB. They leave the country because they understand that they cannot have a normal life in Belarus.

Since 2020, our work has also gained new directions. We are now documenting crimes committed by official structures. This documentation process has now come to the forefront. Clearly, we have problems communicating with society in Belarus, but if you look back to Soviet times, when there was an Iron Curtain between the USSR and the free world, you realize that back then there were much fewer possibilities to communicate then we have today. Nevertheless, in the 1980s we were still reading the underground publications released by the Polish group Solidarity, and we

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were listening to Radio Free Europe and the BBC. In this way we were able to receive information that was critically important for our activism in Soviet Belarus. Now communication is easier because there are social networks, and no matter how much the authorities try to block them, there are always ways, through VPNs and other workarounds, to maintain contact with Belarusians. Thus, today the influence of the diaspora on the situation in Belarus is significantly greater than it was before. That is why even when in prison, people can receive information about what is taking place abroad. Yes, it is limited because the information is passed only through phone calls with relatives. Nevertheless, contacts exist and they shouldn't be underestimated. We are working for the Belarusian society.

There is a lot of talk about restrictions on communication and information sharing. It is known that after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine, letters to political prisoners were allowed to come only from close relatives, and even not from all of them. Why is that the case?

In Stalin's time political prisoners were formally allowed to receive one letter every six months. Throughout the whole of 2025, I received only one single letter from my wife – even fewer than prisoners were permitted in Stalin's era. This shows that Belarus today is effectively living under martial law, the result of both an entrenched internal dictatorship and the military conflict next door. As Belarus has been drawn into this conflict, restrictions on political prisoners have multiplied many times over. In practice, we have been treated

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as prisoners of war, and the rules governing correspondence for prisoners of war are fundamentally different from – and far harsher than – those applied to ordinary inmates.

When you were in prison, were you able to get information about the war in Ukraine?

Those of us who were interested knew these developments fairly well. We had Russian television, which shows everything through its ideological lens, but nevertheless, in terms of facts, you could get a lot from it. This is especially true if you have experience from Soviet times of reading between the lines. You could learn much more from Russian television than from that in Belarus. Programmes on Belarusian channels are chaotic and significantly weaker in terms of their impact on people. But apart from certain facts, our television is usually all about the local issues. This is common from spring until late autumn, plus some sort of administrative shuffles when Lukashenka cleans house with his officials. Though in 2025 there was information on Belarusian television and radio about a key political prisoner being released. When Siarhei Tsikhanouski was released, we found out about it literally on the next day. Overall, I was very interested in the news on the economic situation because through it I could understand how things were going in both Belarus and Russia. When figures about gross income were announced, I could understand what kind of shape the economy was in. We are all aware that this Russian-Ukrainian war heavily depends on Moscow's economic capacity to continue it.

In 2022 you were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. How did other inmates and the administration react to this information? A guard goes to work in the morning to watch over a Nobel laureate. It seems absurd…

People have very different attitudes toward this prize. In prison I encountered people who knew very little about it, as well as those who didn't know anything at all. For them, whether it's the Nobel or some fake prize, it made no difference. But of course, for the more well-read people who understood what it was about, my prize generated respect. In 2025, there was a lot of talk in our prison about the Nobel Peace Prize in the context of Donald Trump's rhetoric. It was much talked about on television, which for some inmates caused complete bewilderment to know that a Nobel Peace Prize laureate was doing time with them in prison. For some it caused distrust, they even argued among themselves whether I was a real Nobel laureate or not. Then they would come to me to clarify.

For the most part, other inmates treated me with respect and dignity. However, you have to understand that this is the lowest level of Belarusian society. These are people mostly without higher education, they have a different life structure, especially those who have been incarnated for 20 or 30 years. Of course, there are also people who col-

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laborated with the administration, and they simply tracked my every step. Their task was to report on everything I was doing, because it improved their conditions in prison, but there were not so many of them overall. I never encountered hostility. No one called me a "foreign agent". No one said that I sold out Belarus – that never happened. Apparently, our official image as enemies does not work well with the Belarusian mentality. Those of us who have a different point of view or who left Belarus are not seen as enemies to the people. Many inmates also do not like the government, albeit for different reasons. For example, because they're forced to work. All these laws about "parasites", they affect a wide circle of people, not just those involved in politics. Another huge problem is that many people end up there for social rather than legal reasons. In these institutions with effectively forced labour, people are treated as prisoners not for the crimes they've committed but because they suffer from alcohol or drug addiction. Over recent years, thousands of people have been placed in these facilities through extrajudicial means. The desire to maintain order, which Lukashenka speaks about so often, has extended to the personal freedom of people who've never been involved in politics. And they openly say that they feel as if they're living in Stalinist times. So the attitude of ordinary prisoners towards political ones is generally okay – there was no hostility between us.

In a recent interview, you said that for a human rights defender, imprisonment is a continuation of work. What did you have in mind when you said that?

My colleagues at the Viasna human rights centre and I had the opportunity to leave when criminal cases were opened against us in early 2021, when the first searches took place. It was clear that remaining in Belarus was unsafe and that sooner or later it would all end in ruin. This is especially true since we had the experience of 2011, when a criminal case was also opened against me. Now it was something very similar. Literally three days before my arrest in July 2021, I met with Valiantsin Stefanovich and Vladimir Labkovich, who are also human rights defenders. We believed that our arrest was very likely, but we decided not to leave the country. We didn't have the moral right to do so. That's how we felt. I don't doubt now that it was the right decision. Not a single day that I spent in detention did I regret it. It really was a continuation of the human rights work we were doing and which we essentially continue to do. Although it was a paradoxical situation, when you are in prison you're not doing what is regarded as classical human rights work – you're not helping people. Quite the opposite, people try to help you, and they suffer because of it – they get arrested too. But the very fact that a human rights defender is in prison in any country is an indicator of the level of democracy in that country and how human rights are respected

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there. It's a litmus test. If the state holds human rights defenders in prison, no more explanation is needed. There's no need to conduct any missions there, any research. This one fact alone – that human rights defenders (and journalists!) are in prison – is very telling. Through our very lives we show what the situation is for human rights advocacy. Do human rights defenders have the opportunity to work normally? Are they limited in this work by certain laws, or are they doing time in prison? In our case, everything is obvious, there's nothing more to discuss.

You have very extensive experience in human rights work and, unfortunately, already substantial prison experience. How have the conditions of detention for political and non-political prisoners changed in Belarus?

When we first started observing this situation and providing assistance, which was in 1997-98, political prisoners were simply beaten in prisons. For example, in Zhodzina prison, people in masks would take prisoners out of their cells almost every day. They would line them up in the corridor and beat them. No one made distinctions between political and non-political prisoners there. Now the situation has changed. Living conditions have become better in some places because overall there's been a greater humanization. No matter how much Lukashenka tries to preserve the Soviet and post-Leninist legacy in the country, the generation of prison guards and prison administration has changed. When I first served my term in the Babruisk colony, around 2000–01, each new group of prisoners was subjected to what was called a mandatory "reception". All the men were taken into a room and beaten indiscriminately with batons. The officers beat them so severely that, by the end, many were left lying on the floor, unable to get up. Now the reception works differently. When you arrive at the colony, after the quarantine period, you are immediately sent to an isolation cell. They do this to some ordinary prisoners as well, but for political prisoners it is mandatory. They no longer beat you unconscious, yet you are left to spend time in a freezing isolation cell for ten or 15 days.

As for food, over these ten to 15 years the food became better, but there's not enough of it. The fact that prisoners leave prisons so emaciated is a result of simply not having enough calories. And of course, the constant pressure and lack of sleep lead to people losing 15, 20, or even 30 kilograms. At the same time, we see that sadistic tendencies, especially towards political prisoners, persist. People die in colonies. Vitold Ashurak and Ales Pushkin died because they weren't given timely medical care. People also lose their health in prisons. There are suicide attempts, heart attacks, strokes – all of this affects political prisoners on a wide scale. If they keep you in a damp cell where water is literally running down the walls, and you're sitting there all day long, and for months

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... whether you survive or not depends on what God has given you.

I wasn't beaten, but other prisoners told me that their colony commandant could simply punch them in the face because they spoke Belarusian. Conditions in prisons are inhumane. This is a serious challenge for us and for the entire civilized world – it just shouldn't be this way.

Alies Bialiatski is a Belarusian human rights defender and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He was awarded the prize in 2022 while serving his second politically motivated prison sentence in Belarus. In December 2025, he was released and deported to Lithuania as a result of negotiations between Belarus and the United States.

Nasta Zakharevich is a journalist who had to flee Belarus in 2020 and is currently based in Latvia.

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Of course human rights still matter

BARBORA BUKOVSKÁ

The question of whether human rights still matter is increasingly appearing in public discussion. Often asked by those eager to sideline dignity in favour of security, it suggests a world that has lost its moral nerve. Yet in an age of digital authoritarianism and climate crisis, human rights remain an essential tool for resisting unaccountable power.

"Do human rights still matter?" This question, now appearing in political speeches, panel discussions and essays with annoying frequency, is unsettling. Too often, it comes from those eager to sideline rights in favour of business or security, as if the idea of dignity has become unfashionable, too naïve for our age of "realism" or "strategic interests". We are told that the real world now runs on power, not principles. On might, not morality. On economic leverage, not international law. We are reminded, often with satisfaction, that human rights do not stop tanks and do not grow GDP. The question reeks of fatigue when asked by those in the human rights field, drained by endless crises, wanting to hear either a reassurance or a lament.

The question belongs to a world that has already lost its moral nerve. It is asked while the Middle East burns again and while civilians in Gaza are starved under the justification of "security operations". It is asked while Ukraine is still caught in the grim rhythm of Russian aggression. While the EU debates not how to stop the killing but how to look "strategically coherent". While international law resembles an obsolete institution that everyone acknowledges, but rarely consults.

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Pleasant fiction

When asked whether human rights still matter, it is not an invite to an intellectual exercise, especially in our region. Instead, it echoes authoritarian regimes that have asked the same thing and answered it every day. In places where rights have been absent or denied, people rarely ask whether they matter as they are too busy surviving or staying out of prison. Instead, the question arises in places and among people who should know better than to trade them away. Looking at the world we live in, it is a world in which human rights are needed the most. In a century that was supposed to have learnt better, authoritarianism has gone digital, propaganda is its soundtrack, and "might makes right" is trending again.

On the other hand, the rules-based order, relentlessly being destroyed in front of our eyes and taking the human rights system with it, has never been as stable or as universal as we hoped. When Mark Carney, Canada's prime minister, called it a "pleasant fiction" in Davos this year, he highlighted what human rights activists, victims, and dissidents have known for decades: that the history of human rights has been a series of disputes, inconsistent enforcement, and plain hypocrisy. They were marketed as the moral spine of global governance, a system in which governments paid lip service to "universal values" while at the same time made arms deals, built border camps, and expanded surveillance regimes. Current events are not really a dramatic break with the past but are more like a reckoning with the compromises that were always there.

In a century that was supposed to have learnt better, authoritarianism has gone digital, propaganda is its soundtrack, and "might makes right" is trending again.

Decades of deregulation and globalization have hollowed out the social contract that human rights were supposed to uphold. States outsourced power to markets and global supply chains, pretending growth would deliver stability and, as a result, rights. Instead, wealth has concentrated, inequality deepened and uncertainty spread. Rights to work, housing, health, education and social security, guaranteed in international treaties, have never been treated as binding obligations. States incorporated them into policy language but not into enforceable standards or accountability mechanisms.

As states shed the illusion of moral oversight, new centres of unaccountable power emerged. Big tech and a handful of corporations now act like parallel governments, with fewer checks than most actual states. Platform rules, content-moderation systems, recommender algorithms, and electronic payment

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systems decide who can speak, organize, get paid or even be seen, often more decisively than any court or ministry. Human rights protections, written for an era of states, are currently being contested in private infrastructures as much as in parliaments and in courts.

The climate crisis also exposes this weakness. Environmental breakdown can no longer be separated from human rights, as the planet reminds us that rights exist in nature. But human rights law was made to deal with individual violations, not the slow, cumulative harm of environmental destruction that crosses borders and generations. It responds to events, not systems, and its inability to link ecological collapse to real obligations has left human rights protections exposed. Rights to water, health, housing and education are often ignored as political debates put economic growth or national interests before human needs.

Maintaining relevance

The end of the western monopoly on power did not bring a more equal human rights project. It brought a crowded marketplace of grievances and alibis. Every major power now justifies abuse by pointing to someone else's double standards. Russia cites Iraq and Libya, western governments invoke Russian war crimes to excuse their own selective outrage, and others dismiss the entire endeavour as a western construct while simultaneously sitting on UN human rights bodies. In this multipolar cynicism, human rights become a vocabulary of accusation rather than a universal constraint. If this is the terrain in which we live, the real question is not whether human rights still matter but who has the power to treat them as a constraint, and who must treat them as a weapon of resistance.

Maintaining the relevance of human rights will require work on three parallel fronts. We must demand that rights be used politically as tools to confront power. They must be used as principles that shape the economic systems through which people secure their livelihoods and the planet. And they must rely on them at the human level, where the recognition of another person's dignity begins long before it appears in law.

Politically, the current tendency, as recently asserted by Ursula von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference, is to conclude that a harsh geopolitical environment requires abandoning the language of rights in favour of "real politics". That conclusion misunderstands the nature of the problem. The challenge is not that power has returned to international affairs. The challenge is not to abandon human rights as doing so will remove one of the few tools at our disposal, capable of structuring power in a fragmented international order.

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This is where the role of "middle powers", including the EU, becomes decisive. These countries still hold enormous influence over global trade, regulatory standards and multilateral institutions. If politics is becoming more strategic, they can together shape the rules that guide cooperation between states and build human rights directly into it through trade agreements, diplomatic partnerships, accountability mechanisms, sanctions, and the mandates of international institutions. They can stop treating human rights as something to be traded away at the next security summit and do away with the lazy habit of applying principles only to adversaries.

Economic perspecitve

From an economic perspective, making human rights relevant means recognizing that human dignity cannot survive if the structures that organize work, wealth and production operate outside its reach. The next phase of the human rights project will therefore depend more on whether economic power is brought under the same constraints that were once designed primarily for states. One place to begin is corporate accountability. Although human rights standards bind states, the task is no longer only to limit what governments can do to citizens. Dominant companies must be forced to accept they cannot run business models that depend on pushing workers, users and whole communities below society's foundations, or on extracting data and resources in ways that drive us past ecological and social limits. If human rights are to survive in the age of big tech and AI, they have to stop knocking politely at the door of "self-regulation" and start treating certain corporations as power-holders that must be regulated, litigated against, and publicly shamed like any abusive state.

We can already see this shift taking shape. Rules on mandatory human rights checks, supply chain transparency and environmental accountability all show that we can move away from the old idea that markets can regulate themselves. So far, these mechanisms have failed to eliminate abuse, and the second frontier will lie in the architecture of global trade and investment that protects capital flows and commercial interests. Rebalancing this architecture means putting human rights at the centre of how economies are organized.

Some economic thinking is beginning to move in that direction. Models like "doughnut economics" try to define the space in which societies can thrive while staying within both social and ecological limits. Seen from a human rights perspective, this framework makes something explicit which has long been implicit – rights depend on the material structure of the world.

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For those of us in the human rights community, this framework is a chance to bring environmental protection back into advocacy for social justice. This shift does not call for seizing the means of production. Making human rights matter here means forcing governments and financial institutions to rethink what counts as progress. It means showing that climate policies, renewables, ecosystem protection, and urban redesign are part of human rights projects as the very concept of human rights is about a decent life on a finite planet.

Human dimension

Yet even political action and economic reform will remain incomplete if the human dimension of rights is neglected. The most important thing about the future of human rights is one often overlooked: the second line of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition to stating that we are supposed to be equal in dignity and rights, it stipulates that we "are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood". This is usually treated as a bit of a moral decoration for the language of rights, which is a neutral, almost scientific, catalogue of legal entitlements. Yet, here, at the beginning of the foundational document of human rights, there is an ethical demand aimed at persons and communities, telling us both what we are and how we should act. It insists that human rights are not what we can claim from others, but about the way we relate to them – with recognition, care, and the basic understanding that other people are not enemies or resources but "brothers".

Human rights are not what we can claim from others, but about the way we relate to them – with recognition, care, and basic understanding.

If the last century has taught us anything, it is that when people get tired of defending rights, it does not take long before they start losing them. Human rights matter not because they are written into treaties and constitutions but because we will keep claiming them and using them to say, in a thousand different voices and contexts, that the way things are is not the way they must be. Human rights will continue to matter in the refusal to normalize border camps, the refusal to euphemize drone strikes, the refusal to accept that algorithmic decisions are neutral, and the refusal to separate environmental harm from the right to life. Human rights will continue by preserving the foundations that make them possible. That means also promoting education that teaches people to think before they repost, media that cannot be bought by algorithms, and social habits that acknowledge others.

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Today's order is no longer pretending to be restrained by law and rules. Our counter-power will be the insistence that rights, claimed and reclaimed, can still make might look ugly, illegitimate, and weaker than it believes itself to be. But we must first stop pretending that such an order deserves our cooperation. ❞

The author writes this essay in her personal capacity and any opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of her employer.

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Rights in the age of the new autocracy

ZUZANA PAVLÍČKOVÁ

If we only focus on the limits of human rights, we tend to overlook their deeper function in the resilience of democracy. While enforcement can fall short, the existence of powerful legal standards still influences political contestation and slows down the process of institutional erosion, even in the age of new authoritarianism.

Are human rights a romantic concept of liberal democracies that have ultimately proved insufficient for saving them from the return of authoritarian governance? The experience of Central and Eastern Europe suggests something more complex. It shows us that although human rights are not the silver bullet against democratic backsliding, they are one of the most important legal tools in the toolkit of democratic resilience.

Modern autocrats play their game by using democratic institutions to unbalance free political competition and seize power by combining nationalist, anti-liberal, and populist agendas, often adding a picture of a dominant leader into the recipe. What mostly puts the effectiveness of human rights mechanisms to the test under their rule is that the destruction of the rule of law and democracy is not happening in the classical coercive way but actually through the law and its selective interpretation. Thus, the rule of law is replaced by the rule by law.

Weaponizing rights

Current politics and legislative initiatives across the region are a playbook example of how democratic erosion in practice increasingly happens through formally

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lawful but substantively corrosive reforms. This broader pattern is referred to as autocratic legalism, when governments rely on formal legal frameworks to legitimize measures that gradually and systematically dismantle democratic checks and balances. Such a strategy is visible also in their approach to human rights guarantees.

Instead of rejecting human rights outright, modern authoritarian, or authoritarian leaning, governments corrupt the human rights system. They weaponize rights to serve their interests by reinterpreting them, narrowing their content, or selectively invoking rights in such ways that can consequently weaken institutional checks and challenge international oversight. They exploit the interpretative margins that law always leaves. Does this mean that new autocrats are within the margin of subjective interpretation when they change human rights narratives?

The selective invocation of certain rights in opposition to others challenges the balancing exercise. Take the example of the recent criminal code reforms in Slovakia, which are meant to dismantle the independent, and effective, Whistleblowers Protection Office and which have been justified through the language of restoring legality and protecting the rights of the accused. The broader political and institutional context signalled that the language of rights was being selectively mobilized to undermine anti-corruption enforcement and accountability mechanisms.

Instead of rejecting human rights outright, modern authoritarian, or authoritarian leaning, governments corrupt the human rights system.

The controversial judicial reform in Romania between 2017 and 2019, accompanied by mass protests, included attempts to amend criminal laws and weaken judicial independence and anti-corruption mechanisms officially to protect defendants' rights, uphold the presumption of innocence, and correct "abuses" by prosecutors. A similar strategy was at play in Hungary with the 2021 "child protection" law, which was presented as necessary to protect children's rights and parental authority. In reality, this move restricted LGBTQ+ rights, a narrative which is continuously used in the country.

Migration is another key field in this regard. The right to seek asylum has been portrayed as a security threat all over the region. The limitation of access to asylum procedures is defended as the protection of the rights of citizens and state sovereignty, even if it means violating international refugee law. These arguments are also increasingly used by countries that have a much stronger democratic record. In 2025, nine European states addressed an open letter asking for a change in the interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights in the area of migration, especially challenging the evolving case law regarding the expulsion of "criminal foreign nationals" and "irregular migration". The initiative, known as the

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Letter of Nine, formally claimed the aim to restore the right balance. However, its language spoke to arguments of safety, security, and national sovereignty.

Another indirect attack on human rights has occurred through the targeting of independent judicial actors who authoritatively interpret and enforce them. During gradual democratic backsliding, the courts are either directly restructured according to the preferences of political leadership and/or their independence is tested by labelling them as elitists and biased in favour of foreign influence. The collapse of judicial independence in Poland, which resulted in the introduction of the disciplinary system targeting judges and political appointments, is a showcase example.

Political will

It would be naïve to believe that human rights mechanisms alone can neutralize abuses of power. These mechanisms face legitimate criticism for being slow, politically constrained and strongly dependent on state compliance. As we have already seen, human rights systems do not always manage to stop the authoritarian drift of determined governments.

In Georgia, as in many other countries in the region, the government went ahead and adopted a controversial "foreign influence" law in 2024 despite strong criticism from the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Venice Commission. Under the argument of ensuring transparency and protecting national sovereignty, the law directly targeted free civil society and freedom of association. The case of Georgia illustrates how neither EU conditionality nor the external human rights mechanisms succeeded at stopping the democratic regression despite early warning. That is, however, not because rights are weak but because their effectiveness depends on political will. It is also worth remembering that their enforcement is fragile. While rights are strongest when understood as legal standards, they become weak once the political will is gone.

Yet if we only focus on the limits of human rights, we overlook their deeper function in the resilience of democracy. It is true that experience has taught us that enforcement can fall short. However, the existence of powerful legal standards influences political contestation and slows down the process of institutional erosion. This was the case regarding the rule of law improvement in Poland after the systematic review and criticism of regional and international mechanisms. Thus, human rights matter more than ever today. This is not because they always win and protect democracy or right each wrong, but because they slow down possible institutional destruction. In the age of the new authoritarianism, human rights play three key roles in supporting democratic resilience.

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Firstly, human rights mechanisms are a cornerstone of democratic resilience. They often serve as an early warning signal when democratic institutions are beginning to erode. While new autocratic leaders rarely attack human rights in direct or openly declared ways, the cumulative effects of their policies and legislation can significantly restrict the enjoyment of rights, especially for particular groups or in specific sectors. Measures targeting civil society organizations across the region illustrate this dynamic. Such actions not only create a chilling effect that discourages civic engagement, but also undermine the protection and exercise of the rights these organizations seek to defend.

The example of Bosnia and Herzegovina is instructive. There, the Constitutional Court suspended a Russian-style "foreign agents" law adopted in Republika Srpska, finding that it failed to meet a pressing social need, was not necessary in a democratic society, and conflicted with the European Convention on Human Rights. This case demonstrates how human rights standards can provide domestic courts with important legal tools to challenge legislation that narrows democratic space.

International human rights standards empower domestic actors, including civil society and human rights organizations, to challenge democratic regression.

At the same time, international human rights standards empower other domestic actors, including civil society, human rights organizations and democratic opposition, to challenge democratic regression. The European Convention on Human Rights has played a major role in empowering Russian human rights organizations, activists and lawyers who have continuously challenged restrictive laws and policies in Strasbourg, particularly before the country's expulsion from the Council of Europe. Judgments such as Kabaliya and Others, Lashmankin and Others, and Ecodefence and Others are among the numerous examples in which the Court found that Russian laws and administrative practices violated the freedoms of assembly and association. Together, these rulings not only exposed the restrictive impact of authoritarian policies on fundamental freedoms, but also helped to consolidate robust regional standards for the protection of civic space.

Secondly, supranational human rights scrutiny becomes crucial when legal reforms are used to weaken the rule of law. When domestic safeguards fail – often as a result of eroded democratic institutions – external review can serve as an important structural corrective. Contemporary autocratic leaders, however, frequently seek to discredit such oversight by portraying it as a form of "western imposition" or undue foreign interference. Hungary's aforementioned "child protection" law illustrates this tension. The legislation has drawn sustained criticism from inter-

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national human rights bodies and has led to infringement proceedings before the Court of Justice of the European Union. Although the case remains pending, the Advocate General Tamara Ćapeta has argued in her opinion that, by calling into question the equality of LGBTQ+ persons, Budapest has interfered with several fundamental rights protected by the EU Charter, including the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex and sexual orientation, respect for private and family life, freedom of expression and information, and the right to human dignity. Her analysis further suggests that Hungary has moved significantly away from the standards expected of a constitutional democracy.

Human rights mechanisms also play an irreplaceable role in creating and keeping records during the authoritarian drift. By monitoring and reporting on national developments through the lens of human rights standards, these mechanisms help to preserve institutional memory against authoritarian amnesia or nostalgia. When governments put all their efforts into rewriting events, domestic oversight bodies are gradually weakened, independent media are put under pressure, and the rights narrative is effectively hijacked at the national level. As a result, human rights mechanisms set the authoritative record.

Twisting of the narrative

Human rights records matter even where political resistance persists. In contexts such as Belarus after the 2020 protests, documentation by UN human rights bodies or organizations such as the Viasna Human Rights Centre has systematically recorded cases of torture, arbitrary detention, and political persecution. This is despite the absence of independent domestic accountability. Such records inevitably carry political and reputational costs and, importantly, help preserve a legal baseline for future democratic recovery. Ultimately, they make it more likely that any such recovery can be accompanied by accountability and justice for victims.

While the new authoritarianism weaponizes rights and dangerously reinterprets their language, the core principles beyond the framework equip democracy with tools to resist and recover.

The strength of these tools depends on effective control of the harm narrative. The struggle over human rights in our times is both institutional and conceptual. The redefinition of the language of rights goes hand in hand with attempts to redefine the underlying notion of harm. In his essay *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill wrote that power may only be exercised over an individual to prevent harm to others. This followed the theory introduced in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen from 1789, which stated that "liberty consists

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in the freedom to do everything which injures no one." The 20th century liberal constitutions were built around these principles. Rights can be limited, but only when their exercise causes demonstrable harm, and only under strict conditions of necessity and proportionality.

In parallel with the shift in the rights narrative, this principle is now not simply rejected but reinterpreted by the new authoritarians. Across the region, political leaders rarely declare that they aim to introduce illiberal systems. Except for Viktor Orbán's 2014 "illiberal democracy" speech, the moves are subtler, even by those leaders that are strongly inspired by him. Following the twisting of the narrative, new authoritarians imply that certain rights are harmful. The right to seek asylum is framed as a threat to security and sovereignty. The right to equality for LGBTQ+ persons is presented as a danger to children and the traditional family. Due process rights and the independence of judges are undermined as obstructions of democratic will or elitism over vox populi. Civil society organizations providing essential public services are described as harmful foreign interference.

This mirrors a critical shift in the structure of equality, which is the core of the human rights framework. Harm is no longer understood in Mill´s terms, i.e. as a concrete injury to someone´s else rights. Instead, it has become a political category. Insecurity (economic, personal, national or any other), fear of safety, demographic anxiety, moral discomfort, or national identity are elevated to the level of constitutional harm. In these new circumstances, limiting some rights becomes easier to justify and less unpopular. Balancing becomes asymmetrical. Some people are not treated as rights-holders, but as sources of risk. Human rights become effectively securitized.

Dignity

The principle that "my freedom ends where yours begins" only functions if both freedoms are recognized as equal. You and I are equal in dignity. When equality is replaced with hierarchy, the mechanism fails. One of the rules that all authoritarians strictly abide by is to divide society into us and them – majority versus minority; nationals versus immigrants; believers versus liberals; etc. Due to this, equality in dignity is deconstructed and the balancing of rights is shifted directly in favour of "us".

This is why human rights matter more in the age of the new authoritarianism. Not because they can stop democratic erosion, but because they maintain legal standards. Human rights define harm in legal, not political, terms. They say that universality is not conditioned by popularity and that all individuals are equal in

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human dignity. The key to democratic resilience is not to make sure that no rights are limited but to make sure that human rights mechanisms do not enable those who seek to define harm through fear.

In that battle, human rights are not just abstract moralistic discourse. Despite being weaponized to undermine democratic structures, human rights still remain a crucial legal instrument for the protection of the rule of law and democracy. EE

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When international institutions fail

ANAÏS MARIN

Whether in Bucha, Gaza or Tehran, international law and multilateral and regional organizations have failed to prevent war and human rights violations. This chaos is both a moral failure and a security threat, especially for Europe, which must confront these challenges while being sidelined from global affairs.

The world order is experiencing serious turbulence, with regional conflicts incrementally becoming global. The effect on human rights, which have been in retreat worldwide for the last decade, is disastrous. The very principle of this concept's universality has been contested while the international institutions established over 75 years ago to protect them are in jeopardy. It is fair to criticize the ineffectiveness of international organizations and it is urgently needed to reform them. However, it is unwarranted to accuse the United Nations or other organizations established to prevent conflicts and protect human rights regionally, such as the OSCE in Europe, of failing.

Similarly, claiming that international law is failing to deliver is both unfair and dangerous: the looming collapse of the norms-based multilateral order is a man-made disaster. Yet, restoring a functioning order in which international human rights law, as well as humanitarian law and institutions, can operate for the better good does not require superhuman efforts. It is each and everyone's responsibility to hold states accountable when they fail to protect human rights both locally and globally. Charity begins at home, and for Europeans that means upholding human rights at least on their continent while they can.

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Irreconcilable views

The post-Cold War order as we knew it is no more. This is only partly due to the toxic new relationship that Donald Trump is building with the Kremlin. This is being done at the expense of Washington's western allies from both sides of the Atlantic. While Europe had been reaping peace dividends over the past few decades, it failed to see that fundamental ideological divisions were emerging in the rest of the world, where 72 per cent of the population now live in countries classified as autocracies or "hybrid" regimes, the highest proportion since 1978.

A majority of countries are not democracies, and do not aim at becoming them. In their view, human rights as currently defined in UN conventions are not universal, since they reflect western values and traditions that do not account for socio-cultural and religious diversity. This argument, known as "cultural relativism", explains why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 – the first document to explicitly state the universality of human rights – has always been unevenly applied.

Countries contesting the universality of human rights put forward its declaratory nature, invoking instead another UN General Assembly Declaration, "on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty", which was adopted in 1965 (Resolution 2131). These countries have long protested against the selective, "politicized" way they perceive how western democracies apply international human rights legal standards, alleging some UN member states face constant scrutiny, criticism and sanctions while others are given a pass. This is ultimately seen as implementing double standards.

The UN institutions established after the Second World War are ill-equipped to respond to current demands for a redistribution of power.

During the Cold War, the Communist International and the Non-Aligned Movement embodied a sovereigntist claim that international scrutiny into their human rights record amounted to undue interference in domestic affairs. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, this coalition of non-western states united behind heavyweights such as China, Russia and India into an informal alliance, which in the UN is called the Like-Minded Group of countries. With the so-called Global South, whose interests it claims to represent at the UN, this alliance would now constitute a global majority. Although they are not all as revanchist or revisionist as Russia, some of these countries do aspire to use their numeric leverage to redesign international norms and institutions in their own, illiberal image.

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The UN institutions established after the Second World War are ill-equipped to respond to current demands for a redistribution of power. Twenty years ago, amidst accusations that the UN Commission on Human Rights had become politicized – in other words, that western democracies were using it to police others – the UN General Assembly replaced it with the Human Rights Council. The new body was tasked with scrutinizing the human rights situation in all member states. This scrutiny takes place primarily through the Universal Periodic Review, a process that governments generally find manageable and therefore are willing to engage in. States receive recommendations from their peers but remain free to reject or ignore them. Some respond positively in principle, making promises of future compliance that they are free to leave unimplemented.

Institutional paralysis

The other two pillars of the Human Rights Council – Treaty bodies and Special procedures – offer fewer opportunities for such whitewashing. Treaty bodies, including Committees that monitor the implementation of the nine core UN human rights conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention against Torture (CAT), and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), can issue decisions that are formally regarded as binding. In practice, however, the UN lacks effective means of enforcement. Belarus, for example, failed for two decades to cooperate fully with the ICCPR monitoring process, neglecting to submit the required periodic reports. In 2023, the Belarusian government went further and withdrew from the optional protocol that allows individuals to submit complaints directly to the Human Rights Committee when they believe their rights under the ICCPR have been violated. Recommendations issued under the system of Special procedures are even easier for states to disregard. Governments may simply refuse to recognize a Special rapporteur's mandate – a problem that arises frequently in country-specific mandates.

Special procedures are under growing pressure. Many appointed experts feel that they are preaching to the choir and face near-empty rooms during presentations at the Geneva Palais des Nations when the concerned state (such as Belarus, Russia, or North Korea) not only boycotts the session when its human rights situation is being discussed, but also calls its allies from the Like-Minded Group of countries to do the same.

More worrying are the frontal attacks some countries make against mandateholders whose allegations they find intolerable. This is clear regarding those against

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The 61st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, February 2026.

Francesca Albanese, the Special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. Following her claims that a genocide has been unfolding in Gaza since 2023, she has suffered constant bashing from Israel, was placed on the US sanctions list, and was recently called to be dismissed by France.

When Special procedures are discredited, the entire UN human rights protection system suffers reputational damage. This has a chilling effect on other mechanisms, incites self-censorship, and fuels doubts about the methodology used to monitor violations, resulting in an elevation of standards of proof. Consequently, crimes against humanity become harder to document, as evidenced in the case of the thousands of children Ukraine claims have been deported by Russia since its full-scale invasion: with its restrictive criteria, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) could not confirm most of these allegations of forced transfer.

This institutional paralysis is mirrored in the UN Security Council. Two of its five permanent members – Russia and the United States – have repeatedly acted in ways that undermine the UN Charter. Most recently, both have used military force against other states (Ukraine and Iran), raising serious questions about compliance with Article 2, which prohibits the use of force in the settlement of international

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disputes. The paralysis created by the permanent members' veto powers also benefits smaller proxy states. Belarus is a telling example: although several Security Council members claimed its deteriorating human rights record threatened peace in the region in 2020, this situation could only be addressed in informal consultations, the so-called Arria format, which do not allow for the adoption of a resolution.

The only regional organization that includes both western countries and Like-Minded Group countries, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), has been stuck in a "consensus trap" since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Whereas in 1975 at the Helsinki Conference participating states agreed that peace and human rights were interconnected, and that dialogue was necessary across the Iron Curtain, the same states now agree to accuse the OSCE of failing to solve their conflicts on the European continent. This catch-22 situation cannot be solved without political will. One way out of the conundrum is for the willing to patch existing accountability gaps. At the same time, another more radical solution is to reform the whole system.

Filling the accountability gap

Impunity for past crimes tends to generate further human rights violations. One of the key expectations placed on international institutions is that they should help close this accountability gap. When perpetrators do not fear prosecution at home – because their own state protects them – and when external actors lack the capacity or will to intervene, repression becomes easier to sustain. This dynamic helps explain why Belarusian dissidents continue to face arbitrary detention and ill-treatment for alleged acts of "disloyalty", which are often framed by the authorities as the expression of "extremist" views critical of Lukashenka's regime. A similar logic applies at the interstate level. As long as the UN Security Council fails to impose meaningful consequences for acts of aggression, Russia can continue its war against Ukraine with limited restraint and can draw Belarus further into the conflict.

The accountability gap also produces a dangerous feedback loop of impunity. The UN's inability to protect the human rights of Belarusians during the mass repression of 2020 emboldened the security forces and intelligence services to intensify their coercive tactics. More broadly, the absence of effective punishment for Russia's aggression against Ukraine has contributed to lowering the perceived threshold of unacceptable state behaviour. This erosion of norms risks encouraging other powers to test the limits of international law in pursuit of selfish geopolitical aims. If such dynamics continue unchecked, the result could be a progressively more fragmented and unstable international order shaped by competing hegemonic ambitions.

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There is, however, hope that this vicious cycle of violence and violations can be broken. Accountability may yet be achieved through the application of universal jurisdiction by national courts willing to prosecute crimes against humanity, which are not subject to any statute of limitations. Proceedings of this kind have already been initiated by Belarusian and Ukrainian victims in several European countries where they have sought refuge after fleeing repression or wartime abuses. International organizations have helped make such cases possible by documenting violations and collecting evidence that can be shared with national prosecutors upon request, without prejudice to future criminal investigations that may be undertaken by ad hoc international tribunals. The establishment in March 2022 of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine reflects this growing effort to prepare the legal groundwork for eventual prosecutions.

The UN's inability to protect Belarusians during the mass repression of 2020 emboldened the security forces to intensify their coercive tactics.

In the case of Belarus, in 2021 the UN Human Rights Council established an accountability mandate, initially under the authority of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and led by his office (OHCHR). This mandate consists of three independent experts who have interviewed hundreds of victims since 2021. The experts concluded in their reports that the massive repression, systematic torture and forced deportation could amount to a crime against humanity. Their findings were corroborated by expert reports submitted to the OSCE in the framework of the so-called "Moscow mechanism". In 2024, Lithuania decided to act on these allegations and submitted a state referral to the International Criminal Court. After the pre-trial chamber concluded from its preliminary investigation that there are grounds to prosecute, the perpetrators in Belarus might start feeling that they could be brought to account in The Hague.

Necessary reform

Restoring an international order based on respected rules and institutions remains difficult, not least because organizations such as the UN and OSCE struggle to enforce human rights conventions when states ignore the commitments they have made. To be sure, these institutions have played an important role in upholding international human rights standards and in promoting normative frameworks. When it comes to effective protection, however, the balance sheet is far less positive. Existing UN bodies and mechanisms have often proved unable

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to prevent violations, deter perpetrators, or hold powerful aggressor states and their proxies to account.

This sobering reality has renewed calls for the long-delayed reform of decision-making within the UN system, beginning with the Security Council. Two of its permanent members have in recent years demonstrated open disregard for international law. The architects of the post-1945 order did not anticipate such a scenario, nor did they design mechanisms for limiting or revoking the veto power. One frequently proposed solution is to expand permanent membership to additional states, including India, Germany, Japan and Brazil, which have long argued for a more representative council. Yet simply multiplying veto holders would not necessarily reduce abuse. On the contrary, it could deepen institutional paralysis. More ambitious proposals envisage revising the UN Charter to allow vetoes to be overridden by a qualified majority vote, rather than requiring unanimity to sanction serious breaches. Such reforms, however, could also destabilize the existing system and risk opening a political Pandora's box.

Notably, the declared candidates for the post of next UN Secretary General have so far avoided addressing the structural flaws of the organization in their vision statements. Figures such as Michelle Bachelet, Rebeca Grynspan, Rafael Grossi and Macky Sall have articulated broad priorities for the UN's future, yet none has presented a detailed agenda for institutional reform or for overcoming the organization's persistent paralysis. As a result, the effectiveness of the next Secretary General – due to be elected in September – will depend largely on the willingness of member states themselves to uphold international norms and to empower the UN system to enforce them. For now, however, there are few signs that such political will is likely to emerge. EE

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Georgia's democracy is being quietly strangled

GEORGE MELASHVILI

Georgia's democratic decline has arrived quietly through procedural changes and repressive laws disguised as promoting transparency. Yet the cumulative effect is unmistakable: a former success story is being hijacked by an authoritarian regime systematically capturing its institutions. The question is no longer whether Georgia's democracy is eroding, but whether that erosion has now become irreversible.

Georgia's democratic decline has rarely announced itself with fanfare. Instead, authoritarian consolidation has arrived quietly through procedural amendments, ministerial reshuffles, and repressive laws disguised as promoting transparency. Yet the cumulative effect, now documented by the OSCE's own Moscow Mechanism rapporteur in a March 2026 report, is unmistakable: what was once a success story born on the ashes of communism is now being hijacked by a regime systematically dismantling the institutional architecture of democracy and fundamental rights protection. The question is no longer whether Georgia's democratic framework is eroding or whether authoritarian consolidation has taken place. Instead, the question now is whether that erosion has become irreversible.

Three pillars, one system

To understand how Georgia's democratic crisis evolved from a series of contested political decisions into a consolidated authoritarian model, one must look beyond

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individual laws or incidents. What has emerged under the government of Georgian Dream is a triad of control, three mutually reinforcing pillars that together sustain authoritarian consolidation while preserving enough of a democratic façade to confuse outside observers and demoralize internal ones.

The first pillar is institutional capture. Understanding its full power requires a degree of historical integrity that Georgian political discourse has not always managed. In his essay "Telling Time the New Way", Hans Gutbrod, a professor at the Ilia State University, proposed that 2003 to 2020 is better understood as 17 years of broadly shared ambitions for reform distributed imperfectly across both the United National Movement and early Georgian Dream governments. As a result, this is more than as a simple binary between two political enemies. Mistakes were made on all sides, some of them serious. Yet Gutbrod's more important insight is where the decisive rupture takes place: the return of Irakli Garibashvili to the premiership in early 2021, which marked the end of reform as a governing purpose and the beginning of something entirely different. Gutbrod described this government as a clique uninterested in making good things happen for anyone beyond its immediate circle. Since then, the courts, regulatory bodies, the electoral commission, the national broadcaster and eventually cultural and educational institutions have been subordinated to political loyalty. This was not accomplished through dramatic purges but through a slow attrition, where appointment cycles were exploited, budgets adjusted, and mandates quietly rewritten. By late 2024, the presidency stood as the sole institution not yet fully captured by one-party, and ultimately one-man, domination. That gap was promptly identified and targeted.

The second pillar is the manipulation of collective public consciousness. Georgian Dream has invested heavily in gaslighting as a statecraft instrument. Fear-based narratives have been progressively expanded to encompass civil society organizations, independent media, and eventually the European Union itself. The deployment of conspiratorial concepts such as the "Global War Party" and the "Deep State" was deliberate. These vague concepts are designed to make it difficult for citizens to recognize lies from truth. By early 2025, a significant portion of the Georgian public had come to view a new war with Russia as a genuine and imminent risk. This is a belief with no grounding in reality but considerable utility for a government seeking to frame its western partners as reckless aggressors rather than allies. Survey data from 2024-25 confirmed a decline in positive perceptions of the EU, which was the precise goal of this campaign.

The third pillar is coercive legalism. In other words, the architecture of control intersects (and suppresses) most directly with human rights. It is to this pillar that we must turn first.

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The Russification of rights

The most consequential legislative act of Georgian Dream's recent tenure was intentionally disguised not to seem undemocratic. The "Russian Law", as it was labelled by the Georgian public, or the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" as it was disguised by Georgian Dream, passed in May 2024. During this process it was presented in the familiar vocabulary of sovereignty and accountability. Civil society organizations and media outlets receiving their funding from abroad were required to register as "organizations carrying the interests of a foreign power", language lifted almost verbatim from Russia's 2012 foreign agents law. Despite resistance in Georgia and promises given by the Georgian Dream leadership directly to European counterparts, the law was partially adopted, recalled, and eventually adopted again. This was followed by the Foreign Agents Registration Act, increasing pressures on civil society organizations even more.

Georgian NGOs that have not yet been shut down are placed under sustained pressure with fines for minor violations and mandatory disclosure requirements.

The effect has been chilling rather than immediately crippling. Organizations that have not yet been shut down have been placed under sustained pressure with intrusive inspections, punitive fines for minor violations, and mandatory disclosure requirements that expose staff and donors to potential harassment. The OSCE rapporteur's February 2026 report documents the pattern in detail, noting that legislative amendments have simultaneously tightened restrictions on broadcasting, grants, and political associations, with each law becoming a small part in consolidating authoritarianism, contributing to a coordinated architecture of civic suppression. Such legislation mirrors similar moves in Russia and Hungary, functioning as a mechanism for stigmatizing and isolating entire segments of a once vivid Georgian civil society. The Russification of Georgia's rights framework is not metaphorical but follows a template.

A protest wave erupted in late 2024 following parliamentary elections whose credibility was undermined by exit poll discrepancies, statistical anomalies, and credible evidence of vote-buying and ballot secrecy violations. This, coupled with the announcement of the decision to postpone efforts to start accession negotiations with the EU until 2028, provided a stress test for Georgia's repressive capacity. The state did not hesitate. Protesters were beaten, arrested, and subjected to fabricated administrative charges. Journalists covering demonstrations were attacked, with Maka Chikhladze and Guram Rogava miraculously surviving these events. Critics were targeted by *titushkas*, what the OSCE report describes as "unidentified per-

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petrators" — a familiar euphemism in post-Soviet governance for state-adjacent violence designed to preserve plausible deniability.

What distinguishes the current moment from earlier episodes of political friction is the degree to which repression has become institutionalized. Judicial reforms have steadily subordinated the courts to political loyalty. Oversight institutions that might once have checked executive overreach have been staffed with loyalists or rendered operationally inert. Bank accounts of leading civil society organizations were frozen to send a warning.

This is the anatomy of "coercive legalism", where formally enacted law is used to discipline rather than regulate. Legislation is weaponized selectively and enforcement calibrated to intimidate rather than prosecute, ensuring the deterrent effect radiates far beyond those charged. The system works precisely because most of the damage occurs in the space between the law and its application — in the decisions not taken, the investigations not launched, the voices that fall quiet before they are formally silenced.

The deterrent architecture: fear, vulnerability, and legal uncertainty

Civil society organizations, independent media, NGOs, and academic institutions have been subjected to a deterrent architecture, an interlocking set of pressures operating through fear, economic vulnerability, and deliberate legal ambiguity.

For the NGO sector, the combination of foreign agents legislation, grant restrictions, and the threat of state pressure creates a climate in which self-censorship becomes rational. Organizations cannot know in advance which activities will trigger enforcement, which donors will draw scrutiny, or which staff members may be personally targeted. This uncertainty can easily be mistaken for a by-product of poorly drafted law, but is exactly its purpose. Independent media face the dual pressure of regulatory harassment and economic attrition. Advertising revenues can be dried up through pressure on corporate clients, with broadcasting licences reviewed and ownership structures challenged. Academics face incentive structures that reward conformity and punish dissent, particularly as university leadership positions have increasingly been filled by party-aligned figures. Independent universities, such as Ilia State University or the University of Georgia, have also faced restrictions.

The protests of 2024 and 2025 have demonstrated that Georgian civil society still has remarkable resilience. Citizens took to the streets in numbers that surprised both the government and outside observers. But protest alone cannot restore in-

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stitutional accountability, and Georgian Dream appears to have drawn from this episode a further incentive for repressive consolidation.

A geopolitical gamble in a changing world order

Georgia's authoritarian turn does not unfold in a vacuum. It both coincides and is emboldened by a restructuring of the international order that has weakened the very mechanisms designed to hold backsliding governments accountable. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, when Georgian Dream gambled on Russia believing Kyiv would fall in three days, marked a decisive inflection point. This is also true regarding the second Trump presidency. American leadership has been redefined, and democracy promotion deprioritized as a foreign policy organizing principle. The US–Georgia strategic partnership was effectively frozen under the Biden administration, bilateral assistance was cut, and the pressure that once reinforced EU conditionality has largely dissipated. Georgian Dream noticed the vacuum created by the (absence of) the new US administration and adjusted its calculus accordingly.

Georgian Dream noticed the vacuum created by the (absence of) the new US administration and adjusted its calculus accordingly.

The EU suspended accession negotiations and discussed targeted sanctions after the 2024 electoral crisis. However, the enlargement toolkit was designed for states genuinely aspiring to membership, not governments that have concluded membership is strategically dispensable. Brussels is simultaneously managing relations with the new US administration, financing Ukraine's defence and internal divisions. Georgia thus has not commanded the sustained political attention the situation requires. The OSCE Moscow Mechanism report of March 2026 — a rarely invoked instrument — represents the most substantive multilateral escalation to date, but reports require political will to translate into consequence and action.

Georgian Dream has, in this environment, made a calculated wager: behaving as though Georgia enjoys the room for manoeuvre of a middle power, hedging between blocs, and assuming that its position on the Black Sea corridor renders it indispensable enough to protect it from danger, all while consolidating authoritarian tendencies. This is a fundamental misreading of Georgia's position.

Middle powers can oscillate between competing blocs because they command enough economic weight, demographic mass, or military capacity to have genuine leverage. Georgia possesses none of these at scale. In his recent article, "Terra Nova

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or Terra Incognita?", Temuri Yakobashvili argues that smaller states in the emerging multipolar order face a choice that middle powers can avoid: align credibly with a camp, or risk sovereignty that survives in form whilst eroding in substance.

The current Georgian leadership's particular mistake, he contends, lies in behaving as if the country enjoys the strategic autonomy it clearly lacks. The danger for Georgia is not conquest or formal annexation. It is the gradual drift of consequential decisions — in security arrangements, economic policy, and eventually the internal character of the state — beyond Georgian control and into the orbit of whichever power fills the vacuum left by western disengagement.

The stakes of miscalculation

What neither Washington nor Brussels has yet assembled is a credible theory of change. Statements of concern do not change how the government acts. Effective conditionality would need to impose asymmetric costs on the ruling elite — targeted sanctions, asset freezes, visa restrictions, the systematic exclusion of Georgian Dream-aligned figures from western institutional frameworks — whilst keeping Georgia's European pathway structurally open for a future government with a genuine democratic mandate. This approach turned out to be particularly difficult for the EU. This is because Hungary's Viktor Orbán, a strong supporter of Georgian Dream, has successfully blocked coherent action from the EU. The stakes extend well beyond Georgia's borders.

If the civic space can be dismantled, elections rendered non-competitive, and fundamental freedoms curtailed in an EU candidate state without decisive consequences, this signals to other governments in the European neighbourhood (and even within the EU itself) that the costs of democratic regression are manageable. And the West's appetite for enforcement is seemingly limited. Enlargement conditionality loses credibility as a transformative instrument at precisely the moment it is needed most as a counterweight to illiberal models that are, in a multipolar world, no longer marginal. Georgia's future therefore becomes a question of the EU's own credibility.

The history of Georgia is one of survival at the intersection of empires, punctuated by moments when strategic misjudgements proved costly in ways that outlasted the governments that made them. Democratic institutions, the rule of law, and accountable governance are not merely moral aspirations. Instead, they are, in the language of strategic realism, assets — the only durable basis on which a small state can maintain credible western alignment and resist sovereignty erosion that requires no tanks to cross a border.

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Georgian Dream is burning these strategic assets while delivering little results. The window for reversing course, with meaningful outside support, is narrowing faster than the diplomatic calendar tends to acknowledge. To answer the question from the outset of this text: Georgia's future is contested, but it is not lost. At least not yet. ĖĖ

George Melashvili is the president of the Europe-Georgia Institute.

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Armenia's civil rights under scrutiny ahead of elections

ANNA VARDANYAN

Armenia's democratic transition is entering a new phase as the country approaches parliamentary elections in June. While reforms have strengthened political competition and civil society, persistent institutional weaknesses and growing polarization continue to shape the landscape. The state of human rights will be central to how this next test unfolds.

Since the political transformation known as the Velvet Revolution in 2018, Armenia has undergone a significant process of democratic transition. The mass protests that led to the resignation of long-time Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan raised expectations that Armenia would pursue deeper democratic reforms, strengthen the rule of law, and expand protections for fundamental human rights. In the years following the revolution, the Armenian authorities introduced several institutional reforms aimed at combatting corruption, increasing transparency, and strengthening democratic institutions.

However, despite these efforts, Armenia's democratic transition remains incomplete. Structural weaknesses within state institutions, persistent political polarization, and unresolved regional conflicts continue to shape the country's political landscape. As Armenia approaches the parliamentary elections scheduled for June 7th 2026, the human rights environment in which the electoral process will take place has become a central concern for domestic and international observers.

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Free expression

International assessments of Armenia's democratic development present a mixed picture. Freedom House has classified the country as "Partly Free" in its "Freedom in the World 2025" report, noting gains in political competition and civil society alongside persistent concerns about judicial independence and institutional accountability. At the same time, Human Rights Watch similarly highlights a relatively open political environment compared to other post-Soviet states but points to ongoing issues such as police accountability, judicial independence, and press freedom. Regional bodies including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, and the European Union also continue to stress the need for further democratic reforms, supporting Armenia through election monitoring, legal assistance, and policy guidance to strengthen governance.

The broader geopolitical context further complicates Armenia's domestic political environment. The consequences of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the displacement of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians from the region in 2023 have intensified political polarization and placed additional pressure on state institutions. Against this background, the period leading up to the 2026 elections will be a critical test for Armenia's democratic trajectory. This is particularly true in four areas: freedom of expression and access to information, the rule of law and judicial independence, the role of civil society, and the broader political climate.

Compared with many countries in the post-Soviet region, Armenia maintains a relatively pluralistic media environment.

Freedom of expression remains one of the most visible indicators of Armenia's democratic development since the Velvet Revolution. Compared with many countries in the post-Soviet region, Armenia maintains a relatively pluralistic media environment with active investigative journalism and vibrant online platforms. Nevertheless, Armenia's media system remains characterized by political polarization and structural weaknesses. According to experts from the Yerevan Press Club, it continues to be influenced by political and economic interests, particularly within traditional television broadcasting. Media analysts from the organization note that many major outlets remain affiliated with political actors or business elites, contributing to partisan coverage of political developments.

At the same time, the growth of digital media has expanded opportunities for independent journalism. Online platforms operated by journalists affiliated with CivilNet – an online media source with a focus on human rights and de-

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Citizens protest against the government in 2024. Public protests and political demonstrations have become common features of Armenian political life.

mocracy in Armenia – have become important sources of investigative reporting and public policy analysis. CivilNet analysts emphasize that digital media outlets have played a significant role in promoting transparency and accountability in Armenian public life.

Despite these developments, Armenian journalists continue to face harassment and legal pressure. According to Human Rights Watch, incidents of violence and intimidation against journalists frequently occur during political protests and demonstrations. Media monitoring organizations have documented numerous cases in which reporters were obstructed or threatened while covering public events.

Legal pressure also represents an important challenge for media freedom. While defamation was decriminalized in Armenia in 2010, civil defamation lawsuits remain common. Media experts warn that such lawsuits can impose significant financial burdens on independent journalists and may create a chilling effect on investigative reporting. Concerns have also emerged regarding digital surveillance and privacy protections. Human rights organizations have criticized legislative proposals that would allow the law enforcement authorities to access surveillance footage from private businesses and public spaces without sufficient judicial oversight. Following strong criticism from civil society groups and in-

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ternational observers, the Armenian authorities ultimately abandoned one such proposal in 2024. The episode demonstrated both the potential risks associated with expanded surveillance powers and the influence of civil society advocacy in shaping policy outcomes.

Rule of law and judicial independence

Judicial independence remains one of the most significant challenges facing Armenia's democratic consolidation. Despite several reform initiatives introduced since 2018, public trust in the judiciary remains relatively low. Freedom House reports that Armenia's courts continue to face systemic problems, including political influence, corruption, and institutional pressure on judges. Courts are often perceived as closely aligned with prosecutors, and acquittal rates in criminal cases remain extremely low. Human Rights Watch has similarly highlighted structural problems within Armenia's criminal justice system. Civil society organizations have reported concerns regarding the excessive use of pre-trial detention and ineffective investigations into allegations of police misconduct.

Armenian civil society organizations have also drawn attention to these issues. Experts from the Transparency International Anticorruption Center emphasize that judicial independence is a crucial element of effective anti-corruption policy. According to the organization's monitoring reports, Armenia has adopted several legal reforms aimed at strengthening anti-corruption institutions. However, enforcement mechanisms remain inconsistent.

Another important issue concerns police accountability. Human rights defenders from the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor have documented cases involving alleged ill-treatment of detainees and have called for stronger oversight mechanisms for law enforcement agencies. Representatives of the organization argue that independent investigations into allegations of police abuse are essential for strengthening public trust in state institutions. Without effective accountability mechanisms, they warn, the rule of law may be undermined.

International institutions have also highlighted the importance of judicial reform in Armenia. The Council of Europe has repeatedly called on Armenian authorities to strengthen judicial independence and improve the transparency of judicial appointments in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights. Similarly, the European Union has emphasized judicial reform as a central component of its political dialogue with Armenia. The EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement includes commitments related to judicial independence, anti-corruption policies, and the protection of fundamental rights.

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Civil society and human rights advocacy

Since 2018, civil society has been one of the driving forces behind Armenia's democratic shift. NGOs, advocacy groups, and independent research centres have taken on the role of watchdogs – tracking government decisions, pushing for legal reforms, and supporting those affected by human rights violations. By regional standards, the sector remains notably active, often setting the pace for public debate across the South Caucasus. Yet this visibility comes at a cost. Human rights defenders continue to encounter intimidation and legal pressure linked to their work.

In recent years, Armenian organizations have also drawn attention to a more subtle form of pressure: the growing use of so-called "SLAPP" lawsuits, which are filed by political or business actors against journalists and activists. While formally legal, such cases can serve to discourage scrutiny and drain the resources of those targeted. At the same time, civil society has found itself responding to urgent humanitarian needs. Following the 2023 displacement of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, NGOs have stepped in to provide legal aid, social support, and emergency assistance – once again underscoring their central role in the country's public life.

Despite the challenges faced by activists, Armenia's civil society remains a key driver of democratic reform.

Analysts from CivilNet note that the humanitarian consequences of the displacement have become an important issue in Armenian domestic politics. Civil society organizations continue to advocate for long-term integration policies that ensure adequate housing, employment opportunities, and social protection for displaced persons. Despite the challenges faced by activists, Armenia's civil society remains a key driver of democratic reform. NGOs regularly cooperate with international organizations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the European Union to monitor human rights conditions and promote policy reforms.

The broader political climate in Armenia remains highly polarized. Political competition between the ruling government and opposition forces has intensified in recent years, particularly in relation to security issues and peace negotiations with Azerbaijan. Public protests and political demonstrations have become common features of Armenian political life. While most protests remain peaceful, clashes between protesters and police have occasionally resulted in arrests and allegations concerning the excessive use of force.

During demonstrations in 2024, Armenian police used sonic grenades to disperse protesters near parliament, resulting in dozens of injuries among demonstrators

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and journalists. Human rights organizations called for an independent investigation into the incident and emphasized the importance of proportional law enforcement responses to public protests. Debates surrounding political prisoners have also emerged in Armenian public discussions. While Armenia does not have a widely recognized category of political prisoners comparable to authoritarian regimes, opposition groups have occasionally alleged that certain criminal prosecutions are politically motivated.

Government officials reject such accusations and emphasize that all prosecutions are conducted in accordance with Armenian law. Nevertheless, the perception of political bias in some legal proceedings contributes to broader political polarization.

International election monitoring organizations emphasize that the protection of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and political pluralism, is essential for ensuring credible elections. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights notes that election observation missions assess whether elections respect these fundamental principles.

Emerging challenges

Alongside more familiar concerns around civil and political rights, Armenia is also confronting newer challenges tied to digital surveillance and data protection. Recent legislative proposals have raised questions about expanding law enforcement access to camera networks and personal data. Critics warn that without clear safeguards such measures could open the door to intrusive monitoring of public spaces.

There are also growing concerns about the possible introduction of facial recognition and other advanced surveillance tools. In the absence of robust data protection rules and effective judicial oversight, these technologies risk being used in ways that could chill dissent or place activists under closer scrutiny. As a result, digital rights are becoming an increasingly important part of Armenia's broader human rights landscape.

Taken together, Armenia's situation ahead of the 2026 elections reflects a mixed picture. The years since the 2018 Velvet Revolution have brought tangible progress: a more active civil society, greater media pluralism, and closer alignment with international standards. At the same time, structural weaknesses persist. Questions around judicial independence, police accountability, pressure on journalists, and deepening political polarization continue to weigh on the system.

International actors, including organizations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Union, Human Rights Watch, and the Human Rights

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House Foundation, have consistently pointed to the need for sustained reforms, particularly in strengthening the rule of law and safeguarding fundamental rights.

As the 2026 parliamentary elections approach, much will depend on whether these issues are addressed. The credibility of the process – and public trust in it – will rest on the protection of civil liberties and the resilience of democratic institutions. In that sense, the elections are shaping up to be another defining moment for Armenia's democratic path.

Anna Vardanyan is a political journalist and researcher based in Yerevan, Armenia. She has served as media adviser to the Armenian Parliament, covered the Constitutional Court, and conducted research at Heidelberg University. She is a recipient of the Tytus Filipowicz Academic Award from the University of Warsaw's Centre for East European Studies and has held fellowships at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław. She currently reports for local news agencies and contributes to several international media outlets.

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Repressions in Belarus continue

An interview with Veranika Stankevich, coordinator of Volnyja, an organization that works with former Belarusian political prisoners. Interviewer Emily Macrae

EMILY MACRAE: Do former political prisoners ever become volunteers?

VERANIKA STANKEVICH: Now, yes, we see this trend. But when we started, we had rules that former political prisoners could not mentor others. We were afraid of the trauma and that if one former political prisoner speaks with another it can be re-traumatizing. But now we can have an interview with the psychologist and they can say if it would be okay if this former political prisoner can help another former political prisoner. But it's not very often. From time to time, former political prisoners volunteer with our organization, not as mentors, but to help with something.

How else have your supporters changed over time?

We have worked for more than three years now. Now we work not only with mentors and mentees and provide emotional support but we also work on financial support from international humanitarian funds. We can give financial help from our organization. We work with international organizations and we collect information on what this organization can give former political prisoners. It varies, it can be psychological support, financial or humanitarian support. For example, if a person needs financial support we can provide it from our organization. But if they need humanitarian help, for example, we don't have offices or someplace where we can collect goods, but we can give some information where you to find such aid.

In Lithuania, Volnyja is registered as a nonprofit so people can give a portion of their tax to the initiative. How does that change the way you work or how does that help you?

To support Volnyja, people can share taxes in Lithuania and in Poland too. We

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have two countries where people can make donations from their taxes. It definitely helps us to support our mentees because it is additional money which we can choose how we spend. For example, there are times when we do not have a project with donors and our team has to volunteer full-time, because we don't have funds for salaries. This money can be used to help our mentees. When we have tax donations from citizens, we can decide how we spend it without limitations.

Ales Bialiatski wrote in the *New York Times* about how he was released from prison in Belarus with no warning or explanation. Forced displacement after being released is another issue Belarusians face. How has Volnyja addressed this?

We have been working with groups who were displaced from Belarus to a new country, for example, the last group was sent to Ukraine. After that many arrived in Poland and Lithuania. We work with these groups in a slightly different way, because we need to work with them in the first hours after their release. For example, from the last group we had 87 people released to Poland. It can be really difficult because you have a lot of people who don't understand anything. And first and foremost, you need to provide basic needs. For example, food and accommodation. We need a lot of money and a lot of volunteers for this. Many of these people already have mentors from our organization. And we had a lot of applications [to volunteer] in December and November because there was a lot of news about the displacement of political prisoners to new countries.

Beyond welcoming new volunteers and supporting a large number of displaced former political prisoners, how does Volnyja strengthen ties between Belarusians living abroad?

From time to time we have offline meetings. But we also have volunteers in different cities and countries. For example, we have volunteers in Canada. We even have two mentors in Argentina for Belarusians who live there. Our geography is quite broad. We try to organize some events for our volunteers and mentors. We have online meetings for volunteers, as well as discussions with our psychologist to talk about different problems and feelings. And we have different networking meetings. We have a very big community. You could know some people as volunteers but you don't know who's a doctor or an engineer. So we do different events to network and understand each other and learn how to work together.

Volnyja's Telegram, Facebook, Instagram and website were recently added to the list of extremist materials. How has that extremist status changed the way you work?

It has not changed a lot for us. In previous years, Lukashenka had declared that we don't have political prisoners … so it doesn't really change our work, maybe only for our team, because of the safety issues for our team members.

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Photo courtesy of Veranika Stankevich

But it's a very strange situation with our so-called "extremist materials" because it means our organization's Instagram [and also] my private Instagram were [declared] extremist materials. I don't post political messages on my Instagram. I post my dog. Does it mean that my dog is considered extremist material now?

Another thing I noticed was about language. Because all the text on the Volnyja website and most of the posts on social media are in Belarusian, but in the videos you often have people speaking Russian.

When we started there was a big discussion in our team about the language question. All our social networks and the website are in Belarusian and English only. It's our cultural support. Because for Belarusian people now it's very important to support our language. And it's our identity, yes? When you emigrate you need to be more active with your identity because you need to integrate with another country and learn another language. And you need to support the identity that you're Belarusian. The Russian invasion of Ukraine which started in 2022 also brought up the language question. Russian soldiers need to "save" Russian speakers in Ukraine … it was very strange. A lot of Belarusians changed from speaking Russian to Belarusian. Language can help with identity in emigration when we use our language. For our mentors and for our internal communication we use Russian and Belarusian, it depends. For example, you have a message to people who speak in Belarusian and you can write in Russian. And Ukrainian works too. Because we understand that when you educate for example, if it's convenient for you to use Russian, then that's okay. But for our outside communication, it is all in Belarusian and English. That was our choice.

What do you wish more diplomats and international relations professionals understood about the situation in Belarus?

First and foremost is that the repressions in Belarus continue. We see the displacement of former political prisoners and maybe some people think that this is the end of the repressions. But no, we have a lot of new political prisoners. And we have a lot of people who now pay a lot of money to stay in the country and not go to the prisons. It's very difficult. They take political prisoners, displace former political prisoners, and take news ones. It is a circle without end. Second, if these

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types of displacement will continue, we need to think about the families, about the people displaced to a new country who have family back in Belarus. For example, they can't connect with their children. They can't unite with a spouse. In a way, it is another mode of repression when you can't come back home and you need to adapt to life in a new country, immediately after prison.

What do you hope to see in the future?

I hope we will not work as an organization because [it will mean that] we will not have political prisoners in our country. I think the most important for us is coming back to our country and helping to build the system to help people who were arrested because of political reasons. Help to rehabilitate these people in different ways, for example, financial and psychological. This will be I think where we find a way to help our country.

Volynyja is an organization that works with former political prisoners through a mentorship programme. They have volunteers from Belarus who live in different countries and work with vulnerable groups of people who have been previously in prison for political reasons.

Veranika Stankevich is the coordinator of the Volnyja Initiative.

Emily Macrae is a writer and editor based in Toronto, Canada.

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New Persian Gulf war puts Iranian Azerbaijanis in the spotlight

NATALIA KONARZEWSKA

The recent American and Israeli military operation against Iran ignited a new and serious crisis between Baku and Tehran. According to Azerbaijan, on March 5th this year Iran attacked Azerbaijani territory with drones, injuring several people and stoking widespread fear that the new Persian Gulf war could spill into the South Caucasus.

In early March, four Iranian Arash-2 drones hit Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhchivan, damaging a terminal of the Nakhchivan International Airport and landing close to the local school during school hours, injuring several bystanders. Given the potential for greater casualties, Baku reacted furiously. President Ilham Aliyev called the incident an "act of terror" and demanded an apology from Iran. Baku recalled diplomatic staff from Iran, placed its armed forces on combat readiness, and warned of retaliation in case of further incidents. Iran denied deliberately attacking Azerbaijan's territory and reaffirmed its respect for Azerbaijan's sovereignty. Some Iranian top officials called the incident an Israeli provocation, but warned Azerbaijan to rid itself of the "Zionist presence" in their country.

A few days after the drone incident, Azerbaijan announced that its security services thwarted several terrorist plots allegedly prepared by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These plots reportedly targeted energy infrastructure, Israel's embassy in Baku, and Jewish institutions in Azerbaijan.

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A rocky neighbourhood

The drone incident triggered unusually direct rhetoric from Baku's top politicians regarding ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran. Aliyev warned Tehran that Azerbaijan "is a source of hope for many Azerbaijanis living in Iran". This marked an end to Baku's cautious approach and likely was a deliberate move to stoke Iran's long standing security fear of an Azerbaijan-backed revolt among its Azerbaijani minority.

Since Azerbaijan regained independence in 1991 its relations with Iran have been complicated and, at times, punctuated with serious crises. Iran, the largest Shia-majority country in the world, sought to extend its political, cultural and religious influence over Azerbaijan, which is also predominantly Shiite. Azerbaijan preferred to remain secular, and aligned closely with Turkey.

The geopolitical objectives of Iran and Azerbaijan do not necessarily align as well. Although Iran officially supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, it maintained closer ties with Armenia. Azerbaijan partially opened itself to cooperation with the West, especially in the energy sphere, whereas Iran remained isolated under western sanctions. In recent years, Azerbaijan has developed a strong military and intelligence alliance with Israel, one of Iran's principal adversaries, and pursued warming ties with the United States. This stoked fears in Tehran that Azerbaijani territory could be used for attacks on Iran.

During the 12-day war in 2025, Tehran accused Baku of allowing US and Israel to launch airstrikes on Iran from its territory, allegations that Azerbaijan firmly denied. Tehran has also expressed concerns about the shifting regional balance following Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh and its plans to create a transportation link connecting mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan through Armenian territory. These developments weakened Iran's regional position in favour of a new regional actor – Turkey – and could possibly take away serious leverage that Iran has held over Azerbaijan regarding transit routes.

The drone incident happened against the backdrop of the deteriorating military situation in the Persian Gulf caused by US and Israeli air strikes, as well as Iranian retaliation. Tehran hopes that adopting an asymmetric war strategy will show its resilience, increase the cost of the war for its adversaries, and trigger broad energy disruptions.

Strikes against Azerbaijan can be a part of this strategy as well. They could well discourage Baku from security cooperation with Israel, which has been going strong in the last couple of years. Indeed, Azerbaijan remains a crucial actor for Israel in the South Caucasus region because of their close military and intelligence cooperation, as well as the fact that Baku remains one of Israel's top crude oil sup-

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pliers (per data from 2025, Azerbaijani supply equates to as much as 46.4 per cent of Israel's crude oil imports). For almost a decade, Israel remains a top supplier of military equipment for Azerbaijan, providing it with advanced weapon systems (such as Harop loitering munitions and LORA long-range ballistic missiles), air defence, as well as surveillance and intelligence systems.

De-escalation

Since the outbreak of the conflict in February, numerous Iranian sources have repeatedly claimed that Azerbaijan's territory has been used to launch attacks on Iran. This has put Baku on high alert and caused serious concerns that Iran could attack its energy infrastructure, especially the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which lies within its easy reach. Such an incident could be particularly problematic for Azerbaijan, as attacks on its energy infrastructure would adversely affect its export capabilities, its budget revenue and, as a consequence, the stability of the Azerbaijani regime.

Despite rising tensions following the drone incident, Baku and Tehran have decided to de-escalate. On March 8th, Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian called Azerbaijan's Aliyev – a move that was widely seen to mend ties with the northern neighbour. Pezeshkian denied Iran's accountability for the attack but offered a thorough investigation of the incident. He also expressed his gratitude for Aliyev visiting the Iranian embassy in Baku to offer condolences for the death of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and numerous civilians. Soon after, Azerbaijan resumed flights from Baku to Nakhchivan and the flow of cargo between Iran and Azerbaijan. Baku also dispatched humanitarian help for its southern neighbour. It seems that these de-escalation tactics have worked for Iran and Azerbaijan, since at the time of writing no new incidents have been recorded.

Despite rising tensions following the drone incident, Baku and Tehran have decided to de-escalate.

Some experts have suggested that Iran's attack was the result of Tehran's wartime defence strategy, which has been prepared for decades. The strategy in question, which is called the "mosaic military doctrine", was adopted by Tehran in the event of being attacked by the US and Israel. It envisages that in a time of war the country will be divided into 31 autonomous regions operated by IRGC with Basij (the IRGC's voluntary, paramilitary force) assistance that can independently deal with emerging threats. This strategy could have resulted in IRGC commanders making independent decisions that were not necessary consulted

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with Tehran. Taking such circumstances into account, some experts conclude that a decision about airstrikes on Nakhchivan could have been made at the lower levels of command.

Ethnic divisions

Since the outset of the conflict, Israeli elites and neoconservative American experts have rekindled the idea of stoking sectarian strife in Iran, exploiting the country's numerous ethnic and religious minorities. Iran's social fabric is quite diverse. Its dominant ethnicity, Persians, constitute roughly 61 per cent of the nation. Iran is also home to many other ethnic groups: Azerbaijanis (approximately 16 per cent), Kurds (ten per cent), Lurs (six per cent) as well as smaller ethnicities such as Balochs, Arabs, Turkmens, Talysh, Armenians and Assyrians among others.

When it comes to religion, the majority of Iranians are Shia Muslims (around 90 per cent), but the country is also home to a smaller Sunni community, Christians of different denominations, Baha'i and others. These are only estimates since the exact numbers for ethnic and religious communities in Iran are unknown as the country does not run a census based on sectarian divisions. While Iran's legal framework acknowledges minority groups, its theocratic system regularly targets minorities in the ongoing crackdowns and frames them as a security problem. Structural constraints imposed by the state suppress the political mobilization of the minorities, at least for now.

Iranian Azerbaijanis are the largest, non-Persian ethnic group in Iran, estimated to number between 12 and even 30 million people.

The proponents of dividing Iran along ethnic fault lines hope to use the country's minority grievances to destabilize the country from within while it faces military attack. The Kurdish minority has been at the forefront of this strategy, as some Iranian Kurdish factions are more likely to act as proxies for the external powers.

However, Iranian Azerbaijanis have also been analysed in this context. The largest, non-Persian ethnic group in Iran is estimated to number between 12 and even 30 million people, mostly living in the north-western regions of the country (West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan) that border Azerbaijan. The minority is also found in significant numbers in Tehran, Karaj, Qazvin, Hamadan and Markazi provinces.

For centuries, Iran had been controlled by Turkic dynasties that originated from the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan. In the 19th century, the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay divided the lands that Azerbaijani people were in-

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habiting between Russia and Iran. Thus, the Azerbaijani minority in Iran, which outnumbers their ethnic kin living in Azerbaijan, emerged as a result of historical transformations in the region.

Against the backdrop of Azerbaijan-Iran tensions, observers are taking a closer look at the situation of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran and are wondering whether the current crisis can transform this minority into a mobilized ethnic group. For now, it seems that such a scenario has a small chance of materializing. The external military pressure has strengthened hardline regime control rather than triggering internal strife. And at the moment, Iranian Azerbaijanis have not shown any sign of political mobilization, while many of them remain embedded in state structures.

Wider identity

The identity of Iranian Azerbaijanis and their relationship with the Iranian state have long been a subject of debate among scholars and analysts. Many point to a gradual rise in identity awareness within this ethnic group. External reference points, particularly Azerbaijan and Turkey, play an important role in this process. Cross-border ties, as well as the widespread consumption of Turkish popular culture via satellite television (officially banned in Iran but widely accessible), have all contributed to the strengthening of a broader Turkic identity.

At the same time, Azerbaijanis in the Republic of Azerbaijan have developed a distinct, largely secular and nationalist identity. Nevertheless, the very existence of a neighbouring Azerbaijani state serves as an important symbolic "homeland", reinforcing a sense of shared identity. In recent years, there have been several instances of Iranian Azerbaijanis expressing solidarity with their northern counterparts or openly affirming their Turkic identity. One example was the wave of pro-Azerbaijani demonstrations in north-western Iran during the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. This happened despite Tehran's official neutrality and its indirect support for Armenia.

Mobilization has also occurred around cultural and social issues. Supporters of the Tabriz-based football club Tractor Sazi have repeatedly taken to the streets, protesting what they perceive as the unfair treatment of the team and chanting nationalist and anti-Persian slogans. Earlier episodes of unrest include the 2006 protests triggered by a cartoon in an Iranian newspaper widely seen as offensive to Turkic people, as well as demonstrations in 2012 over the ecological degradation of Lake Urmia, which many blamed on government policies.

Taken together, these developments suggest that since 1991 Iranian Azerbaijani identity has been undergoing a gradual transformation, marked by a renewed emphasis on Turkic ethnic, cultural and linguistic roots. The Iranian state has

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often viewed this process with suspicion, limiting cultural rights such as access to education in the Azerbaijani language and adequate media representation. While Turkish, and to a lesser extent Azerbaijani, cultural influence is significant, neither Ankara nor Baku actively promote political mobilization among their ethnic kin in Iran. Although nationalist rhetoric occasionally appears in Azerbaijani political discourse, particularly during periods of tension with Tehran, all sides have generally prioritized economic cooperation and regional stability.

The Iranian authorities remain deeply mistrustful of ethnic minorities. According to watchdog organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Freedom House, minority groups have been disproportionately targeted by security services, particularly during periods of unrest such as the 12-day war and the protests of January 2026. Despite external pressure, including US and Israeli strikes, the Iranian regime has remained resilient and has in fact tightened domestic control. The security apparatus continues to function effectively, with arrests, patrols and expanded surveillance remaining in place, alongside extended internet shutdowns and communication restrictions. At present, there is no evidence of large-scale ethnic mobilization among Iran's minorities.

Paradox

Despite growing cultural awareness, political mobilization among Iranian Azerbaijanis remains limited. Exiled groups, such as the Baku-based Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (SANAM), advocate self-determination and even unification with Azerbaijan, but they have little influence on the ground. Within Iran, Azerbaijani activism tends to focus on cultural and social demands rather than separatism or irredentism.

This relative lack of mobilization is often attributed to the group's deep integration into Iran's social and political structures. Iranian Azerbaijanis have historically occupied prominent positions within the state. Figures of Azerbaijani descent have reached the highest offices, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Masoud Pezeshkian. Azerbaijanis are also well represented in the military, security services and the clergy – partly due to their Shia identity and their longstanding role in the historical development of the Iranian state.

The resulting picture is somewhat paradoxical. Iranian Azerbaijanis are numerous and increasingly conscious of their identity, yet remain unlikely to pursue separatism or irredentism. Institutional constraints, coupled with their integration into the political system, limit the prospects for such mobilization. At the same time, the state's persistent suspicion – framing them as a potential security

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threat – continues to restrict cultural expression and may lead to heightened repression in times of crisis.

Recent reporting from Iran suggests that external military pressure has exposed not weakness, but the durability of the country's coercive state apparatus. In fact, the system appears to have become even more repressive. Intensified crackdowns, expanded surveillance, persistent internet blackouts and communication restrictions, combined with the destabilizing effects of ongoing strikes, are likely to discourage any form of ethnic mobilization in the short term. This, however, reflects only the current situation. A prolonged conflict could gradually erode state capacity, deepen grievances among minority groups, and create space for the emergence of non-state actors. As seen in other conflict zones, power vacuums often generate opportunities for ethnic or religious activation that were previously suppressed.

Warnings and concern

Against this backdrop, recent Iranian airstrikes targeting Azerbaijan can be interpreted primarily as a warning to Baku regarding its geopolitical positioning. Unlike other regional states hosting US military infrastructure, Azerbaijan is not viewed by Tehran as a primary target for sustained asymmetric warfare. Despite strained relations, both sides appear keen to avoid escalation. The recent drone incident was swiftly contained, not least because Iran remains a crucial transit link between mainland Azerbaijan and the exclave of Nakhchivan.

For its part, Azerbaijan is concerned about the broader consequences of a prolonged conflict involving Iran. Any disruption could severely affect regional transit and energy routes, including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Baku is also wary of a potential humanitarian crisis stemming from a large influx of refugees from Iran.

Importantly, a weakened or fragmented Iran is not necessarily in Azerbaijan's interest. Such a scenario could generate new and unpredictable security challenges along its southern border. At the same time, Iran, already under significant military pressure, is unlikely to open an additional front with Azerbaijan. Tehran does not appear to consider its northern neighbour a priority target, particularly given Baku's formal neutrality and the absence of US military bases on its territory. EE

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The politics of reforming Ukraine's wartime lifeline

JAKUB ŁOGINOW

Ukraine has a unitary railway system. The state-owned company, Ukrzaliznytsia, has a monopoly on the railways and operates passenger and freight services. This means competition is virtually non-existent. Such a model is not accepted in the European Union.

In recent years, Ukraine's railways have become a source of widespread admiration. Despite repeated Russian shelling, they have continued to transport passengers and military equipment efficiently and punctually. They deliver cargo to ports and sustain the functioning of the national economy. Since February 24th 2022, Ukrainian airports have ceased operations, leaving rail connections as the country's principal link to the outside world. It is by train that key international politicians travel to Kyiv, and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself typically begins his foreign visits with a rail journey to the Polish airport at Rzeszów-Jasionka.

Ukrainian railways are also efficiently evacuating civilians and wounded soldiers from frontline towns, and the heroism of the railway workers is widely recognized. In this situation, the need to carry out far-reaching reform of Ukrainian railways in order to introduce European standards has been causing widespread controversy in the country. Such reforms would entail splitting Ukrzaliznytsia into three separate companies and a complete overhaul of the management model.

The rail reform can no longer be postponed and must be carried out amidst the ongoing war – this is one of the conditions for Ukraine's accession to the European Union. But could such reforms hinder military logistics and the evacuation of the

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wounded? Is it possible to carry out such a major reform in the midst of a war in which the railways play such a strategically important role?

Area of dispute

Under ordinary circumstances, railway reform would be nothing more than a tedious technical issue that readers of this magazine, mainly interested in foreign policy issues, would not be very interested in. However, the reality is different: alongside agriculture and the rule of law, the railways could become a key area of dispute and difficulty between Kyiv and Brussels. Ukraine is seeking accelerated EU membership and sees this as an opportunity to end the war. For the accession to take place, however, the state needs to meet the requirements of the *aquis communitaire* – the legal standards all EU countries must adopt, and this includes reform in the transport sector.

Ukraine has already implemented a significant portion of EU law. This process began back in the 1990s, during the second term of Leonid Kuchma and under the reformist government of Viktor Yushchenko (from 1999 to 2001). It gained even more momentum during Petro Poroshenko's term (2014-19). This was especially true when the reforms were needed for Ukraine to secure visa-free travel, as well as sign both the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU. And there are areas where Ukraine has already achieved full integration. One such example is the telecommunications sector, where since January 1st 2026 Ukraine and Moldova have become members of the European "roaming like at home" zone. This means Ukrainians can come to the EU and use their home SIM cards without roaming fees, and vice versa.

Yet, there are areas where Ukraine still operates based on a Soviet, rather than European, logic, and where the reform process has barely begun. One of these last bastions of Soviet-era practices is the railway system. Contrary to intuition, it is not because of the different track gauge. In fact, maintaining this distinctiveness is already allowed by the EU. Finland, Spain and the Baltic states, among others, have broad gauge tracks as opposed to other EU states with more narrow ones.

What characterizes Ukraine (and Moldova) is the unitary railway system. In other words, Ukrzaliznytsia, or UZ, is a single state-owned enterprise which holds a monopoly on the railways. It owns and manages railway infrastructure (tracks, train stations) and operates passenger and freight services. This means competition is virtually non-existent. Private railway companies carry out freight transport as wagon owners, but they too must use UZ locomotives and operate in accordance with the state monopoly's timetable.

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Such a model is unacceptable according to EU rules, which requires competition or the equal treatment of operators. That is why all previous candidate countries had to split their railways into at least three separate companies before joining the EU. In addition, they had to establish an independent regulator to ensure free access to tracks for all passenger and freight carriers. Poland, Czechia and Slovakia carried out such reforms between 1999 and 2003, which was one of the conditions for them joining the EU in 2004. In Poland, this process initially led to considerable chaos; the positive effects only became visible a few years later. Currently, many people in the transport sector in Ukraine fear a similar period of chaos during the implementation of Ukraine's railway reform whilst the war is ongoing.

Thus the question is: can Ukraine join the EU without railway reform and privatization by securing an exemption or a long transition period? Such a scenario does not seem likely. This is especially true as neighbouring Moldova is already privatizing its railways. Arguments about unequal treatment will therefore come up – why do we require Moldova to privatize its railways, yet exempt Ukraine from this task? It is also doubtful whether other EU member states would agree to an exemption for Ukraine and this will certainly be one of the main areas of contention, much like the case with agriculture.

An imbalance

Ukraine currently has the third-largest railway system in Europe, after France and Germany. Thus, EU road hauliers are already protesting against what they see as unfair competition from Ukrainian transport, road and rail companies. A structural imbalance is emerging: while Ukrzaliznytsia's subsidiary, UZ Cargo Poland, is expanding into the Polish transport market, European rail operators cannot operate freely in the Ukrainian market. Maintaining such an imbalance would be contrary to the fundamental principles of equal treatment of entities and fair competition, and would also be politically difficult to accept for member states. EU accession requires unanimity, and the argument of unequal competition would certainly be raised by some governments.

Even if railway reform could be postponed, this would likely mean delaying Ukraine's EU accession and Kyiv falling out of the first wave of the next enlargement. If this were to happen and only Moldova, Montenegro and Albania were to join the EU, Kyiv could lose the opportunity for rapid accession for many years to come.

The issue of railway privatization and new operating rules regularly returns to the agenda of the Verkhovna Rada and its committees. A draft law on imple-

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menting the reform was already rejected in 2024. The formal justification was the conclusion that the draft bill referred to the legal situation in the EU from several years ago. Changes have since taken place and these must be taken into account. In the Ukrainian industry debate, two factions are at odds. There are those who want changes as soon as possible and those who want the reform to be postponed until after the war.

Existing concepts for a peace plan, as discussed with the current White House, appear to assume Ukraine's eventual accession to the EU as a key element of its long-term security framework. In this respect, they reflect the aspirations expressed during both Maidan revolutions – a strategic orientation towards European integration that Russia has consistently opposed. And while EU membership may appear as an attractive security anchor, it would in practice offer weaker formal guarantees than NATO membership. At the same time, however, the EU is gradually strengthening its Common Security and Defence Policy, and membership could increase the political willingness of EU states to provide military assistance to another member state. Such a dynamic could, in itself, contribute to deterring further Russian aggression. Thus, a plausible medium-term scenario envisages Ukraine's accession to the EU around 2028-29, even if the peace process were to stall or fail to produce a comprehensive settlement.

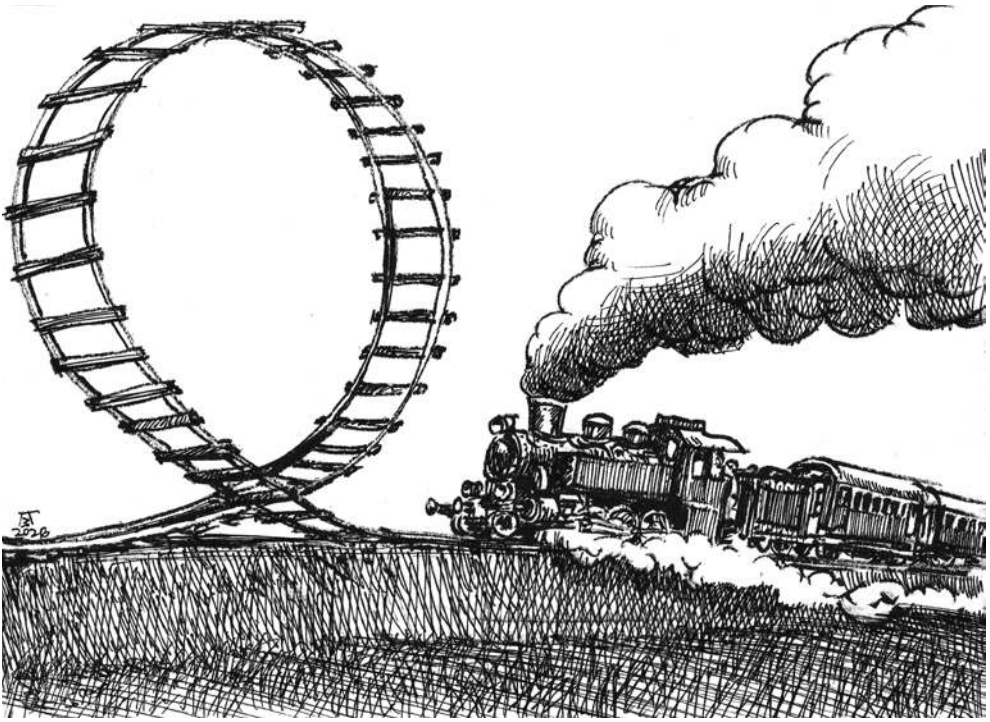
A plausible scenario envisages Ukraine's accession to the EU around 2028-29, even if the peace process were to fail.

Game changer

Obviously the success of Kyiv's European integration would strengthen Ukraine economically and financially. Moreover, a reformed and modernized country that is already an EU member could have a better chance to gain the upper hand on the frontline and even regain lost territory, thereby forcing Russia to end the conflict. For this reason, rapid accession to the EU can be seen as a game changer enabling Kyiv's victory – and for this, reforms are also needed in the transport sector.

In the EU, public transport generally operates at a loss, and the state finances passenger transport (rail and bus) through transparent subsidies. At the same time, efforts are made to introduce competition on the railways, which is why private companies are emerging alongside national carriers. In Ukraine, too, passenger transport runs at a loss, but until now this deficit has not been covered by the state budget. Instead, it has come from Ukrzaliznytsia's profits generated by the profit-

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able freight transport. And these profits were coming easily: the roads were in a terrible state, and the rail network was one of the densest in Europe.

In Ukraine rail transport dominated for years thanks to economies of scale. Competition from road hauliers was weak, and UZ held a monopoly on the railways. In this way, it was able to raise freight rates and profit from its monopolistic position, using these profits to fund passenger, military and social transport (e.g. population evacuation). The government was satisfied with this arrangement because there was no need to set aside additional funds from an already small state budget for subsidies to rail transport, which in Western Europe consume a significant portion of the budget. In effect, UZ takes on a significant portion of the state's financial and social obligations. In an institution operating in this way, economic efficiency is given less priority. However, it is easier to foster a strong work ethic and above-average commitment, especially in crisis and wartime situations.

Fears about a loss of morale among railway workers in a company undergoing deep restructuring are therefore well-founded. People are willing to work for relatively little money because stability and a sense of social mission are important to them. With the transition to a more market-oriented and commercial model, this sense of social mission may weaken, especially when there is a risk of job cuts and

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the need to learn a new system from scratch. Reform at such a time does indeed pose a risk.

The problem is that the railway reform can also no longer be postponed for economic reasons. In 2025 UZ management announced that, due to dramatic declines in revenue from freight transport, the company was no longer able to use this to finance the deficit in passenger transport. The existing model no longer works. One can either carry out a reform along European lines, or do what happened in Poland in the 1990s: shut down railway lines and passenger services on a massive scale and fail to renew the infrastructure, allowing it to further deteriorate.

Incidentally, this is precisely what happened in Moldova, North Macedonia, Albania and Armenia. The authorities postponed reform fearing it would disrupt a sense of stability, whilst at the same time refused to finance the deficit from the budget. In this situation, the railways could only cut services. As a result, in the countries mentioned, the rail network is now virtually non-existent.

In Moldova, the backbone of public transport is the *marshrutka* – the privately operated minibuses that provide frequent and flexible services across the country. There are only a handful of rail connections mainly from Chișinău to Kyiv and Bucharest. The main railway station in Chișinău handles surprisingly few services. Paradoxically, this is also why the reform of the Moldovan railways – that is, their restructuring along European lines – is currently proceeding smoothly and without the kind of resistance seen in Ukraine, as things cannot get any worse.

Lost profits

In Ukraine, the causes of the railway sector's decline can be broadly divided into two categories. The first is directly linked to Russian aggression, including the destruction of infrastructure and the loss of industrial plants and coal mines in the eastern regions, which had previously generated substantial volumes of freight traffic.

The second is the growing competitive pressure from road transport, reinforced by Ukraine's controversial transport policies under both the Poroshenko and Zelenskyy administrations. These policies have prioritized heavy investment in road construction while comparatively neglecting railway infrastructure. Such an approach runs counter to the core principles of EU transport and climate policy, to which Ukraine formally aspires. Strategic EU documents place a clear emphasis on shifting freight and passenger flows towards rail and inland waterways, while underlining the need to curb the expansion of road transport due to its negative environmental and climate impacts.

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Prior to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Ukrzaliznytsia generated substantial profits from the transport of goods and raw materials between large industrial plants and mines in Donbas and other eastern regions and seaports, as well as land border crossings. These were reliable, regular, and easy-to-use transport services. Following the loss of part of Donbas in 2014, these services declined significantly, and after 2022 they collapsed even further. Ukraine has now lost almost all its coal mines, which used to generate large volumes of freight and a reliable profit.

Ukrainian freight is moving towards road transport, which is better suited to serving today's more dispersed industrial sites.

Ukrainian business is adapting surprisingly easily to the new conditions, with industry relocating to the safe region of Zakarpattia and other parts of western and central Ukraine. For the economy as a whole, this means greater resilience and modernization. But this new, dispersed industry is more difficult to serve by rail, which has become accustomed to the post-Soviet geography of production, based on large, outdated industrial complexes concentrated in a single location.

Serving the "new industry" by rail requires greater flexibility: sending a few wagons to an industrial plant instead of a whole train, combining wagons from different directions at marshalling yards, and transhipment operations. All this comes at a cost and requires changes in management and mindset, as well as different employee skills. In this situation, freight is "fleeing" to road transport, which is better suited to serving today's more dispersed industrial sites.

Until now, Ukraine had one of the highest rail freight market shares in Europe. Such figures seemed to fulfil the EU's dreams of sustainable transport and achieved climate targets. That is now a thing of the past. Road transport has been so heavily invested in that the neglected railways are unable to compete with it.

As freight revenue falls, and profits from freight are still needed to cover the deficit in passenger services, Ukrzaliznytsia's response is to raise freight rates. However, this leads to even greater declines in freight volumes. For some industrial plants, transport costs are becoming too high, resulting in reduced production, which stifles economic growth. Other clients are switching from rail to road hauliers. Raising rates is not working; reform is needed here and now.

A European model

A new funding model is already emerging. For several years now, the Ukrainian Ministry of Infrastructure has been procuring public passenger transport services, acting as the transport organizer in line with the European model. The previously

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hidden subsidization of passenger transport is now being partially replaced by a European, transparent public procurement mechanism. In the case of regional and local transport, subsidies are to come from regional local authorities and the city of Kyiv.

A shift in perspective is now under way. Until recently, Ukrzaliznytsia itself determined train routes and timetables, responding to market demand, public expectations and, at times, political pressure. Under the emerging model, however, the Ministry of Infrastructure and regional authorities are expected to assume responsibility for commissioning and financing rail services, while UZ will operate primarily as a service provider.

In the longer term – particularly a few years after Ukraine's accession to the European Union and the subsequent liberalization of the rail market – operators are likely to be selected through competitive tender procedure. In such a framework, Ukrzaliznytsia would no longer be guaranteed to provide services in every segment or region.

It is therefore conceivable that, following the example of Poland, regional and municipal authorities could begin establishing their own railway companies, such as hypothetical entities along the lines of Lviv Railways, Zakarpattia Railways, or Kyiv Railways, in order to manage and develop local passenger services more effectively.

Regardless of everything, Europe's third-largest railway network (excluding Russia) faces massive changes in the coming years. Should Ukraine join the EU, the community's railway map will also change significantly, as the EU's broad-gauge network will expand considerably. Ukraine and Moldova will, however, remain isolated from their broad-gauge "siblings" in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland. This gap will be filled by Belarus, which will likely exploit this fact to strengthen its position, offering a normalization of relations in exchange for the restoration of rail transit. If Lukashenka's current regime remains in power by then, Ukraine's accession to the EU could be a gamechanger in this part of Europe, and Belarus, as a transit country, could increase its independence from Moscow. For now, however, there are too many unknowns to make reliable predictions. EE

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Ballots under fire. Elections during war?

MARIIA DIDKOVSKA

Consensus in Ukraine is that in order to hold elections, a ceasefire would first be necessary. Yet even if a genuine ceasefire were secured, urgent questions would follow. Ukraine thus faces a dilemma few modern democracies have encountered on such a scale: how to safeguard the integrity of elections while fighting for the state's very survival.

Ukraine's parliament and presidency have remained unchanged since 2019. Under normal circumstances, the country would have held parliamentary elections in 2023 and presidential elections in 2024. Instead, amid Russia's full-scale invasion, the vote was postponed indefinitely. The reason is not merely the volatility of wartime politics. Ukraine's constitution and legislation, which has been in force since the outbreak of war in 2022, explicitly prohibits any elections under martial law. Yet the debate surrounding electoral politics during wartime refuses to fade. On the contrary, it is intensifying. In recent months, discussions about holding elections despite the war have gained momentum not only within Ukraine, but internationally. Pressure from Washington, combined with the threat to waive US security guarantees if Ukraine does not elect a new president and hold a peace deal referendum, has pushed the issue into the geopolitical spotlight. At the same time, Moscow eagerly exploits the postponement, branding Ukraine's leadership as "illegitimate" in its ongoing information warfare.

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Peace before or after the polls?

International practice suggests that democracies at war more often defer elections until hostilities cease rather than treat elections as a cure for conflict. Some exceptions include the Canadian federal elections in 1917 during the First World War and US elections during the Civil War, as well as during the world wars of the 20th century. Yet in both cases, with the exception of the American Civil War, active combat was not taking place on their territories. This contrasts with the United Kingdom during the Second World War. As London endured sustained bombing, elections were suspended. The same parliament remained in place for nearly a decade, prioritizing the continuity of governance over electoral turnover.

Historically, international institutions approach wartime elections with caution. In its resolution "Elections in Times of Crisis", the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) notes that elections under martial law risk becoming a contradiction in terms. Universal suffrage requires freedom of movement, open campaigning, and basic security conditions that are difficult to guarantee during active conflict. Beyond these principles lie practical challenges: millions of displaced citizens, occupied territories, damaged infrastructure, and the safety of polling stations.

Nevertheless, if elections were to become a diplomatic prerequisite for peace negotiations, Kyiv has signalled its readiness to adapt legislation accordingly. But legislation alone cannot guarantee feasibility. The success of wartime elections would depend not only on Ukraine's institutional capacity, but equally on Russia's willingness to halt hostilities and on credible, enforceable security guarantees from international partners.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has proposed a 60-day full ceasefire to make elections technically possible. Jokingly, he has remarked that Kyiv would be ready to cease fire too for Russia – if Russia itself agreed to hold real elections. In response, however, Moscow has agreed only to a one-day pause. Under Ukrainian law, regular elections require a 90-day campaign period, while early elections demand at least 60 days. Even the shortest legally viable timeline, therefore, requires sustained stability. A single day would not serve for anything in practice.

Even if a genuine 60-day ceasefire were achieved, however, further questions would immediately arise. How would voting be organized for millions of internally displaced persons and refugees abroad? How to ensure democratic voting for the military? Could Ukrainians vote under Russian occupation? Ukraine thus confronts a dilemma that few modern democracies have faced on this scale: how to protect the integrity of the ballot while defending the survival of the state itself.

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Challenge abroad

Up to nine million Ukrainians fled abroad after the full-scale invasion in search of safety. While many have secured the right to live and work in host countries, they remain Ukrainian citizens and retain their inherent right to vote. This figure adds up to those who emigrated before 2022 but preserved their citizenship. Taken together, this represents a substantial share of the electorate that the Ukrainian state cannot afford to overlook if it seeks a representative and legitimate outcome.

Distance should not dilute one's political voice. No matter how far from home, every citizen must have the opportunity to express their will. Yet that right risks being constrained by limited voting infrastructure abroad. At present, Ukraine operates only 104 polling stations outside its territory – a number that struggled to meet demand even before the war. Under the current framework, voting takes place at consulates, further narrowing access: only around 300,000 Ukrainians are officially registered with them and therefore eligible to vote there.

Any future vote must be accompanied by a clear and comprehensive information campaign explaining citizens' rights.

Ensuring meaningful turnout overseas would therefore require procedural adjustments. One option would be a proactive information campaign inviting Ukrainians abroad to confirm their intention to vote and provide updated data on their place of residence. A clearer mapping of the diaspora would allow the state to plan more effectively, though it would not eliminate the risk of overwhelming an already limited consular network.

Another possibility is to negotiate with host governments the opening of additional polling stations beyond consular premises. Ukraine's "Unity Hubs" – state-supported centres established to assist citizens abroad – could potentially serve as supplementary voting locations. However, such arrangements would need to respect domestic legislation in receiving states, some of which restrict certain forms of foreign political activity on their territory.

Certainly, any future vote must be accompanied by a clear and comprehensive information campaign explaining citizens' rights and the practical steps required to exercise them from abroad. The 2019 Ukrainian elections offer a telling precedent. In the second round, only 13 per cent of citizens registered abroad cast their ballots, which is a fairly modest turnout. The reasons for this extended beyond long queues and logistical constraints: limited awareness of procedures also played a role.

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Displaced electorate

In addition, around four million Ukrainians are internally displaced, having left the frontline or occupied territories for relatively safer regions inside Ukraine. This internal migration presents one of the most complex challenges for any future elections. Under Ukraine's current electoral framework, citizens vote according to their officially registered place of residence, as listed in the State Register of Voters. The difficulty here lies in the fact that this register no longer reflects reality.

Consider the case of Bakhmut. The town is located in the east of Ukraine and was devastated by war before falling under Russian occupation. It has been effectively emptied of its population. Officially, the number of registered voters there has decreased by only two per cent and the electorate remains on paper. In practice, it has scattered across the country.

This discrepancy demonstrates the urgency of updating voter data. The Central Election Commission would need access to verified information on the actual place of residence of internally displaced persons in order to re-register citizens accordingly. Equal voting conditions must be guaranteed for IDPs regardless of when or from where they were forced to move. The solution, however, cannot be purely administrative. Internally displaced citizens themselves must be encouraged to update their voting address, since the election authorities cannot do so without their active participation. That makes simplification essential. The re-registration process would need to be clear, accessible, and ideally digitalized to ensure speed and efficiency.

Yet infrastructure alone will not resolve the issue. As with voting abroad, awareness remains decisive. A comprehensive information system must be in place to ensure that every displaced citizen understands both their rights and the practical steps required to exercise them. As the war has shifted where citizens live, the electoral system will need to reflect this new reality.

Similarly, those in the Ukrainian military, who are engaged daily in a life-threatening defence of the state, retain the same political rights as any civilian citizen. Whether elections are held during or after the war, every soldier must also be able to exercise the right to vote. For those stationed behind the lines, voting according to their place of registration would be feasible. Yet the situation is different on the frontline. Soldiers cannot simultaneously abandon their positions to travel to their home regions. One proposed solution is the creation of temporary mobile polling stations in frontline areas. To simplify the procedure, draft legislation would allow soldiers to vote using their service identification rather than passports.

Safeguards, however, are essential. Polling stations must remain under civilian administration to prevent undue influence linked to the military hierarchy. The secrecy of the ballot must also be protected. If the number of mobile stations is

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A Kharkiv neighbourhood after a guided aerial bomb attack from Russia. During an election, the authorities would have to ensure maximum safety of all polling stations, one of many challenges Ukraine would face if it were to organize elections during wartime.

insufficient, overcrowding could undermine confidentiality and, ultimately, trust in the process.

Transparency poses another challenge. International observation missions are a key component of electoral credibility. Ensuring their safety in frontline regions would be difficult, and their willingness to deploy under such conditions is uncertain. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission withdrew from Ukraine in 2022, leaving open the question of whether similar missions would return during active hostilities.

Beyond logistics and oversight lies the issue of access to information. Soldiers stationed in relatively stable areas may follow political developments, but those engaged in intense combat operations have limited opportunity or time to monitor campaigns. Even if granted pre-election leave, many would likely prioritize medical rehabilitation or time with their families over political engagement. Additionally, active suffrage must be matched by passive suffrage. Many members of Ukraine's armed forces had civilian careers before mobilization and may wish to participate directly in political life. As citizens, they are entitled to do so. Yet candidacy itself carries financial and procedural barriers. Such costs can deter participation, particularly for those just leaving military service.

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If elections are to be genuinely inclusive, measures could be considered to reduce financial obstacles for military candidates or to provide structured support mechanisms. At a minimum, service members seeking to stand for office would require guaranteed leave to register and campaign on an equal footing with civilian contenders.

The vote under occupation

Undoubtedly, Ukraine cannot organize elections in territories currently occupied by Russia. Any formal arrangements or negotiations on that matter would be largely illusory. Kyiv is unable to guarantee the integrity of a democratic process in areas fully controlled by an occupying power. Yet the issue does not end there. Many Ukrainians living under occupation still identify as citizens of Ukraine and would want to cast their vote as such. Their political will does not disappear with territorial control. The question, therefore, is how and whether that will can be accommodated.

Information is the first barrier. Conducting an election campaign presupposes access to pluralistic media and open political debate. In occupied territories, independent sources of information are suppressed and replaced with centrally curated Russian propaganda. Providing alternative channels of communication is not only technically difficult but potentially dangerous. The Russian-installed authorities closely monitor digital activity: even indications of pro-Ukrainian sentiment on personal devices may expose individuals to detention or violence. Any attempt to maintain links must therefore balance outreach with the physical safety of those involved.

The second dimension concerns mobility. Being trapped under occupation should not automatically deprive individuals of their voting rights. Ukraine could allow citizens from occupied territories to vote once they reach government-controlled areas or third countries, excluding Russia and Belarus. However, encouraging people to "leave occupation in order to vote" carries serious risks. Russian forces have established so-called "filtration centres" along exit routes, where civilians are interrogated about their political views and personal affiliations. Passage is neither automatic nor safe. For some, the attempt to leave could result in detention or worse.

Given the scale of the challenges, postal or digital voting may appear to be logical solutions. In practice, however, both options pose considerable risk, arguably outweighing their advantages. Postal voting raises logistical concerns. It is difficult to guarantee that ballots would be delivered, returned, and processed within legally

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defined timeframes. Delays could undermine both credibility and confidence in the results. At the same time, the complexity of the procedure might discourage participation, particularly among younger voters, potentially depressing turnout.

Digital voting, meanwhile, could be linked to Ukraine's Diia application, the governmental digital platform which provides a wide range of public services to Ukrainian citizens at home and abroad. Compared to postal voting, Diia offers greater simplicity and accessibility. Yet ensuring stable operation during a nationwide vote would be technically demanding, especially given past system overloads, including during the Eurovision national selection conducted through the app. Public trust presents an even greater obstacle. According to recent surveys, 60 per cent of Ukrainians would not trust a fully digital voting procedure. And both postal and online systems are widely perceived as more vulnerable to external interference or manipulation, particularly in the context of ongoing war and cyber threats. For these reasons, the government is currently ruling out both alternatives.

Given the scale of the challenges, postal or digital voting may appear to be logical solutions.

There is one compelling argument in favour of digital mechanisms: accessibility. Previous elections revealed persistent barriers for people with disabilities due to poorly adapted polling stations and limited assistance. Today, with thousands of wounded soldiers and civilians, ensuring accessible voting has become even more urgent. Digital tools could, at a minimum, expand participation for those physically unable to attend polling stations.

A long to-do list

Aside from the elections themselves, digital solutions may still play a constructive role beyond casting ballots. They could facilitate voter re-registration based on actual residence and help collect data from citizens abroad regarding their intention to vote. In this sense, technology may not replace traditional voting, but could strengthen the administrative foundations on which any future election would depend.

Nevertheless, taking all these challenges together, it becomes clear that holding elections during a full-scale war would be an exceptionally challenging undertaking. Even if the security situation improves and martial law is lifted, many of the structural obstacles would remain and need to be addressed immediately. The war has reshaped the electorate geographically, administratively, and socially, and the system will have to respond accordingly.

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To ensure that the next elections are democratic, representative, and respectful of fundamental rights, Kyiv would need to first conduct a comprehensive audit of both security conditions and voting infrastructure, update the State Register of Voters, implement a clear and targeted information campaign, and work closely with partner countries to facilitate participation abroad. Such steps will require coordinated action across institutions, carefully adjusted legislation, and, above all, sufficient time. ■

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Populism and motherhood

TATSIANA ASTROUSKAYA

Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime in Belarus has declared 2026 the "Year of the Belarusian Woman". Under this banner, it has launched a large-scale media campaign promoting families and celebrating mothers. Not new to Belarus, the instrumentalization of family policy reflects a broader global pattern in which populist regimes appeal to traditional values and mobilize anti-gender narratives.

In 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power on an anti-corruption ticket. Yet his first election campaign also placed considerable emphasis on family and social policy. His electoral programme, published in the newspaper *Narodnaya Volia* (*The People's Will*) on June 14th 1994, promised extensive state support for families, motherhood and childhood. Among the proposals were childcare allowances, as well as housing loans and subsidies for young families.

Even Lukashenka's anti-corruption rhetoric was framed in moral and paternal terms. He appealed to voters by presenting the fight against corruption as a matter of protecting the nation's future. During the campaign he declared that corruption must be eradicated "for the sake of our little children". At the same time, he used anti-corruption as a pretext to launch attacks on political opponents, which resulted in effectively removing from power of the then chairman of the Supreme Soviet, democrat Stanislaŭ Shushkevich.

Sexist rhetoric

Lukashenka's style of rule has been described by scholars as both pre-emptive and adaptive authoritarianism. Both definitions highlight the regime's volatility and capacity for adjustment. Yet beneath this flexibility several elements have re-

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mained remarkably consistent, including sustained attention to family and social policy. This sphere is a result of a mixture of Soviet-era and domestically developed regulations, as well as by a characteristic blend of carrot-and-stick politics. While some social groups and sectors have been punished or, at best, neglected, others have received disproportionate state support and attention. At the same time, even as the regime has become increasingly repressive and has targeted virtually anyone who might be perceived as a dissenter, it has continued to seek – and carefully cultivate – popular support.

Already during his first electoral campaign, Lukashenka was presented as a favourite among women. Since then, he has consistently relied on the female electorate. This is partly explained by demographic realities: women constitute a clear majority of the population – 52.9 per cent in 1994 and 53.8 per cent in 2025. The gap is also reinforced by differences in life expectancy. In 1994, women in Belarus lived on average to the age of 74, compared with 63 for men. By 2025, these figures had risen to roughly 79 and 69 years respectively. As these numbers indicate, the disparity remains substantial and shows little sign of narrowing in the near future.

In such a demographic context, appealing to and relying on the female electorate has clear and pragmatic foundations. At the same time, this political strategy unfolds in a society marked by persistent gender inequality and, as the sociologist Elena Gapova noted in 2023, a limited recognition of women's autonomy. One example suffices: the United Nations Development Programme data for Belarus shows that the gender pay gap in the country amounts to around 27 per cent.

At the same time, sexist rhetoric – such as Lukashenka's notorious remark that "our constitution is not written for a woman [president]" – has long been a hallmark of the regime and has intensified in recent years. Lukashenka's personal relationships with women have also periodically attracted public attention and speculation. His first wife, the mother of his two sons, never moved to the capital after his election and did not take on the public role usually associated with being the country's first lady. The mother of his third child, meanwhile, has never been officially presented to the public in this capacity.

Moreover, Lukashenka frequently appears in public accompanied by young, conventionally attractive women. The state – and as widely believed Lukashenka himself – controls and coordinates beauty contests such as Miss Belarus (launched in 1998) and The Beauty of Belarus (launched in 2020), alongside numerous similar competitions at both local and national levels. Staged as large-scale and carefully choreographed spectacles, these events instrumentalize women and their bodies. At the same time, the regime has repeatedly blocked the adoption of a law on domestic violence. Women, who constitute the overwhelming majority of victims, therefore remain without effective protection from the state.

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Privileges for some, disadvantages for others

At first glance, state support for families in Belarus appears relatively substantial. Part of this system was inherited from late-Soviet social policy and combines both material assistance and symbolic measures. Two key dates mark the institutionalization of this policy framework: the adoption of the Basic Guidelines of State Family Policy in 1998 and the passage of the Law on Demographic Security in 2002. Today, the key elements of Belarus's family policy include three years of paid maternity leave, as well as one-time childbirth benefits. The system also provides disproportionate support for large families, with many benefits reserved exclusively for them. These include housing subsidies for young families with three or more children – in 2025 there were approximately 123,000 such families in Belarus – as well as concessional housing loans. Another important instrument is the so-called "family capital" – a one-time payment of roughly 10,000 US dollars that can be accessed once the child turns 18.

The "Order of Mother" is a state award granted to women who have given birth to five or more children.

Large families also benefit from free school lunches and exemptions from fees for textbooks and extracurricular activities. Alongside this material support, several symbolic measures have also been introduced. The "Order of Mother" – a state award granted to women who have given birth to and raised five or more children – was established in 1995. Since that moment on, around 14,500 women have received the award. The practice echoes the Soviet title of "Hero Mother", introduced under Stalin in 1944 for women who bore ten or more children.

This is not to dismiss these achievements and benefits as existing only on paper. They do exist and have been implemented consistently. Many families, particularly low-income households, receive substantial state support, which has helped improve their standard of living. The main problem of this welfare policy, however, is that – much like Lukashenka's governing strategy more broadly – it remains highly arbitrary and dependent on the president's personal priorities and whims. By introducing social benefits that place certain families in a privileged position while disadvantaging others, the state not only intervenes in the private lives of its citizens but also cultivates subtle mechanisms of dependency. Rather than creating conditions in which families can provide for themselves, the system encourages reliance on paternalistic state support in exchange for loyalty and public approval.

Moreover, demographic trends during Lukashenka's presidency provide a sobering reality check. According to official data, Belarus's population declined from

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10.3 million in 1994 to around 9.2 million in 2025. At the same time, the country continues to record one of the lowest life expectancy rates in Europe. Taken together, these figures suggest that the state does not extend the same level of concern to all citizens. Instead, policy appears to prioritize investment in "new" generations and large families, while gradually marginalizing singles, child-free couples, small families, the elderly, and those who do not conform to the state's preferred social model.

Revenge on women

The true litmus test of the state's social policy – and its broader attitude towards women – came in 2020. The mass peaceful protests that followed the presidential election that year gave a serious blow to Lukashenka's authoritarian system. They showed the erosion of fear, the absence of genuine popular adoration and, most importantly, a clear and collective "no" from women. Lukashenka had gravely miscalculated the level of women's support for this challenge and significantly underestimated their political agency. The protests were widely described as a "revolution with a female face", not only because women assumed visible leadership roles but also because of their massive participation. They protested openly against violence, patriarchy, sexism, and inequality in Belarusian society, mobilizing in defence of their own future and that of their children and grandchildren.

Lukashenka responded with a systematic and, in many respects, calculated campaign of retaliation against women. The regime's initial reaction was the launch of large-scale repression that continues to this day. Over the past five years, the human rights centre Viasna has reported that around 8,000 women have faced political persecution – based on documented cases alone. Drawing on my own research on Soviet dissidents, it is striking that in recent years the proportion of women among political prisoners in Belarus has exceeded post-Stalin Soviet levels. It has fluctuated between roughly 13 and 15 per cent of all political prisoners, whereas in the Soviet Union the figure was closer to five per cent.

Women prisoners have been subjected to forced labour and severe disciplinary measures, including confinement in punishment cells (*kartser*), while their specific needs and vulnerabilities have largely been ignored. Many have been separated from their children. Dozens of women with three or more children have been prosecuted and imprisoned for organizing local cultural events or posting a handful of critical messages on social media. Tens of thousands of women and children have also been forced into exile. In emigration, many face severe obstacles to integration and are confined to low-skilled employment. They also experience poverty, physical and psychological strain, limited access to medical care, exhaustion and

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legal insecurity (the first issue of the journal *Topos* for 2026 explored this issue at length). Many are also unable to renew their Belarusian passports, which effectively deprives them of freedom of movement.

Women, especially mothers with young children and former political prisoners, belong to the most vulnerable social groups. Even after leaving the country, the Belarusian state continues to subject them to unprecedented pressure and intimidation.

A woman can do everything

Against this backdrop, the regime declared 2026 the "Year of the Belarusian Woman". Under this banner, it has launched a large-scale – and, in my view, deeply troubling – media campaign promoting large families and celebrating their mothers. The instrumentalization of family policy is nothing new for the Lukashenka regime. Rather, it fits in with a broader global populist appeal to "traditional values" and anti-gender campaigns.

In Belarus, however, this appeal takes a distinctive form. It shows the regime's growing obsession with stimulating birth rates and actively promoting large families. Yet these campaigns rarely contain direct calls for women to submit to their husbands or withdraw from public life. No one openly demands that Belarusian women attend church, remain at home, or abandon their careers. On the contrary, one of the official slogans of this year's campaign proclaims: "A woman can do everything."

At first glance, this slogan sounds innocent – even empowering. On closer inspection, however, it evokes the legacy of Soviet state-imposed "gender equality", under which women were expected to work full time while also bearing and raising children, often without meaningful sexual education or genuine reproductive autonomy. The current campaign, however, goes even further.

While researching this article, I was particularly struck by the story of one woman, Elena Viktorovna, a forty-five-year-old mother of eight, published on February 22nd 2026 on the website of the major state newspaper *Belarus Segodnya* and presented as exemplary. Reflecting on family planning, she attributes everything to fate: "But fate had other plans, blessing them with a big, lively and noisy family."

The article goes on to describe in detail what a Belarusian woman supposedly can – and should – do. Viktorovna not only cares for her children but also nursed her dying mother-in-law while pregnant with her youngest child. Still on maternity leave, she reportedly "happily" spends her summers working in a ten-acre vegetable garden "because she loves the land". When the children fall asleep, she knits and

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sews, making tablecloths, blankets, towels, sweaters and dresses for her daughters. And, as the anonymous journalist concludes, she carries all this "lightly, with a smile".

And this is only one example. In fact, dozens of similar stories have been published by state-controlled media, both traditional outlets and new social media platforms such as those that can be found on Telegram. They consistently portray happy, often employed, mothers with many children who supposedly cope effortlessly with all responsibilities. At this point, I should acknowledge my own positionality: I am myself a mother of four. I know from personal experience how difficult it is to combine professional work with the care of a large family. Yet the state insists that women can manage everything – and therefore should. This is why I find this campaign alarming.

Belarusian women are being exploited. Their bodies, work, and emotional resources are instrumentalized. They are expected to be productive workers and self-sacrificing mothers simultaneously, while their agency is taken away from them. Families are encouraged to bear more children in the name of elusive family happiness, and in exchange for paternalistic state care. The primary target audience of this campaign is the lower middle-class and working-class families. Mothers in large households, especially those with limited resources, are constantly preoccupied with basic survival: how to feed, clothe, and educate their children. They are forced to take on additional unpaid work. They grow vegetables, sew, knit – all to make ends meet.

It is also known that children from such families, on average, have fewer life chances. They are less likely to enter higher education and often join the labour market earlier, which corresponds closely to the state's economic interests. Many young men will also be conscripted into military service, with all the risks this entails.

And there is yet another unsettling consequence of these policies. By overloading women – especially mothers – with endless responsibilities, the regime deprives them of time, energy, and resources for political participation. In this way, social and demographic policy becomes a tool of political control. Exhausted by everyday burdens, women are less able to mobilize, organize, and resist. It is a calculated and deeply cynical mechanism designed to ensure that a moment like 2020 does not happen again. EE

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How Georgia is being led away from NATO

BEKA CHEDIA

In Georgia, the ruling elite increasingly presents neutrality as the country's only viable path. Yet this narrative obscures the extent to which that same elite actively erodes trust in NATO and weakens Georgia's engagement with the Alliance.

Over the past few years, Georgia's foreign and defence policy has undergone a profound transformation. Whereas it was previously defined clearly by the constitutionally-enshrined goal of Euro-Atlantic integration, primarily membership in the European Union and NATO, the country is today moving along an increasingly ambiguous geopolitical path. At the centre of these changes is the ruling Georgian Dream party, whose rhetoric, institutional decisions, and strategic partnerships signal a gradual but systematic departure from the previously declared pro-western course. Moves towards the West were promoted both by previous governments and earlier by Georgian Dream itself. This shift is neither abrupt nor overt. Rather, it is framed through carefully constructed narratives that present it as pragmatism, realism, and neutrality.

A key element of this process has been the emergence and promotion of the idea of Georgian neutrality, supported by affiliated political movements. Despite claims of independence, the ideological coherence and consistency of political initiatives between these movements and Georgian Dream point to coordinated efforts to prepare society for a possible formal renunciation of achieving NATO membership. The ruling elite increasingly presents neutrality not as a deviation from Tbilisi's historical course, but as the only rational response to NATO's alleged indecisiveness and the country's unresolved territorial conflicts. Georgian Dream has constructed and now promotes a neutrality narrative through reinterpreting

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NATO as an ineffective actor, undermining Euro-Atlantic institutions domestically, manipulating public opinion via disinformation, and reorienting Georgia's strategic infrastructure and partnerships.

Discourse of inevitability

The concept of Georgian neutrality did not arise organically within the country's domestic political discourse. On the contrary, it was deliberately shaped through the coordinated actions of pro-Russian political actors, media platforms, and direct Kremlin coordination. Despite presenting themselves as independent political forces, political movements and parties such as United Neutral Georgia, Solidarity for Peace, People's Power, and the Conservative Movement, are closely linked to the ruling Georgian Dream party. Their leaders have repeatedly proposed initiatives that were later implemented by the ruling party, suggesting functional dependence rather than genuine ideological pluralism. Criticism of Euro-Atlantic integration is also evident among prominent figures of the Georgian Orthodox Church. One of the most controversial examples came from Archbishop Iacob, a high-ranking member of the Georgian Orthodox Church, when he first stated in 2024 that Georgia should be admitted to NATO "as it is". However, in 2025, he called it a mistake that Georgian Dream had enshrined the country's Euro-Atlantic integration in the constitution.

The leadership of Georgian Dream increasingly presents neutrality as an inevitable outcome of NATO's alleged inability to fulfil its commitments. A statement by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze on December 17th 2025, in which he characterized Georgia and Ukraine as victims of NATO's so-called "open-door policy", is a striking example of this narrative. By asserting that there was never a real intention to admit Georgia to NATO, Kobakhidze reframed decades of Euro-Atlantic engagement as a strategic illusion imposed from the outside, thereby shifting responsibility for the stagnation of the integration process from domestic governance problems to the Alliance itself.

Nino Tsilosani, the deputy speaker of the Georgian parliament, also holds a critical position, portraying NATO as an ineffective organization that failed to protect Georgia in 2008 when Russia launched its war against the country. Furthermore, she blames Tbilisi's NATO aspirations for allegedly contributing to Moscow's invasion, creating a narrative that continued Euro-Atlantic integration could provoke new Russian aggression. One of the most active recent critics of NATO is Shalva Papuashvili, the speaker of the Georgian parliament. In December 2025 he compared NATO's so-called "open-door policy" to "a carrot dangling in front of a donkey", stating that "the real uncertainty lies within NATO itself regarding enlargement." In December

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2025, speaking on a local pro-government TV channel, Papuashvili claimed that in 2008 NATO did not merely "leave the door open" for Georgia but allegedly flung the windows wide open, causing a draft. According to him, the consequences of this "draft" were visibly felt in 2008, referencing the Russian invasion of Georgia.

The political utility of these arguments is clear. If NATO never intended to admit Georgia, neutrality appears not as a retreat but as a rational correction of previous misconceptions. This logic also delegitimizes domestic pro-Atlantic actors, portraying them as naïve or irresponsible. In this sense, the neutrality discourse becomes a tool for internal political consolidation, marginalizing opposition forces and civil society groups that continue to advocate for Euro-Atlantic integration.

It is important to note that this rhetoric is also accompanied by concrete political steps weakening Georgia's institutional commitment to NATO. The 2025 closure of the NATO and EU Information Centre in Tbilisi, established in 2005 to raise public awareness of Euro-Atlantic values, was both a symbolic and practical dismantling of integration infrastructure. Observers interpreted its closure as a clear signal of hostility towards NATO membership prospects and alignment with Kremlin interests.

As a result, the ruling elite frames neutrality not as one of several possible strategies, but as the only viable path now for Georgia. This constructed sense of inevitability conceals the extent to which the ruling elite itself actively works to undermine trust in NATO and diminish engagement with the Alliance.

Strategic passivity

A key element of Georgian Dream's anti-NATO rhetoric has been the reinterpretation of the war in Ukraine. Georgian officials have repeatedly claimed that Kyiv's pursuit of NATO membership provoked Russia's full-scale invasion, presenting Alliance enlargement as inherently destabilizing. Irakli Garibashvili, a former prime minister, articulated this position as early as 2023, and similar arguments have been repeated by other high-ranking officials. This narrative serves several functions. First, it absolves Russia of primary responsibility for aggression, portraying its actions as a reaction to alleged NATO provocations. Second, it frames Georgian restraint and passivity as a rational lesson drawn from the Ukrainian experience. Third, NATO is depicted not as a security guarantor but as a source of risk for aspiring member states.

The consequences of this rhetoric are tangible. Georgian prime ministers – first Garibashvili and later Kobakhidze – have been excluded from key NATO sum-

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Photo: Yannick Morelli / Shutterstock

Despite anti-NATO propaganda and disinformation from the ruling elite, support for Georgia's NATO membership remains very high.

mits, including those in Vilnius and Washington, signalling a serious deterioration in political relations. While Tbilisi was still formally represented at these summits through its foreign ministry, the downgrade was politically significant. This negative trajectory culminated in 2025, when Georgia did not receive an invitation to attend the NATO summit in The Hague, underscoring the depth of the current estrangement. Yet Georgian Dream interprets this not as a result of its own policy choices but as further proof of NATO's lack of genuine commitment to Georgia. This circular logic reinforces the narrative of abandonment and justifies further distancing.

At the same time, NATO insists that the Georgian authorities respect democratic principles, comply with international sanctions against Russia, and actively support Ukraine in its defence against aggression. These direct calls are largely ignored by the Georgian Dream party. Instead of aligning its policies with the Alliance's standards, the party deepens its ties with Russia. This is despite the fact that the majority of Georgia's population considers it the country's main enemy. According to the latest study titled *Caucasus Barometer 2024,* conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC-Georgia) in 2024, 69 per cent of Georgians view Russia as their country's principal enemy.

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Another important rhetorical shift is the insistence that unresolved territorial conflicts are a precondition for NATO membership. By asserting that Georgia must first resolve issues in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian Dream effectively reproduces a longstanding Russian narrative. This approach sharply contrasts with Tbilisi's previous policy, which aimed to prevent Moscow from using occupied territories to block Euro-Atlantic integration. Linking territorial integrity to NATO membership is actively used by pro-Russian propaganda to argue that abandoning NATO aspirations could facilitate the return of lost territories. Despite high public support for Alliance membership, this discourse sows doubt and creates false dilemmas, undermining public consensus. In this context, NATO's indecision on eastward enlargement becomes less a cause than a convenient justification. Georgian Dream uses the Alliance's inconsistency to legitimize its own strategic retreat, turning uncertainty into an argument for neutrality.

Sowing scepticism

Beyond rhetoric, Georgian Dream has dismantled its own institutional architecture supporting Euro-Atlantic integration. The biggest move in this regard was the liquidation of the European integration department at the foreign ministry, along with the earlier abolition of the position of state minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration. These institutional changes are accompanied by an aggressive disinformation campaign against the EU and NATO. Pro-government media outlets promote narratives depicting Europe as economically declining, socially unstable, and morally corrupt.

Since NATO membership remains popular among the Georgian population, the authorities employ various manipulations to cultivate distrust toward the Alliance while sowing doubt about its very existence. Pro-government media with strong anti-western and anti-NATO messaging increasingly broadcast sceptical statements about NATO's future. In January 2026, for example, one outlet prominently cited a former NATO Secretary General claiming that due to divisions in Europe, the United States might leave the Alliance.

Tensions within NATO, particularly among allies over Greenland, have further fuelled the inevitability narrative in pro-government media. News in 2026, such as potential French intentions to exit NATO, proved highly advantageous for Georgian propagandists. In early 2026, leaders of the anti-NATO and anti-western political party United Neutral Georgia cynically began promoting propaganda narratives in the media. Critics say that these efforts are backed by the country's authorities. Among their claims was the assertion that NATO had "effectively died" as a result

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of the war in Ukraine, and that the Alliance's "funeral" would allegedly take place in Greenland. Supporters of Georgian neutrality describe internal disputes among NATO allies as a "historic opportunity" for Georgia, arguing that the country should seize the moment and transform itself into a neutral state.

Georgia's foreign policy evolution is also reflected in the changing approaches to strategic infrastructure and international partnerships. The decision to develop a strategic partnership with China shortly after NATO officially identified it as a security challenge calls into question the coherence of Tbilisi's foreign policy. This step is particularly significant in the context of the deep sea port project in Anaklia. Initially conceived as a geopolitically transformative project with American investors, the port was seen as a factor strengthening Georgia's economic independence and strategic significance. Western experts also noted its potential military importance and role in NATO rapprochement. However, the termination of the contract with the original consortium and the search for new investors opened the door for potential Chinese involvement, effectively sidelining US interests.

The government's prioritization of economic considerations over security guarantees is evident in in many of its decisions.

This prioritization of economic considerations over security guarantees is evident in other government decisions, including plans to build a civilian airport at the Vaziani military airfield, near Tbilisi. This facility has high strategic value due to its geographic location, infrastructure, and history of joint NATO and US exercises. The base is close to the capital and lies near the intersection of the Azerbaijan-Armenia border, adding military-strategic significance. Transforming the base for civilian use could create serious risks, including reduced military readiness and limited options for future cooperation with western defence partners.

Historically, the base was part of Soviet military infrastructure and, after the USSR's collapse, was used for an extended period by Russian armed forces. Later, through efforts by previous Georgian governments, the extensive facility was transferred to the Georgian armed forces. Since then, it has been one of Georgia's key military bases, used for joint exercises, housing barracks, and at least two major Georgian armed forces units. The airfield remains non-operational after Russian airstrikes in 2008, despite formally being under the defence ministry.

Overall, these decisions indicate a broader trend of voluntary demilitarization under the guise of economic development. While infrastructure projects can indeed stimulate growth and employment, implementing them at the expense of national security raises legitimate concerns about long-term vulnerability. Reducing military capacity at key sites aligns with a neutrality model aimed at minimizing

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visible engagement with NATO. For Russia, this trajectory is favourable. Georgia's formal renunciation of NATO ambitions, weakening of military infrastructure, and deepening economic ties with non-western powers would fit seamlessly into the Kremlin's geopolitical vision for the South Caucasus.

Between power and values

Georgia's shift toward neutrality is neither spontaneous nor purely reactive to external constraints. It is the result of a deliberate political strategy pursued by Georgian Dream through coordinated rhetoric, institutional dismantling, public opinion management, and strategic reorientation. By portraying NATO as ineffective, depicting Euro-Atlantic integration as risky, and presenting neutrality as a pragmatic inevitability, the ruling elite has prepared the ground for a fundamental change in the country's geopolitical identity. While NATO's indecisiveness and unfulfilled promises have indeed contributed to disappointment, they alone do not explain Georgia's current course. These factors have been used as justification for policies that reduce western influence and align with Russian strategic interests. Thus, the promotion of neutrality functions less as a security decision than as a political instrument – a tool for internal consolidation and redefining Georgia's place in the regional order.

It is unlikely that Georgian society will accept such a reinterpretation of national interests. Despite anti-NATO propaganda and disinformation from the ruling elite, support for Georgia's NATO membership remains very high. According to one opinion survey conducted by Edison Research, commissioned by the Formula TV channel in 2025, 85 per cent of Georgians support it. The gap between official policy and public opinion creates long-term risks because it intensifies social polarization, reduces political stability, and makes the country vulnerable to external threats. The concept of neutrality in the form promoted by the current ruling elite of Georgia does not represent a return to balance but a departure from the strategic foundations that have defined post-Soviet Georgia. It also effectively constitutes a strategic success for the Kremlin in the absence of protection for Georgia's national interests. EE

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How Central Asia quietly expands its horizons westward

IOSEB DZAMUKASHVILI SEKHNIASHVILI

Azerbaijan's entry into the Central Asian Consultative Meeting could transform the grouping into a more coherent and self-reliant framework in which energy, security, cultural ties, and diplomatic coordination mutually reinforce regional autonomy. Energy aggregation would be central to this shift.

On November 16th 2025, during a consultative meeting of Central Asian heads of state, Azerbaijan formally joined together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in a new effort. With this step, the Central Asian Consultative Meeting – widely known as the C5 – effectively evolved into the C6. Although the decision initially appeared procedural, its geopolitical significance may prove substantial. For the first time, the region's consultative framework has extended beyond Central Asia's traditional boundaries to include a South Caucasus state that anchors the western shore of the Caspian Sea and serves as a key gateway towards Türkiye and Europe.

The timing of Azerbaijan's accession was particularly notable, coming only months after the second Central Asia-China summit held in Astana in June 2025. This sequence highlights how regional institutional developments are increasingly intertwined with broader Eurasian connectivity agendas. The emergence of the C6 strengthens the so-called Middle Corridor – the shortest overland route linking western China with Europe. This corridor has gained strategic relevance as an al-

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ternative to Russia-centred transit networks in the context of the Kremlin's ongoing war against Ukraine. More broadly, Baku's inclusion points to deeper structural trends: the gradual institutionalization of regional coordination, the consolidation of multi-vector foreign policies among participating states, and the widening scope for diversified engagement by external actors across Eurasia.

Regional ownership with strategic flexibility

Launched in 2018, the C5 platform was not originally conceived as a geopolitical bloc. Instead, it was an initiative designed as a confidence-building forum in the region after decades of fragmented regional relations in a post-Soviet reality. The creation of the C5 was partly shaped by the precedent set by the US-led C5+1 format launched in 2015 by then Secretary of State John Kerry. It familiarized regional leaders with regularized, high-level coordination. By establishing their own consultative framework without the formal participation of external powers, the five republics adapted this model to emphasize regional ownership while preserving strategic flexibility. This approach has enabled them to deepen internal coordination and, at the same time, maintain diversified engagement with outside partners, including China, the United States, the European Union, and Türkiye.

Central Asia's C5 platform was not originally conceived as a geopolitical bloc, but rather a confidence-building forum for the region.

For several years, the C5 remained a lightweight, non-institutional format as Central Asian states, shaped by centuries of imperial rule and wary of supranational constraints, prioritized sovereignty, flexibility, and non-alignment. Hence, cooperation was consensus-based and avoided binding commitments. The C5 reflected a shared desire to cooperate without integrating.

However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the C5 decided to shift its calculus. The weaponization of energy and transit infrastructure, as well as sweeping western sanctions against Russia, reshaped Eurasia's economic geography. The region was also somewhat forced to reconsider export routes, supply chains, and strategic dependencies.

At the same time, a number of external actors intensified their engagement in the region. China further consolidated its position as Central Asia's largest trading partner through sustained investment as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. The United States moved to revitalize the C5+1 framework, while the European Union accelerated its outreach across the wider Caspian region within the framework of its Global Gateway strategy.

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Rather than aligning themselves exclusively with any single partner, Central Asian states have sought to leverage this renewed external attention to diversify their foreign and economic ties. In this context, the C5 has gradually evolved from a primarily consultative forum into a more strategic platform for coordination, enabling participating states to align positions on transport connectivity, energy cooperation, and patterns of engagement with external actors.

More connectivity with caveats

Azerbaijan's addition to the C5 has been a logical extension. The rise of the Middle Corridor made the exclusion of the Caspian's western anchor increasingly artificial. Azerbaijan materially strengthens the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, linking East Asia to Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. The Alat port in Baku is the only major transit hub on the Caspian's western shore, while Azerbaijan's railways and pipelines – such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline – form an indispensable bridge between Central Asia and European markets.

Additionally, Azerbaijan's participation in the C6 platform synchronizes Central Asia and the South Caucasus into a more unified political-economic space. What had previously been a fragmented corridor is now acquiring a clearer operational vision. Joint initiatives between Central Asian and Caucasus states in such fields as logistics and digitalization already allow cargo to move from East Asia to Europe with unified documentation, reducing delays and transaction costs. For instance, on February 10th 2026, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Georgia signed a protocol expanding cooperation on the digitalization of Middle Corridor rail operations and cargo transportation, moving toward a coordinated and interoperable digital framework for rail freight.

For external stakeholders, this enhanced connectivity is strategically valuable. Since 2022, political risks associated with the Northern Corridor through Russia have increased sharply. Although the Middle Corridor remains less economical than Russia's rail routes, its geopolitical insulation has become its primary advantage. Azerbaijan's accession improves predictability and coordination across the wider Caspian region, key priorities not only for China but also for European and regional actors seeking reliable alternatives.

While Azerbaijan offers significant opportunities for external actors through international logistics and trade, its inclusion also strengthens the region's overall economic and political leverage. With a GDP of approximately 79 billion US dollars, Azerbaijan ranks as the third-largest economy within the C6 framework,

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increasing the bloc's combined GDP to around 650 billion US dollars and its total population to more than 94 million. Unlike several Central Asian states, Azerbaijan is not structurally dependent on any single external financier. Its diversified energy export portfolio, strategic ties with Türkiye and European partners, and restored territorial integrity following the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, position Baku not merely as a participant in emerging corridor governance, but as one of its principal shapers.

A significant energy cluster

Azerbaijan's potential entry into the C6 could transform the grouping into a more coherent and self-reliant framework in which energy, security, cultural ties, and diplomatic coordination mutually reinforce regional autonomy. Energy aggregation would be central to this shift. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan rank among the region's principal oil exporters, while Turkmenistan remains a major supplier of natural gas. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also together account for more than half of global uranium output. Taken together, these capacities position the C6 as an increasingly significant energy cluster with expanding strategic relevance for both European and Asian markets.

For China, this presents both an opportunity and a constraint. While Beijing remains Central Asia's largest economic partner, it has not acquired political dominance over the region. The expansion from C5 to C6 reinforces this dynamic. Central Asian states continue to practice a multi-vector diplomacy: welcoming Chinese trade and infrastructure finance while simultaneously courting US, European, Turkish, and Gulf partners. Kazakhstan's supply-chain diplomacy in Washington, where it positions itself as a critical minerals partner amid global decoupling trends, illustrates this approach. For instance, during the November 2025 Washington summit, the United States and all five Central Asian governments advanced operationally focused agreements on critical minerals, transport corridors, and industrial projects. Overall, these totalled over 25 billion US dollars in potential investments.

Additionally, these developments, together with Azerbaijan's growing involvement in regional connectivity initiatives, reinforces the regional capacity to diversify transit, energy, and trade partnerships. This can be done while maintaining pragmatic relations with Moscow as well, exemplifying the multi-vector approach at the core of contemporary Central Asian diplomacy. Thus, the group could enjoy greater bargaining power in energy and security deals, collective resilience against external pressure, and the ability to intensify ties with the West.

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Azerbaijan's highly diversified foreign policy aligns closely with this emerging pattern. By avoiding exclusive alignment with any single major power, Baku reinforces the C6's collective capacity to diversify external partnerships and mitigate overdependence on any one actor. Its simultaneous engagement with China, Russia, Türkiye, Europe, and the United States illustrates that participation in the Middle Corridor and selected Belt and Road–related projects can coexist with a broader portfolio of strategic relationships. The outcome is not one of exclusion, but of calibrated inclusion – an approach that could strengthen strategic autonomy across both Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

The US factor adds another dimension to the C6's calculus. Discussions in Washington about deepening engagement with the wider Caspian region reflect growing interest in critical minerals, supply-chain diversification, and westward connectivity. This creates additional leverage that the C6 can selectively harness. Additionally, Turkic connectivity adds another layer to the shifting strategic geometry. Azerbaijan's active role in the Organization of Turkic States strengthens East–West linkages that operate independently of Russia's North–South axis and purely BRI-centric routes.

Azerbaijan's participation in the C6 could mark a pivotal shift in the Eurasian geopolitical landscape. By linking Central Asia to the South Caucasus and Türkiye, the bloc can consolidate the Middle Corridor, aggregate energy and industrial capacity, and strengthen regional leverage. For external powers, such as China, the EU, and the US, this development offers more reliable connectivity and safer trade routes. Simultaneously, the C6's growing autonomy and collective agency constrain the ability of any external actor, such as Russia or China, to exert unilateral influence. As the Middle Corridor becomes increasingly multi-vector, the defining feature of Eurasian integration may no longer be competition for dominance, but adaptation to a multilateral regional core that is progressively setting its own terms. EE

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The imperial mindest knows no borders

A conversation with Vitaliy Dribnytsia, a Ukrainian historian. Interviewer: Nikodem Szczygłowski

NIKODEM SZCZYGŁOWSKI: You communicate primarily with Russians through live conversations on so-called "chat roulette" – an online platform that randomly connects users via video and enables spontaneous exchanges. You record these encounters and later publish them. In such conversations, are you ever able to persuade your interlocutors to reconsider their views or learn basic facts about Ukrainian history that were previously unknown to them?

VITALIY DRIBNYTSIA: When I began this activity, I wanted to use the opportunities offered by the internet to reach ordinary Russians. My intention was to find a common language with them and to explain certain historical issues. Over time, however, I realized that I am not Don Quixote. At best, I am Sancho Panza. It makes little sense to try to persuade people in such settings, especially on chat roulette platforms, where one often encounters individuals without historical education and sometimes without broader education altogether. Today, rather than trying to convince them, I simply respond to their questions and explain the basic elements of Ukrainian history.

In Russia, people who often lack historical knowledge – and who may consciously or unconsciously distort the past – frequently accuse others, including those in Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic states, Finland and the West more broadly, of being guilty of these issues themselves. In your view, when did this sense of pride in a particular historical narrative begin to take shape?

It is difficult to identify a precise moment, yet it appears that post-Soviet Russia has never fundamentally departed from the imperial Russian–Soviet narrative. There were brief periods, particularly in the early 1990s, when the ideological pressure exerted by the Soviet state apparatus simply collapsed. However, during that decade no new and coherent system of ideological orientation emerged. Instead,

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Photo courtesy of Vitaliy Dribnytsia.

there was a short and fragile phase of conditional democracy. With Vladimir Putin's rise to power, the process of ideological consolidation gradually gathered momentum. Many scholars regard his Munich speech in 2007 as a decisive turning point, although one should also recall his earlier statement describing the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century".

What differences in the teaching of history between Ukraine and Russia do you observe through the prism of your work?

Contemporary Russian history education places a strong emphasis on Russianness as a central organizing principle. As a result, relatively little attention is devoted to the diverse, non-Russian regions historically connected with Moscow. Official narratives frequently stress themes such as "unification" and the "voluntary incorporation" of peripheral territories. Since around 2012, increasing emphasis has also been placed on the glorification of Russian military victories. In general, Russian textbooks are highly ideological and present Russia as a civilizationally superior state with a millennium-long historical continuity. Ukrainian textbooks, by contrast, are slowly shedding their ideological character seen over the past decade. They now place greater emphasis on critical thinking, the development of intellectual curiosity, and the cultivation of analytical and problem-solving skills.

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Is Russian propaganda, as it is also included in history textbooks, primarily directed at an anti-intellectual audience?

Political propaganda in any country tends to appeal to emotions rather than to intellectual reflection. In Russia, however, this tendency has been taken to an extreme. The authorities have sustained simplified and manipulative narratives over an exceptionally long period – longer than in many historical cases that are often invoked for comparison.

As a historian, do you believe that stereotypes can be challenged?

Stereotypes do change over time. Historians themselves frequently observe that, while they dismantle older interpretative frameworks, they also inevitably construct new ones. We can never fully reconstruct the past as it truly was; our understanding is always shaped by contemporary perspectives and intellectual imagination. For example, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was long interpreted – especially in Soviet historiography – primarily through the lens of class struggle. Today, Ukrainian scholars of that period tend to emphasize the competing ambitions and interests of various elites across its diverse territories. This does not necessarily mean that current interpretations are definitively more accurate. Rather, they reflect a shift in analytical perspective. Future generations will likely reassess them once again. In this sense, by challenging some stereotypes historians inevitably contribute to the formation of others – yet this is unavoidable, as the past itself remains beyond our direct reach.

Can this be understood as your response to claims – often voiced by Russians – that others are "rewriting history"?

History is constantly being reinterpreted; this is inherent to the discipline itself. It is not something that can be written once and then accepted as definitive. Each generation revisits the past, reassesses evidence, and poses new questions to historical sources. Such reinterpretation should not be understood as distortion, but rather as the very mechanism through which historical knowledge develops.

Another topic that frequently arises in your conversations with Russians is Stepan Bandera. Why does this figure, a man who was never a citizen of the USSR nor a subject of the Russian Empire, occupy such a prominent place in Russian historical discourse?

The mythologization of Bandera dates back to the Soviet period, when the security apparatus – including the NKVD and later the Ministry of State Security, subsequently transformed into the KGB – was mobilized to combat Ukrainian nationalism. Soviet propaganda persistently over-emphasized Bandera and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army's sporadic alignment with Nazi forces present in the country. Based on my conversations with Russians, this perception remains deeply embedded in public consciousness and often persists without the need for supporting evidence or historical

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nuance. Ukrainian nationalism, from its emergence in the late 19th century – for example in Julian Baczyński's *Ukraina Irredenta* – was perceived as a threat to successive imperial formations: the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and, later, post-Soviet Russia. The stereotype of "Ukrainian Nazism", constructed during the Soviet era, continues to be used today to justify Russian aggression.

Many of these narratives concern people and territories that were not part of Russia before 1939. How do you interpret this phenomenon?

This reflects a broader imperial mindset in which borders are perceived as fluid or ultimately irrelevant. From such a perspective, it matters little whether specific regions or historical figures were formally connected to the Russian state. Individuals such as Stepan Bandera or Tadeusz Kościuszko are often reduced to a single defining characteristic: opposition to Russian imperial power.

Another topic that often appears in these discussions is the Ukrainian People's Republic of 1917–1921. How is this period perceived in Russian historical consciousness?

Russian historiography generally interprets Ukrainian state formations of that period solely through the prism of the Russian Civil War. The concept of a distinct Ukrainian revolution has little presence in this narrative.

The history of medieval Rus' was appropriated by the imperial project in order to give it legitimacy and pedigree; the aim was to give it a certain European character. In your opinion, is it possible to debunk this myth, if not in Russia itself, then at least in the minds of Europeans?

It takes a long and arduous effort to change the consciousness of Europeans, because many of the institutions, worldwide, that focus on Eastern Europe, whether through cultural activities or academic research, are staffed by Russians. That is why it is so difficult to counter the Russian narrative. The history of medieval Rus' was essentially used to create the Russian imperial project. It gives it legitimacy. On the other hand, let us not forget that when academic science was already taking shape in Russia in the 18th century, as it was throughout Europe, it was not used directly to legitimize the Russian Empire. However, the sources on the history of medieval Rus', which were discovered in monasteries and archives at that time, were studied and referred to, clearly pointing to Kyiv as the cradle of statehood. At the same time, there were no sources on, for example, the Finno-Ugric tribes inhabiting the territories of the later Moscow Tsardom. On the other hand, Russian history did not deal with issues such as the Khazar Khaganate or Volga Bulgaria at that time. Thus, the sources themselves suggested that the beginnings of Russian history lay in the lands of ancient Rus', and Kyiv was then the centre of a province of the Russian Empire, so everything added up. In the 20th century, it became clear that this was used to justify the imperial project,

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then the Soviet project, and now the post-Soviet project.

In your conversations with Russians, you often hear phrases about "one nation" and "common culture", but also about a certain "Slavic community". What do Russians mean when they talk about Slavic culture and history? And what do they know about the history and culture of other, especially non-East Slavic, nations?

By "Slavicness", they always place a great emphasis on Eastern Slavs, i.e., Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians, no one else. When you try to explain that such an identity can also include groups that are not traditionally seen as allies, including those who can be Western and Southern Slavs, they refuse to accept it. They understand Slavic identity only on their own terms and no other. And accordingly, for them, this conventional linguistic and cultural unity among Eastern Slavs is an integral part of their myth. When you try to present arguments that this is not the case, it doesn't work.

Can the current war be understood as, in part, a war over history?

It can indeed be argued that the conflict has a significant historical dimension, since collective identity is deeply rooted in shared and sometimes mythologized understandings of the past. The Russian side has been particularly active in instrumentalizing historical narratives and using them as a political and ideological resource. At the same time, we, too, inevitably turn to history when it serves our purposes, employing it as a means of strengthening social cohesion and international support. In this sense, the war is fundamentally a struggle for minds, as, in many respects, every war ultimately is. It is not fought solely over resources or territories, but above all over perceptions, loyalties, and interpretations of reality. Victory depends, to a significant extent, on the ability to secure broader public support – both domestically and internationally. Russia finds this task easier not only because it invests vast resources in propaganda and the strategic use of historical narratives, but also because of its demographic advantage. Nevertheless, we must also assume responsibility for articulating our own historical perspective: explaining to our fellow citizens who we are, communicating to our neighbours how we understand our past, and steadily deepening cooperation with those countries that support us. This engagement may also involve the strategic use of history – but in a measured, transparent, and responsible manner consistent with the norms of a democratic and international order.

A side effect of the war is the popularization of history in this way…

Because people are looking for answers to questions that bother them. "Everything was fine" until 2014, as they often repeat. No, it wasn't. It just wasn't so clearly visible at the time. Everything was accumulating and a key awareness

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was forming. Vasyl Pavlov, a military historian, clearly points to 2012 as a turning point. It was in 2012 that all higher education institutions in Russia specializing in pedagogy and history began to train teachers in military history. A massive effort was launched to prepare teachers of Russian military history. Five years later, the subject was introduced into schools, followed by the emergence of the so-called *Yunarmiya* [a pro-regime paramilitary youth organization – editor's note] and other examples. This means that systematic work has been and is being carried out to prepare a mobilization reserve, using history as a tool to this end. EE

Vitalii Dribnytsia, known online as Vox Veritatis, is a Ukrainian historian and history teacher from Bila Tserkva. He is the co-author of textbooks and a YouTuber.

Nikodem Szczygłowski is a reporter, writer and translator from Lithuanian and Slovenian. He is a frequent contributor with *New Eastern Europe* as well as other media outlets.

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I predicted a stalemate and that's what we got

An interview with Mark Kimmitt, retired Brigadier General of the US Army. Interviewer: Vazha Tavberidze

VAZHA TAVBERIDZE: As we just passed the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, what are the main military lessons learned? What has fundamentally changed on the battlefield?

MARK KIMMITT: I don't think much has changed on the battlefield. If you read my piece from August 2022 in the *Wall Street Journal*, you will see that I predicted a stalemate because of the West's dithering in providing Ukraine what it needed. It has resulted in what can only be described as a stalemate. The only changes I've seen are in the technology used on the battlefield. On the one hand, it is clear that the Russians are fighting the same way in 2026 as they fought in 1944. They are still using massive amounts of artillery. They are using their infantrymen as targets and as little more than cannon fodder. Their movements reveal that the argument of quantity is better than quality still holds true. On the other hand, the Ukrainians are using some of the best technology in the world. They have brought drone warfare into a new era. That era, I think, will be short, and [will last] until counter-drone capabilities get fully established on the battlefield and that temporary advantage goes away. But they also have modern command and control. They have had modern training. They have been given equipment such as M1 battle tanks and ATACMS missiles, and they have developed their own drone capabilities as well. Unfortunately, for many reasons, there hasn't been movement on the ground of any real significance, certainly not during this past winter. So you could also make the argument that very little has changed in the last year.

You mentioned technology. One of the most striking developments in this war has been the rapid evolution of unmanned systems. Drone-on-drone combat enabled by artificial intelligence now appears within reach. How close are we to that, and what would the potential impact be?

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Well, I wrote an article for *Politico* where I said that drone supremacy is over. The important thing to recognize is that throughout history all significant developments on the battlefield are quickly countered, whether it was the machine gun, the tank, or the aerial bomber. The reason I felt that drone supremacy is over is because counter-drone systems are being developed rapidly. If you're talking about drones with AI and counter-drones with AI, then I think you will see the same kind of equilibrium on both sides. Once one side integrates AI into its drones, the other side will do the same, both in drones and in counter-drone systems. It's similar to air force tactics. It is going to resemble modern air operations. You will have drone swarms coming in, and you will have drone swarms attacking those drone swarms. I think you will see this whether it is AI-enabled or not. Drones are not leaving the battlefield, but they are not the wonder weapon that everybody is making them out to be right now.

Would that mean less human involvement in warfare? To what extent does AI reduce the human role on the battlefield?

AI kind of [already] replaces the human when it comes to air operations. Thirty years ago, there was a theory about the "lonely battlefield", suggesting that instead of having great masses of forces, you could replace troops with technology. It will certainly be the case that there will be a reduction in the number of troops on the battlefield. But there is a wonderful quote in T.R. Fehrenbach's book *This Kind of War*, where he was talking about the Korean War. He says you can bomb a battlefield to smithereens. You can fire artillery until your nose bleeds. But at the end of the day, if you want to occupy land and hold terrain, you have to do today what the Roman legions did thousands of years ago: you have to put your young men in the dirt, in the mud. I don't think technology changes that fundamental reality. I don't know how drones would defend a hilltop.

To what extent could drones help Ukraine alleviate some of its manpower shortages?

My view is that drones are already doing that. Ukraine has not revealed its exact troop numbers on the ground or its casualty figures. But I can't help but believe that what has held the battlefield in a stalemate is not only trench lines and positional defence, but also the fact that the kill zone has now been extended deep into the battlefield. Drones can go ten or 15 kilometres into the rear and hit second waves and soft targets such as ammunition dumps, command-and-control headquarters, and logistics hubs. All of that used to be extremely difficult and unlikely unless you had very good intelligence. Now it is possible because of drones. If you can take out follow-on waves and logistical nodes with drones, you don't need as many troops on the front lines.

On positional warfare, the consensus seems to be that it has prevailed over manoeuvre warfare in Ukraine as the battle-

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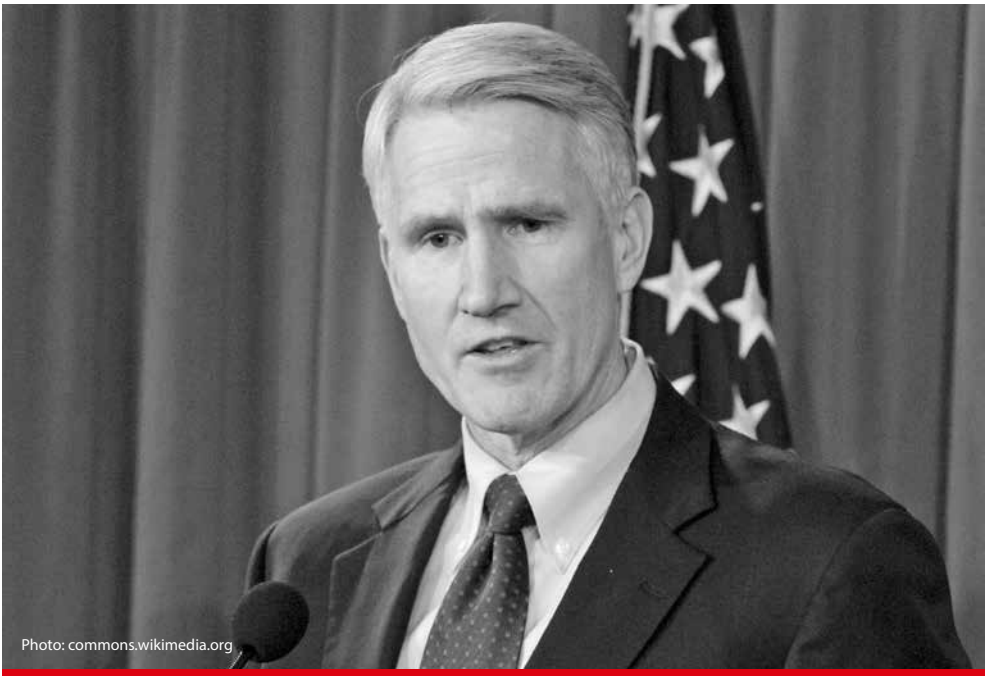


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Mark Kimmitt also served as the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East.

field has become increasingly transparent. Is this here to stay, or could a technological or operational breakthrough shift the war back towards manoeuvre warfare?

At this point, without significant counter-drone capabilities, I think drones on both sides will continue to drive what you call positional warfare. I would describe it as entrenched defensive warfare. I think it will continue to prevail because what we're learning is that if you try to drive around with three tanks to achieve a breakthrough, one drone can knock out three tanks with no problem at all at this point.

If we were to look at the map as we enter spring, what does it look like and which directions matter most?

I think we go back to the historical norm, which is that an attacker needs a three-to-one advantage over a defender. That ratio can rise to five-to-one or even six-to-one if the defender is in a prepared defence. By prepared defence, I mean obstacle belts, dug-in positions, and pre-sighted artillery. If there were no drones in the air, I would say that if a Russian unit had a six-to-one advantage over a trench line, they could bust through. Those numbers get even higher when you are not just talking about trenches but about what I would call "hedgehog defence". For example, this would involve units defending small towns that cannot easily be bypassed. The rubble creates significant hiding places for snipers and

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significant protection against artillery from within. Assuming what we see on the battlefield today is what we will see once the ground dries, I do not see either the Ukrainians or the Russians generating enough force for a major breakthrough.

But the Russians will have to move forward regardless. If we look at this through the eyes of Russian command, which directions would you choose? Where would you go and what would you do?

It depends on the objective. Do I want to get to Zaporizhzhia? Do I want to get to Kherson? Do I want to move back up toward Izyum in the north? One thing is certain, wherever the most likely attack route appears to be, the Russians would be foolish to attack along that route. Historically, they have been very good at this kind of stuff, at what they call *maskirovka* (masking, or deception). So where they attack is probably where you do not expect them to attack. In the case of the Ukrainians, I think they clearly want to go directly east. If you look at the road network leading to the Russian border, they would likely attack along many of those routes, if not most of them. Their objective, in my view, would be to sever the middle of the Donbas from Crimea and southern Donbas, and then spread out. The idea would be to take back land and split Donbas to reconnect with their own territory. They could attack west from Kherson, but I do not think we will see land assaults on Crimea. I think the primary focus will remain Donbas.

Whatever their other objectives might be, the Russians too will still try to press on the Donbas front and try to scoop up what remains, correct?

Oh, yes. There is no doubt that at a strategic level their objective is to take the entire Donbas.

There has been a curious development in recent weeks, the Huliaipole counterattack conducted by the Ukrainians, with several hundred square kilometres reportedly regained. How significant is that? Are we talking tactical, operational, or strategic impact?

I would put it like this: Ukraine is 640,000 square kilometres. If the Russians are taking roughly 14 square kilometres a day, it would take them about 125 years to take the entire country. So Ukrainians taking a few hundred square kilometres is tactical depth. It is not operational and it is not strategic.

I wanted to ask about the recent US formal restriction on Ukrainian strikes deep inside Russian territory, in this case Novorossiysk, reportedly on the grounds that it harmed US economic interests. What are the military implications of such restrictions?

The United States remains committed to what I would call unrestricted warfare by the Ukrainians, just not using US-provided equipment to conduct strikes inside Russia. The belief is that if NATO equipment were used to strike deep into Russia, that could be interpreted as a direct NATO-Russia conflict. That may be one of the restrictions that should have been lifted, so that we can shoot some

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Storm Shadow and other types of long-range missiles that way. But I think what you are seeing is western risk aversion, a reluctance to expand the war beyond Ukraine and Russia.

The official explanation was that such strikes harm US economic interests. Would that mean Washington would have no objection if Ukraine used domestically produced systems to hit those same facilities?

I do not think the United States would object to that at all. I do not think it would take a formal view on it. The fact remains that Russia is conducting a strategic bombing campaign inside Ukraine. Why would we tell the Ukrainians not to conduct a strategic bombing campaign inside Russia?

Ukraine's new defence minister has publicly set a goal of inflicting 50,000 Russian casualties. How achievable is that, and what would be the operational or political impact if it were reached?

The logic behind that number is that it would bleed the Russians dry, that conscripts would stop showing up at recruitment stations, that the Russian troops, as they have done historically, would revolt on the front lines. I don't necessarily believe that to be true. And I'll just leave it at that.

According to this year's Estonian foreign intelligence report, Russia has dramatically increased artillery ammunition production and expanded its stockpiles. How sustainable is Moscow's current pace of war, and are we likely to see a fifth anniversary of this conflict?

I would assess that unless there is a diplomatic solution, that if we leave that decision up to the operations on the battlefield, I think we will see a fifth anniversary. At this point, with the equipment on the ground, the resources on the ground, and the people on the ground, I don't see any reason why there would not be a fifth anniversary. EE

Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt (US Army, (Ret.)) is an advisor to US firms in the Middle East. He served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy under Defense Secretaries Donald Rumsfeld and Robert Gates and as Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs under Secretary Condoleezza Rice in the George W. Bush administration.

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The last resident of Kharkov

MARTINA SANNA

In a sealed border zone between Armenia and Turkey, one woman refuses to leave the last home in a vanished village – preserving a fragile link to a homeland her family lost to genocide.

The wind is the first thing you notice in Kharkov, a village on the Armenian border with Turkey. Not the kind that squeezes between apartment blocks in a city, but a vast, ancient wind, strengthened by its long sprint through the gorge carved by the Akhuryan river. It turns cold this time of year, though Vahanduckt Melkonyan, now 89, barely registers the chill. Every morning, she steps outside, feeds her chickens, touches the earth of her small yard, and feels the wind on her face while the sun is still rising behind her. She checks on her dog – it still limps from a violent encounter a few weeks earlier, when a wolf came too close to the house. The animal drove the predator away, but healing takes time.

Most days are quiet. Then something interrupts the silence, the chant of a muezzin drifting from a mosque across the border in Turkey, visible from her garden. Vahanduckt cannot understand the words, but she listens until it stops. Then the winds reclaim their space, shaking the giant flags flying over the Russian military base next door. Her footsteps once again become the loudest sound in the area. So it has been for 15 years.

Sole resident

Kharkov is not just any remote settlement. It is the final inhabited home in what was once a village, sitting mere metres from the Armenian–Turkish frontier. It lies inside a tightly controlled restricted-access border zone overseen by Russian border troops – a strip of land where civilians enter only with special authoriza-

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tion. Kharkov is also the closest Armenian settlement to Ani, the medieval capital of ancient Armenia, a sacred symbol of Armenian civilization lost beyond today's border. This is a border formally established after the fall of the Soviet Union. Once, the villagers of Kharkov would gaze at Ani's ruins from their doorsteps, pride mixed with longing. Now Vahanduckt's eyes are the only ones still looking that way. She is the sole remaining resident of the village.

But today, Kharkov stands on the edge of possible transformation. The August 2025 peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, initialled in Washington after decades of hostility, opened a new chapter for the South Caucasus. Its core elements include the construction of a strategic transit route linking Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory, and a broader commitment to reopen long-sealed borders and reconnect regional economies. For a country like Armenia, with its frontiers to both east and west closed for years because of conflict and regional power struggles, the agreement raises the real prospect of normalization and renewed transit. For Kharkov, long left behind by history, the change could be existential.

Kharkov is also the closest Armenian settlement to Ani, the medieval capital of ancient Armenia, a sacred symbol lost beyond today's border.

The village was not the first place Vahanduckt would call home. She arrived here on July 8th 1962, to marry a man she barely knew. At 25, she says, it was considered "time" to wed, and she left her home in Armavir in western Armenia under the impression she was headed for the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. Instead, she arrived in this remote village of a few hundred people – and a drenched groom.

"I remember it was pouring rain that day," she said. "They came to get me in an old sidecar motorcycle. My husband was sitting in the sidecar; when we arrived at the village he was dripping water everywhere."

Her new life meant moving into a house with her husband, his sister, and their mother – a woman marked by personal tragedy. She became a widow after the family's patriarch was executed during Stalin's purges in 1937. His crime was a remark in the fields, saying aloud at the wrong time that Aghasi Khanjyan, the Bolshevik leader of Soviet Armenia whose sudden death remains shrouded in historical ambiguity, was "a good man". The consequences were swift: arrest, an accusation of ideological disloyalty, exile to a Siberian labour camp, and execution.

"My husband and his siblings never got to see their father alive again, even if they begged to," says Vahanduckt. "My husband's sister found all the documents years later. They threw his body in the gorge, that's how they were dealing with corpses at the time."

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A promise

Long before Soviet power renamed the village, its history had been drawn by another atrocity. Kharkov – originally named Yenikey – was founded in 1915 by survivors of the Armenian genocide, people forced out of their ancestral lands in Mush and Van, in what is now eastern Turkey. The barren steppe reminded Soviet officials of the Ukrainian plains around Kharkiv, leading them to impose the name Kharkov sometime later. But for the Armenian families who resettled here, this was not a blank new land, it was the closest they could get to the places they had been torn from.

One of those survivors was Vahanduckt's mother-in-law. Nearly blind by the time Vahanduckt met her, she clung fiercely to the memory of her native Mush, and to the hope, passed on like an heirloom, that the border might one day open.

"She told me several times about her life in Mush. She said that when the border would have opened, she would bring me to our lands," says Vahanduckt. For 15 years, Vahanduckt cared for her. Their bond forged a promise that would define a lifetime: "do not abandon this place."

"Don't leave, even if you have no flour, light your *tonir* oven and let the smoke arise. This way the Turks will know that there are still people living in this village."

The torments of the 20th century – genocide, repression, Soviet collapse – had carved deep uncertainty into this border. During the Cold War, tensions with the NATO member Turkey led the Soviets to fortify the area with troops. After the USSR dissolved, Russia continued to guard Armenia's Turkish and Iranian borders under a 1992 agreement. The restricted-access border zone, once three kilometres wide to match the range of contemporary artillery, evolved into a one-kilometre-wide ribbon of restricted land stretching all 311 kilometres along the frontier.

For villagers, the military presence was constant. Yet life persisted, until the fabric of an already fragile community began to tear. The water supply was cut after the Soviet collapse. The village school closed. Families drifted away in search of education, utilities and normalcy. In the late 1990s, Vahanduckt and her husband found themselves the last couple remaining. They moved into the abandoned school building where she had been the librarian, and he was a teacher.

Living proof

"My husband was a kind, talented man," Vahanduckt recalls. He could fix anything from watches to tractor engines, and he never took money from people. There wasn't a person in the village he hadn't helped."

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His death in 2010 was a turning point. He is buried near the old church, its cross-stones carried long ago from Van by genocide survivors who refused to let Soviet secularism erase their faith. It is where she hopes to be buried as well.

"What if I die somewhere else?" she said. "It will be more complicated for my kids to bring me back here." Her children have pleaded with her to leave, to escape the harsh winters, the isolation and the restrictions. She refuses every time. She will not abandon the promise, the grave, the identity embedded in these stones. She will not allow the flame lit in this village 110 years ago to go out under her watch.

Her presence is the last living proof that Kharkov was founded and inhabited by Armenians. People like her mother-in-law who were forced out from their lands and still managed to build a new home a stone's throw from their historical Ani cathedral, to keep the connection with what was once their homeland alive. Vahanduckt is the last remaining bit of that connection. On the rare occasions she leaves the village, she insists on coming back as soon as possible.

"I remember a particular day, I was visiting my family in the city, and they wanted me to stay the night because the car was broken, but I insisted so much that they had to borrow another car to bring me back here," says Vahanduckt with a smile. "I had it my way in the end."

Her presence is not only symbolic to her – it is responsibility. Every lifeform still clinging to the village depends on her: chickens, rabbits, crops, the very heartbeat of a place once home to hundreds. If she goes, the village ends.

"My husband would never leave the village. He used to say: 'This is my birthplace. I'm not going anywhere. You stay too, keep the village alive.' And with his blessing, I stayed. I must stay until people return, rebuild homes, bring life back. If I go, this hope is lost."

She is not entirely alone. Russian soldiers patrol nearby. And sometimes visitors arrive, like researchers, journalists, the curious few granted passage through the fences and checkpoints. She offers them food, whatever her refrigerator holds. In turn, family members and residents of nearby villages occasionally bring provisions.

One such neighbour is Vahan Tumasyan, a 60-year-old farmer from Bagravan, another small village around 20 kilometres from Kharkov. Portions of his land fall within the restricted-access zone, so he often appears at Vahanduckt's doorstep for a cup of Armenian coffee or a chat. Vahan has been involved in several renovation projects in this portion of rural Armenia for most of his life. His purpose is to prevent the area from emptying out, to make sure new generations can have the choice of building a life there and are not forced to find a better future in the city. For three decades he has been campaigning to shrink the restricted area, arguing that Armenians are being barred from rich croplands and direct access to the

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Akhuryan River. He cites cases where, after years of persistence, local authorities moved fencing near other border villages.

According to Vahan, the villagers from Anipemza, another small settlement on the southern part of the border, managed to have the fence moved after years of persistent requests. In addition, in recent years several parts of the border were taken over by Armenian troops, after decades of being exclusively guarded by Russians.

"This is why I cannot forgive the people of Kharkov," said Vahan. "If they stayed, if they had resisted, maybe they could have done the same here."

Surviving the present

The name of the village is spelled in various ways today, another marker of abandonment. Officials have taken notice of Vahanduckt's endurance, at least symbolically. In 2019, the governor of Shirak visited to deliver a letter of recognition from Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, praising her "unwavering dedication to your homeland and your tireless, long work". Promises of changes at the border followed. But months later the COVID-19 pandemic came. Then the renewed war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Promises dissolved into silence.

Normalization with Turkey could be presented as a diplomatic success to boost the ruling party's electoral chances.

Still, it is beyond doubt that a geopolitical shift is in the pipeline. According to Professor Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, who specializes in the foreign and security policies of Turkey and the South Caucasus states, the Armenian government has mentioned in recent times the possibility of an expedited transfer of the border control to Armenian troops. Ter-Matevosyan believes that the Russian presence could be removed as quickly as the end of the year. The upcoming parliamentary elections in Armenia, taking place this June, could be an additional motivation for the current ruling party, Civil Contract, to push for an imminent change in this regard.

With the burden of more possible stress for Armenia's economy and population due to the current conflict in neighbouring Iran, a long-awaited normalization with Turkey could be presented as a diplomatic success to boost the ruling party's chances in the polls. The restricted border zone could have only a few months of existence left. Villages like Kharkov, and all the arable land around it, could be given a second chance to life. But for Kharkov to have any future, it must survive the present. That is what Vahanduckt safeguards. Every chicken fed, every light kindled in the tandoor oven, and every day she refuses to leave keeps the village from slipping into memory.

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"People always ask about the border opening, but this is business for the politicians," says Vahanduckt. "If the border opens, the village might revive a bit. People might return. That is why I must stay. I live with hope. Hope brings light."

Time is speeding up, and Vahanduckt knows it. She believes this may be her final year. She will turn 90 in June, days away from the parliamentary elections that will decide Armenia's future. With her death, Kharkov may finally fall entirely into the realm of history, a place erased not by war, but by waiting.

"This village is important," said Vahan. "It is the closest to Ani, our sacred landmark. Without Ani we are lost in the world without our identity."

Standing in her yard, you can see the golden plains stretch towards the gorge and beyond. The wind rushes past, the same wind that once carried the smoke of ovens from hundreds of Armenian homes, the wind that still blows the sound of prayer from across the border, the wind that knows this land is not empty, not yet. Every morning, Vahanduckt wakes up. She feeds her chickens. She touches the earth. She keeps her promise. She watches the sun rising above the cathedral, the very sacred landmark of her people, who refused to cut their connection with it. She is still here. ЁЁ

Martina Sanna is a postgraduate student at the London School of Journalism and a master's graduate in specialized translation and computational linguistics at the University of International Studies in Rome (UNINT). Her work as a reporter was published on Civilnet.am, Hetq.am and *Newsweek*.

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Eighty-nine-year-old Vahanduckt Melkonyan in her living room. Vahanduckt is the last living resident of the village of Kharkov on the Armenian-Turkish border.

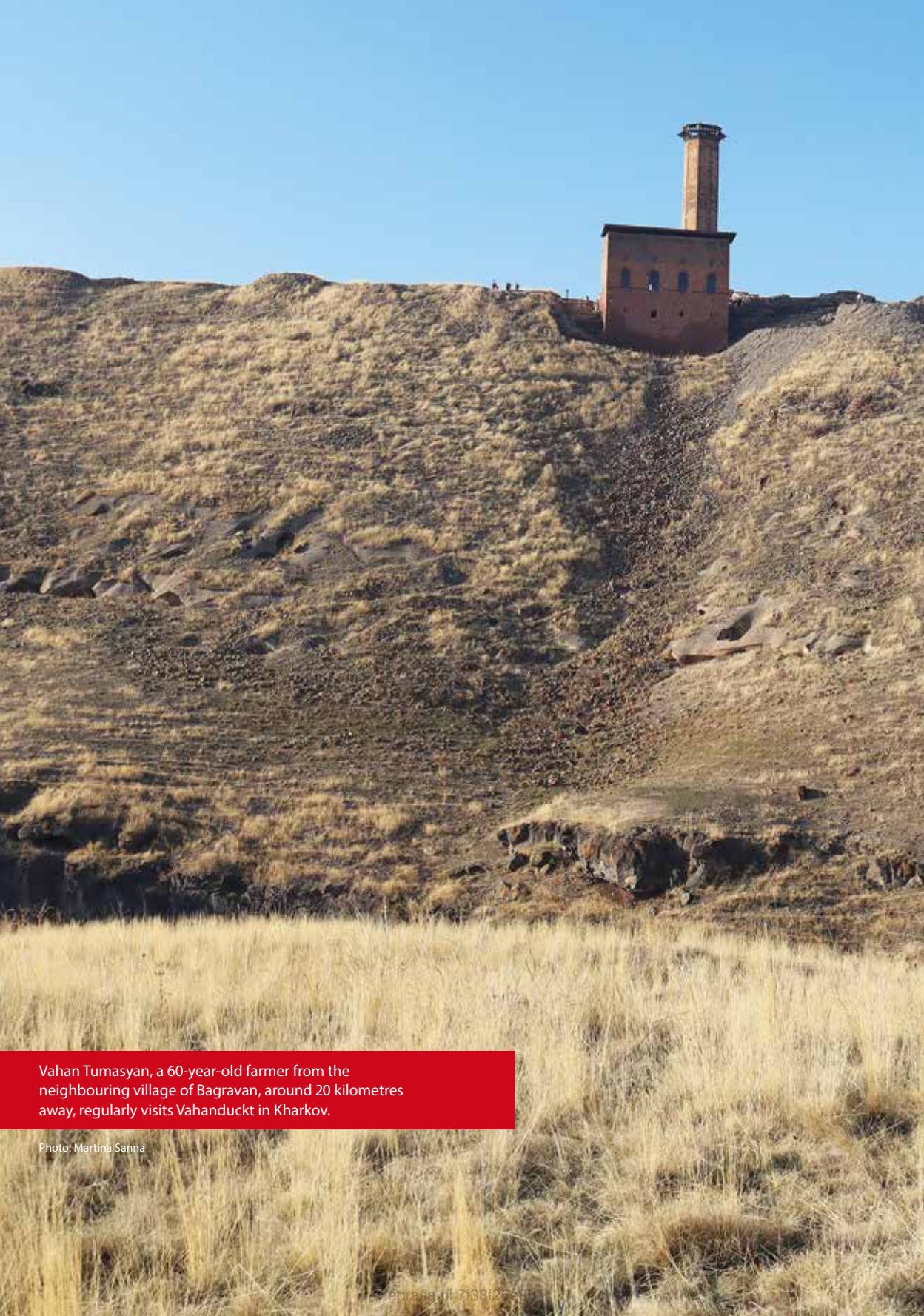
Photo: Martina Sanna



Vahanduckt's garden outside her home. The chant of a muezzin can be heard, coming from the mosque across the border in Turkey.

Photo: Martina Sanna





Vahan Tumasyan, a 60-year-old farmer from the neighbouring village of Bagravan, around 20 kilometres away, regularly visits Vahanduckt in Kharkov.

Photo: Martina Sanna





The interior of the Kharkov church. Kharkov is the closest Armenian settlement to Ani, the medieval capital of ancient Armenia, a sacred symbol of Armenian civilization lost beyond today's border.

Photo: Martina Sanna

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The Armenian flag flies at the border near the village of Kharkov - the final inhabited Armenian home, mere metres from the Armenian–Turkish frontier.

Photo: Martina Sanna

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GDAŃSK

GDAŃSK

TOWARDS A HUMAN RIGHTS CITY

Human rights and freedom are an integral part of the Gdańsk DNA. It was in this city, in 1980, that the Solidarity movement was born, becoming the foundation of the Gdańsk community's identity, based on the values of individual freedom and dignity.

For Gdańsk, the reference to these values is not merely a political declaration. It is also a practice reflected in the daily work of public officials and the civic engagement of its residents. These values were particularly evident in 2016, when, amidst a climate of growing social tensions and misinformation, the city decided to develop the Immigrant Integration Model together with local civil society. The model aimed to establish a system for managing immigration in the city in such a way as to strengthen the inclusion of new residents and ensure a better fulfilment of their social, cultural and political rights.

Two years later, in 2018, the Gdańsk City Council reaffirmed this commitment and extended the programme to further marginalised groups. The city adopted the Model for Equal Treatment – the first local government policy in Poland to voluntarily undertake the task of supporting people experiencing discrimination on the grounds of age, gender, disability, origin, religion or sexual orientation. The city developed the model over several months of collaborative work between officials and non-governmental organisations. This resulted in over 150 proposals for changes to the city's activities, so that everyone in Gdańsk would feel respected and safe, and could enjoy what the city has to offer without barriers.

A key achievement of the Model for Equal Treatment was the creation of a broad ecosystem of support for people experiencing discrimination. At the heart lies

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the Gdańsk Centre for Equal Treatment – a network of centres run via partnership of NGOs, offering free, legal and psychological support.

The model focused not only on support but also on preventing harmful behaviour through education. Gdańsk emphasized teaching civic responsibility and respect in schools and kindergartens from an early age. The cornerstone of this strategy is the Gdańsk Civic Lessons programme – a series of workshops that focus on the rights of children and young people and pro-democratic values.

The city strives to make the protection of human rights a lasting habit for every resident. The social campaign "Gdańsk: City of Equality" has become a symbol of this endeavour. For years, it has "brought colour" to the city's public spaces, promoting diversity and encouraging active opposition to injustice. The campaign encourages residents to seek help from the Gdańsk Centre for Equal Treatment when they experience or witness discrimination. The centre has raised awareness about violations and how to respond to them effectively. Importantly, Gdańsk's approach is holistic. The city also provides municipal programmes that aim to change the aggressive behaviour of perpetrators of violence.

The Model for Equal Treatment has become not only a tool to help marginalised groups, but also inspire other local authorities in Poland by demonstrating how to courageously combat discrimination and prejudice at the local level.

Gdańsk's next step is to join the Human Rights Cities Network, inspired by the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency. A Human Rights City is a place where local authorities, organisations, and residents jointly commit to upholding international human rights standards. This initiative responds to growing trends of polarization and democratic backsliding.



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Being a Human Rights City means much more than simply implementing one-off projects to level the playing field for marginalised groups. It requires a shift towards the systematic design of a city that is inclusive for all – from the very

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start. The key process is human rights mainstreaming, i.e. incorporating a fundamental rights perspective into urban policies, programmes and the day-to-day work of the local authorities. This means that every decision, from waste management to public procurement, is analysed in terms of its impact on the dignity and rights of the city's residents.

This evolution will not happen without in-depth education that builds a culture of human rights in the city. A key element of this is the Flying University of Human Rights at the European Solidarity Centre. The Flying University is a six-month educational programme attended by, amongst others, officials from municipal institutions and civic activists. Together, they listen to lectures by leading experts and practitioners and learn about tools that will, in practice, help their institutions better protect and promote human rights. Adopting the status of a Human Rights City is a natural next step in the evolution of Gdańsk's equality policy. At the same time, it marks Gdańsk's entry into the European family of progressive cities, such as Vienna and Barcelona. This broad vision of a just and safe community places the dignity of every resident at its heart, building a narrative of hope as an alternative to the politics of fear.

Text by Barbara Borowiak
Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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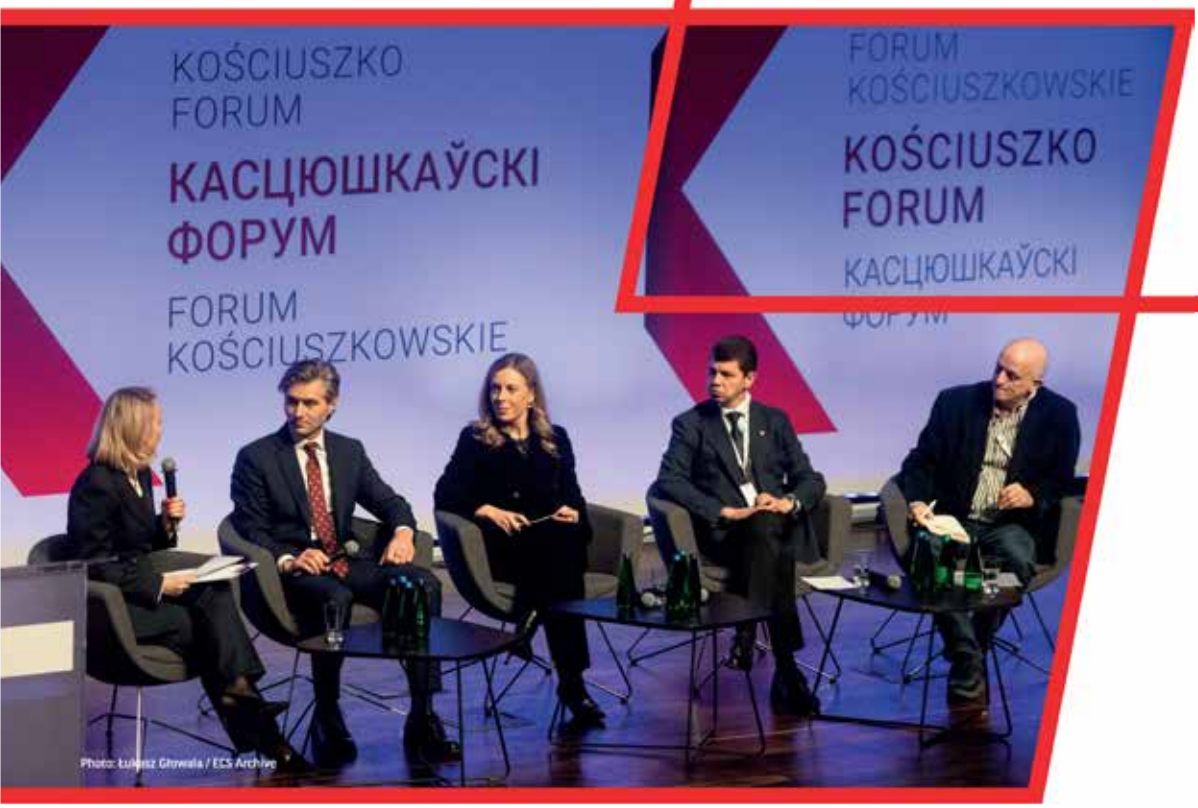
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Ukrainian children's future left to Italian courts

NATALIYA KUDRYK

Italy has taken in several hundred Ukrainian children from care homes since 2022. As these minors are now under Italian jurisdiction and the security situation in Ukraine has not improved, an urgent priority for the Ukrainian authorities is to re-establish partial oversight of their living conditions, with a view to their eventual return home.

In the first weeks of Russia's full-scale invasion, 4,739 orphans and children deprived of parental care were temporarily evacuated to European countries with the Ukrainian government's permission. Kyiv gradually began to repatriate these young people, but according to the State Service of Ukraine for Children's Affairs, as of April 2025, over 1,700 children (around 40 per cent) remained abroad. Some countries, citing local court rulings, do not allow minors to be taken out of the country due to the protracted state of war in Ukraine.

This list includes Italy, which has taken in several hundred Ukrainian children from care homes since 2022. Currently, over 100 children are in the country's southern regions, mainly in Calabria and on the island of Sicily, as well as in the northern Lombardy region in the province of Bergamo. As Italy has taken these minors under its jurisdiction and the security situation in Ukraine is not improving, the urgent task for the Ukrainian side has become not so much the swift return of the minors as the restoration of partial supervision over the conditions of their stay in a foreign country with a view to their future return to their home country. The Ukrainian Consul General in Naples says that due to opposition from local guardians, the situation has reached a legal impasse and a protracted legal battle lies ahead.

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Out of place

Mykola Lokotosh, an 18-year-old native of Uzhhorod, arrived in the southern region of Calabria in the spring of 2022 with a group of pupils from the Chynadiyevo boarding school (Zakarpattia Oblast). In a telephone conversation, the young man explained that although their facility is located in a safe region, the management decided at that time to temporarily evacuate abroad the children who had international travel documents. This was done to make room for other children from care homes arriving from the frontline zone, in particular from the Sumy children's home. This version of events was also shared with the facility's former director, Svitlana Sofilkanich, as well as Yulia Dynnychenko, a representative of the Ukrainian New Horizons Association in Sicily. This was also true of one of Dynnychenko's colleagues (speaking on condition of anonymity) from another Ukrainian association in southern Italy, who helped organize the reception of the minors.

As Lokotosh recalls, after his first few days in the hostel, he was placed with an Italian foster family in the town of Vibo Valentia, where the then 14-year-old felt completely out of place. "I always had to stay in my room; there were constant restrictions. I was only allowed out to go to school, and when I came back from lessons, I couldn't go out for a walk with my mates. I asked to be moved to a different family, but that didn't happen. So I decided to do something to get myself taken away from that family. And I beat up their ten-year-old son, because he often insulted me, and I couldn't stand it," says Mykola, going into detail about his deliberate misbehaviour. The boy was eventually taken away from that family and, with the help of local social services, placed in a children's home 70 kilometres away in the city of Catanzaro, where he still lives today.

Over 100 Ukrainian orphaned children are in Italy, mainly in the southern region of Calabria, as well as in the northern Lombardy region.

"I'm fine here. I've been used to children's homes since I was little. My parents died when I was very young. In Ukraine, one foster family treated me badly, so I'd rather be in a children's home than with some family," Mykola continues. He has three sisters. The youngest, who came to Italy with him, lives in Vibo Valentia with an Italian foster family. She is doing well in her new family and, according to Mykola, wants to stay there.

When we start talking about his home town, the young man speaks wistfully of his grandparents and other relatives in Zakarpattia, whom he misses, but he has no intention of returning home at present. Having reached adulthood, Mykola can decide for himself where to live, and he is no longer listed among the minors whom

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the Consulate General of Ukraine in Naples is seeking access to, having become bogged down in legal wrangling. As the diplomatic mission informed, many of the children, having reached the age of 16, previously returned to their home country with the assistance of the Consulate General. It is clear that diplomats can also assist children who have come of age in the meantime with the paperwork required to travel to Ukraine. However, these young people have not been in contact recently, the Consulate General in Naples added. This is a fact confirmed by the story of the young man from Uzhhorod.

Change of status

As of February 2026, around 20 teenagers from Chynadiyevo remain in Calabria and six on the southern island of Sicily. On the same island, more than 50 children from the Emerald City social rehabilitation and health centre in the Donetsk region are currently staying with foster families or in relevant facilities.

In the first few months, in accordance with local legislation on the protection of foreign minors, these Ukrainian arrivals were granted residence permits in the country as minors. However, as of today, almost all these children have been granted a different legal status –international protection, specifically refugee status – by decision of the territorial commissions, which has radically changed the situation. This was confirmed by the international lawyer Rosa Emanuela Lo Faro, who has handled dozens of court cases involving Ukrainian children in Sicily.

"The new status means that the Ukrainian state has lost custody of its underage citizens; the children can no longer have contact with diplomats from their country of origin; that Ukraine has effectively been removed from the process; and the host country [Italy] is free to decide even on the adoption of these children without Ukraine's knowledge. Under international law, Italian citizens may adopt children who have been recognized as political refugees," Lo Faro explains.

Under the international protection procedure, the host country is not obliged to provide information about asylum seekers to their country of origin. Applications for international protection for Ukrainian minors began to be submitted in 2024 by their temporary Italian guardians – lawyers appointed by local juvenile courts. These guardians, according to Lo Faro, under pressure from Italian foster families and influenced by negative news from Ukraine, have thus found a loophole in the legislation to prevent the return of young orphans to their home country. According to her, foster families are genuinely convinced that these children will have a better life in Italy, as they are allegedly treated poorly in Ukrainian residential care homes, a fact some of the minors have testified to in court hearings.

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Lo Faro stated that responsibility for the change in status of the evacuated orphans lies with the Italian state itself, specifically the interior ministry. This department, she says, allowed regional commissions to grant protection to Ukrainian children under the legal procedure for the international protection as refugees. The commissions grant this status to the children even though Italian courts had previously ruled in favour of the Ukrainian guardians and granted them permission to return the Ukrainian orphans to safe places in their homeland.

"We are not allowed to communicate with the children because the temporary Italian guardians have filed applications for international protection status for the children, stating that communication with representatives of Ukraine could pose a threat. We are now forced to resolve these matters exclusively through the courts, where we are no longer talking about rights, but about a struggle," said Maxim Kovalenko, Ukraine's Consul General in Naples.

According to him, juvenile courts in the Sicilian cities of Catania and Palermo have assured diplomats that, whilst martial law is in force in Ukraine, the adoption of these children in Italy is not possible. However, once the conflict ends, "this issue may be resolved differently."

Unaccompanied minors

Following the change in the children's status, even their temporary Ukrainian guardians on the ground, registered with the Consulate General, are not permitted to communicate with them. "I only had official status as the children's representative guardian in Calabria for the first three months," says a former guardian on condition of anonymity. "I helped to process their documents and assist with local social services. We sought foster families whose suitability was verified by the court. I asked for the children to remain in my care, but the Juvenile Court of Catanzaro decided otherwise. Italian guardians were appointed for them, and after that I could not have any contact with the children." The woman has long since emigrated to Italy and is a member of a Ukrainian association which helped to take in a group from an orphanage.

In general, the courts in Sicily and Calabria frequently prohibited contact between the children and their legal Ukrainian guardians from the very first weeks of their stay, initially granting the children the status of "unaccompanied minors". However, in accordance with international and Ukrainian legislation, the refugee children were accompanied by persons legally authorized by Ukraine. As Lo Faro, the legal expert, explained, local judges, ignoring international agreements like the 1996 Hague Convention, decided that the documents of the Ukrainian guardians could not be applied on Italian territory.

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"These are orphans or children deprived of parental care who were in institutions in Ukraine," La Faro said. "These are children who belonged to Ukraine. They did not flee the country, unlike the truly unaccompanied minors who arrive here from Morocco or Egypt, because these African children often have parents. This is an important distinction. And we should be talking about misconduct on the part of the Italian temporary guardians."

Some courts take national law into account over international conventions. In these cases, Italy has effectively brought these children under its jurisdiction, removing Ukraine – their country of origin – from custody. Diplomats are also convinced that such actions by the judicial authorities contravene the 1996 Hague Convention on Parental Responsibility.

Back in 2023, following a submission by Yulia Dinnichenko, a Ukrainian temporary guardian from Sicily, even the Italian Court of Cassation confirmed her status within the country. Later, in 2024, the Supreme Court established the exclusive authority of the Consul General of Ukraine to appoint such guardians and, where necessary, lawyers for minors from among trusted individuals, which the Italian authorities must recognize in accordance with the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. However, in the aforementioned cases in Sicily and Calabria, it is clear that not all judges adhere to international law or heed the decisions of their Supreme Court, giving preference in such cases to national laws on the protection of minors. Despite requests for comment to the president of the Juvenile Court in the Sicilian city of Catania, where, as of April 2022, there were already 110 young Ukrainians with "unaccompanied minors" status, no response was received.

In whose best interest

In January this year, in the town of Tropea in the Calabria region, during a conference on the protection of minor rights, the issue of young Ukrainian war refugees who are still in the region was also raised. The lawyer, Raffaele Figliano, who acted as a legal representative for a Ukrainian teenager in court, took part in the public discussion. The lawyer explained the situation from the perspective of the local judiciary regarding the case of Ukrainian orphaned minors.

"Yes, the Court of Cassation is doing what it is supposed to do: acting in accordance with regulations and laws. At the same time, we must understand the real emergency situation we face with the mass arrival of young refugees fleeing the war. We are concerned first and foremost with the best interests of the child. And if you [the guardian] arrive from Ukraine, go to the police with 50 children and say that you are their legal representative from their country of origin … where

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are we supposed to place them all? Who will be responsible for each of them? We are talking about people! I agree with the decision of the Court of Cassation, but it is not being followed either in Sicily or in Calabria," said Filiano, a specialist in family law and the protection of minors.

The lawyer is sceptical of the Ukrainian consulate's arguments regarding the children's return home and explains: "If the active phase of the war is ongoing, with certain regions of your country being bombed daily … does allowing these children to return to Ukraine contravene international law or not? The answer is often yes." In this lawyer's view, the relevant ministries are truly responsible in such cases, as they are tasked with regulating such emergency situations at the intergovernmental level. The main argument against returning the children is the lack of safety.

Ukrainian diplomats have held several meetings in Rome at the ministries of justice and foreign affairs, where officials express understanding of the circumstances and send recommendations and clarifications regarding the application of international norms to the regions. At the same time, Italian government officials emphasize that the judicial system is an independent branch of government and they have no right to interfere or exert pressure on judges. The courts, for their part, state that they take the government's recommendations into account but are not obliged to follow them. In short, a deadlock has arisen, according to Kovalenko.

Many of the children are losing touch with their homeland and forgetting their native Ukrainian language.

According to the consul and representatives of local Ukrainian associations, Italian families are often keen to keep the children with them and look after them as well. However, many of the children lose touch with their homeland. They forget Ukrainian, as social services or foster families do not concern themselves with preserving the national identity of these refugees. The Italian authorities allocate between 100 and 500 euros per month to support each child, depending on the needs of the individual family or the children's home. If they did not like living with the families, some children returned to Ukraine on their own, with the permission of local juvenile courts.

"While we were with the children, we organized Ukrainian games, spoke in our native language, and gathered for dinner with the families. But later, once we were removed, neither the families nor the social care homes gave any thought to their Ukrainian upbringing," said a former Ukrainian carer, delegated by the consulate, who looked after young arrivals in Calabria.

The young man Mykola Lokotosh, now living in a different city from his sister, keeps in touch with her and says they already speak Italian, as the girl is forgetting her native language, having arrived in Italy at the age of ten. Mykola him-

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self tries to speak Ukrainian but in reality it as a Ukrainian-Italian mix. The boy cannot recall the Italian carers offering him any lessons in his native language. At the same time, according to the consul, the judges assure him that in some of the orphanages, an educational programme in Ukrainian is indeed provided for the children.

Difficult decision

The children's prolonged stay in an Italian environment and their personal statements in court expressing their unwillingness to return to their homeland are compelling arguments for the judge to deny Ukraine's request for the return of the minors. Therefore, even if the armed conflict were to end, lawyers and diplomats predict that it would be impossible to return these children, as it would be argued that this is contrary to the child's best interests. For now, however, the Ukrainian authorities are more concerned with at least gaining access to the children to check on their living conditions, which, according to the judges' reports, are considered acceptable. "The children here do not want to return to Ukraine. The boys live in shelters, they are afraid of ending up in the war, and there are a few girls with families. One child was very withdrawn at first, but has now opened up and is feeling better. Overall, they are doing quite well here," said a former Ukrainian carer.

When the topic of visiting Ukraine came up, Mykola from the Chynadiyevo facility replied categorically: "No, I don't want to go to Ukraine, because I might have to join the army. There's a war there, even though it's far from my home. My relatives are trying to talk me out of going back. Once I leave this children's home, I'll earn some money here and go to my other sister in Switzerland. I don't like it in Italy. And if the war ends, I'll return to my homeland."

However, there are other situations where children wanted to return home to Ukraine. Some left quickly, whilst others are still waiting due to a lack of court decisions, or have been refused. At the start of the full-scale Russian aggression, a group of 25 children from the Stepan Suprun Children's Home in Sumy arrived in southern Italy, according to the home's director Lyubov Rudyka. Since 2023, she said, most of the children have returned to Ukraine with the permission of local courts and without hindrance from their host families, particularly to the Ternopil region, and have been placed mainly in family-based care. As of today, five minors from the institution remain in children's homes in the regions of Apulia, Campania and Abruzzo. These children, according to Rudyka, have expressed a desire to return to Ukraine, but have been waiting for months for court permission to leave, with no explanation given for the delay.

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Our investigation discovered that there are currently 29 children from the Berdiansk boarding school (from the Zaporizhzhia region in occupied territory) still in the northern Italian province of Bergamo. In 2022, the entire group (115 pupils) was evacuated to the Apennines. According to Andrii Kartysh, Ukraine's Consul General in Milan, seven pupils from the aforementioned school returned to Ukraine last year. Four of them went on to study at vocational schools, whilst three found new Ukrainian families. With the assistance of diplomats, work is ongoing in the case of one child to place them with prospective Ukrainian foster parents and facilitate their subsequent return to their homeland. The remaining children have not yet expressed a desire to move home or meet prospective Ukrainian foster parents. Consular staff have been able to maintain contact with the children.

In the summer of 2024, a scandal erupted over the return of this group from Berdiansk, as the local juvenile court initially agreed to the Ukrainian authorities' request for 57 orphaned children to be sent abroad. However, their departure was then suspended following applications for the minors to be granted international protection status. **EE**

This investigation was first published in Graty, an independent Ukrainian NGO publication.

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Dividing the forest

NIKOLA BUDZIŃSKA AND NASTA ZAKHAREVICH

In spring 2022, the Białowieża Forest, on the Polish border with Belarus, became the site of one of the most controversial infrastructure projects in the region: the construction of a permanent steel barrier along the Polish–Belarusian border. While construction crews worked on the fence, local researchers conducted daily field visits to document its immediate ecological footprint.

In 2022, Poland completed the construction of a five-metre-high metal barrier along its border with Belarus. Officially framed as a response to the migration crisis orchestrated by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime, the 187-kilometre wall cuts directly through the Białowieża Forest – a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the last remaining primeval forests in Europe.

By physically dividing this unique ecosystem, the fence has disrupted long-established migration routes, severed genetic links between wildlife populations, and altered everyday life in the borderland. More than two years later, the ecological consequences are increasingly visible, while the comprehensive monitoring needed to assess them remains largely absent. The wall was built outside standard environmental safeguards. How is this reshaping wildlife behaviour in the Białowieża Forest, and why have security imperatives consistently overridden scientific warnings and international conservation commitments?

A border nature does not recognize

In the Polish village of Teremiski, less than ten kilometres from the Belarusian border, encounters with wild animals are commonplace. Local residents

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report that European bison enter the village now far more often than decades ago, while wolves are no longer a rarity. Villagers insist that they are not afraid of these animals. What worries them, instead, is that the forest has changed. "No one cared about the local residents, no one cared about the people who live here. And very rarely did anyone talk to us [about the situation]," said Ela, a long-time local resident.

The risks are not abstract. In late 2025, a bison attacked a tourist who approached the animal too closely. According to Rafał Kowalczyk, a professor and former director of the Mammal Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the bison avoided being euthanized only because witnesses confirmed that the tourist ignored clear warning signals. For scientists, such incidents reflect a deeper disruption. Kowalczyk explained that when animal movement corridors are blocked, such as with the border fence, wildlife adapts, and often by moving closer to human settlements.

In spring 2022, the Białowieża Forest became the site of a permanent steel barrier along the Polish–Belarusian border.

In spring 2022, the Białowieża Forest became the site of one of the most controversial infrastructure projects in the region: the construction of a permanent steel barrier along the Polish–Belarusian border. While construction crews worked on the fence, local researchers conducted daily field visits to document its immediate ecological footprint. They recorded damaged trees, concrete residue, discarded construction containers, plastic waste and human refuse, most of it concentrated along forest roads heavily degraded by construction machinery. Each finding was photographed, catalogued and mapped.

The barrier, stretching 187 kilometres and completed in June 2022, was built by Budimex, a major Polish construction company owned by the Spanish conglomerate Ferrovial. With a total cost exceeding 350 million euros, the project included not only steel fencing but also extensive ground works and an electronic surveillance system. Crucially, the structure runs directly through areas designated under the EU's Natura 2000 network, including zones of strict environmental protection.

The construction of the barrier was enabled by a special law signed in October 2021 by then Polish President Andrzej Duda. This exempted the project from standard administrative procedures and allowed Poland to bypass a number of international and EU obligations. Under the EU's environmental regulations, a project of this scale would normally require a full environmental impact assessment prior to construction. Warsaw also ratified the Espoo Convention on transboundary environmental impact assessment in 1997. According to available information, no such assessment was carried out.

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The Polish Ministry of Climate and Environment did not respond to requests for comment on the barrier's construction. The regional office responsible for environmental protection in Białystok confirmed that the barrier was built under the special legal regime created by the October 2021 law. This legislation explicitly exempted the project from environmental, water and construction regulations. As a consequence, the regional office did not conduct its own environmental audits, assessments or analyses during construction.

Any materials concerning the potential impact of the barrier on Natura 2000 sites, the office explained, were prepared at the national level and transferred to the General Directorate for Environmental Protection – the sole body authorized to publish information on the potential consequences for protected species and Natura 2000 areas. The Białystok office also reported having no records of environmental complaints related to the construction and no information on any post-construction environmental monitoring.

Under the special legislation, responsibility for the construction was distributed among more than ten state institutions. There is no evidence that any of them attempted to challenge either the legal exemptions themselves or Poland's departure from international environmental obligations. In parallel, more than 1,800 scientists from multiple countries signed an open letter opposing the construction of the fence, warning of the long-term ecological damage. The intervention did not affect the course of the project.

Geopolitical context

The rapid transformation of the Białowieża Forest cannot be understood without the broader geopolitical context. In the summer of 2021, the forest became a key corridor during the migration crisis on the EU's eastern border. Groups of foreigners often with the assistance of smugglers, and assisted by the Belarusian regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka either directly or indirectly, began appearing in the area. As political tensions increased, the Polish government closed the border zone for ten months, allowing access only to local residents. Journalists, volunteers and tourists were barred.

At the same time, the state quickly moved to establish a permanent physical barrier. The special law not only eliminated the requirement of an environmental impact assessment but also allowed contractors to be selected without open tenders. In addition to Budimex, several other companies were involved in supplying components or constructing additional sections of the barrier. Public access to contracts and financial details was blocked, leaving NGO watchdogs and local

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communities without answers to basic questions. When asked about transparency, the Polish Border Guard responded that the technical aspects of the barrier do not constitute public information and therefore cannot be disclosed under standard transparency procedures.

The authorities in Minsk have sharply condemned the Polish wall, describing it as an act of "barbarism" that disrupts ecosystems, obstructs animal migration, and increases light and noise pollution. These arguments, while partially supported by ecological evidence, omit one important fact: the existence of a separate barrier on the Belarusian side of the border. This structure, known as "the System", has been there since the late 1980s. Although only two metres high and less visually imposing than the Polish fence, it already restricted the movement of large mammals such as bison, deer and elk within the Białowieża Forest.

Scientists from Poland's Mammal Research Institute identify Bruno razor wire as one of the primary causes of wildlife deaths.

Belarusian state media acknowledge the existence of the System but insist that it does not pose a significant obstacle, as smaller species can pass through it. Experts note, however, that wolves previously crossed the border by swimming across the river – until this route was blocked by additional razor wire, known as "Bruno wire". Scientists from Poland's Mammal Research Institute identify Bruno wire as one of the primary causes of wildlife deaths. Animals attempting to cross it often sustain deep cuts that have proved fatal.

"Some species already had difficulty crossing the border," said a Belarusian scientist who asked not to be named for security reasons. "But now the situation has become much worse. Back in 2017, we discussed the possibility of removing the Belarusian fence. Today, that hope no longer exists – it is no longer realistic."

Not all Belarusian criticism of the Polish fence is supported by verifiable data. Some statements appear to function primarily as part of a broader propaganda strategy. In a 2022 interview with the state news agency BelTA, the Belarusian hunting specialist Andrei Malyshka claimed that the deer population in the Volkovysk hunting area, in the Hrodna region not far from the Polish border, had declined by half within a single year.

"Last winter, about 150 deer remained on our territory. This year, only around 70 are left," he said, attributing the decline exclusively to the construction of the Polish barrier. However, there is no reliable data indicating whether the animals died, remained on the Polish side of the border, or migrated elsewhere within Belarus. This all highlights the broader absence of systematic, transparent monitoring on both sides of the border.

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Disruption of pan-European routes

When the border zone in the Białowieża Forest reopened in July 2022, the material traces of construction were unmistakable. By early 2023, however, the landscape appeared deceptively calm. Heavy machinery, military trucks and border guard vehicles had largely disappeared, while tourism infrastructure in the region – restaurants, hotels and hiking trails – fell silent. This apparent normalization masked a different reality. Refugees and migrants continued to move through the forest at night, sleeping outdoors, falling ill and, in some cases, dying. Activists estimate that between March and early May 2023, around 2,000 people reached the Polish side of the wall and sought assistance. Volunteers managed to help nearly half of them. In April 2023 alone, at least 350 people had experienced pushbacks from Belarusian and Polish border guards. For local residents, these parallel realities – empty villages and hidden human movement in the forest – have shaped ambivalent attitudes toward the wall.

"On the one hand, there is nothing good; on the other, there is something good here. It all depends on how you look at it," said Basia, a resident of Teremiski. After a pause, she added: "I'm sure the animals are not happy about it."

The wall itself is only one element of a broader security landscape. In several locations along the border, rows of dragon's teeth – pyramidal concrete blocks weighing around three tonnes each – were installed to prevent vehicle access. Their transport and placement required additional heavy machinery, further extending the construction footprint beyond the fence line. Satellite imagery confirms that these interventions – together with access roads, cleared strips and military infrastructure – have produced durable changes to the border landscape that remain visible well beyond the immediate construction phase.

Researchers from the Geobotanical Station of the University of Warsaw monitored ecological impacts between February and November 2022. During 26 visits to the area, they documented reptiles, amphibians and birds – species protected under Polish law – killed by construction machinery.

"We had the tools to conduct proper monitoring before the construction had begun," said Professor Michał Żmihorski, director of the Mammal Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences. "No one has asked us."

Heavy machinery disrupted established animal movement routes, while sustained noise pushed wildlife deeper into the forest. Promised mitigation measures – 24 large wildlife crossings intended for bison, wolves, deer and lynx – remain closed, despite assurances from the contractor that the barrier would not obstruct the pan-European migration routes. Razor wire was installed across river valleys and

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created additional hazards for migrating animals, particularly in periods of drought when access to water becomes critical.

One research project led by Professor Katarzyna Nowak, which specifically examined this issue, shows a clear increase in human presence along the border compared to control roads further away. Data and camera traps indicate that wildlife avoids both the fence itself and nearby roads, with significantly fewer animal tracks recorded in these zones.

"We see an increase in vehicles, people, military units, border guards and so on," said Rafał Kowalczyk. "And we see how this affects the distribution of mammals, their activity. Very preliminary results suggest that bison, wolves and red deer occur less frequently near the border compared to areas further away from the fence."

Heavy machinery disrupted established animal movement routes, while sustained noise pushed wildlife deeper into the forest.

Winter tracking conducted in 2024 suggests a more complex pattern for smaller species. Some small mammals and medium-sized predators can navigate the new obstacles, while others are drawn towards military posts where food waste and empty packaging accumulate. Soldiers reported regular visits by foxes, martens, domestic cats and other species during winter 2024 and again in January 2025. This redistribution reshapes interactions between wildlife, humans and domestic animals and can increase the risk of disease transmission.

Acoustic monitoring further indicates that the barrier's impact extends beyond its physical footprint. One week of continuous sound recordings in winter 2024, combined with long-term recordings in the strictly protected core of the national park, revealed that anthropogenic noise – such as helicopters and gunfire – penetrates deep into the forest.

During the study period, all gates in the Polish barrier remained closed. Researchers argue that decisions on opening existing gates or constructing new wildlife crossings should be subject to negotiated agreements, ideally involving Belarus and international bodies such as UNESCO or the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Priority locations would be near rivers, streams and watering sites.

"There are bison – and likely other large mammals – that have become trapped between Poland's main border barrier and the Belarusian System," said Professor Nowak. "It is impossible to assess how many animals and which species are affected, because most of this area lies on the Belarusian side."

Along the Białowieża Forest alone, the area between the two barriers covers approximately 37 square kilometres. This space is fragmented into around five

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sections connected by narrow corridors where the fences run close together – passages that large animals such as bison may be reluctant to use. As recently as August 2025, researchers noted a male bison located just behind the Polish barrier, facing west.

Politically unrealistic

Only in early 2025 did UNESCO's World Heritage Centre report that a partial scientific assessment of the barrier's impact on mammals and invasive plant species had been commissioned in 2024 – two years after construction had begun. The report envisaged the creation of a multi-institutional monitoring team involving site management, the Polish Ministry of Climate and Environment, the Border Guard, the military and scientists. This group would be tasked with developing a comprehensive ecosystem monitoring programme and corrective measures.

Later the same year, the International Union for Conservation of Nature downgraded the conservation status of the Białowieża Forest to "critical". Poland's State Council for Nature Conservation responded with an urgent appeal and called for emergency measures, including new reserves, reduced traffic on forest roads, the restoration of wetlands, and an integrated protection plan for UNESCO and Natura 2000 sites.

The most vulnerable populations are lynx. Researchers estimate around 20 individuals on the Belarusian side of the forest and only ten to 12 on the Polish side. According to Professor Kowalczyk, some lynx previously crossed the Belarusian barrier up to 50 times per year. Access to Poland is now completely blocked. Continued genetic isolation could push these populations toward irreversible decline. Proposed mitigation measures include functional predator crossings, improved waste management, the removal of invasive species and long-term monitoring.

At present, dismantling the border fence is politically unrealistic. Nevertheless, scientists argue that development and security planning must acknowledge the barrier as a long-term ecological variable. Opening gates on the Polish side alone will not resolve fragmentation as long as the Belarusian barrier remains closed. Any meaningful improvement in connectivity would require coordinated action by both states and sustained, adaptive monitoring.

Although long-term mammal monitoring in Białowieża was never designed to study the fence, the data now clearly shows that the barrier has a measurable and significant impact on wildlife. Local residents require little confirmation. "Several

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years ago, a bear came to us from Belarus. Animals just walked here," said Basia. "When I used to go to the border, I saw wolves crossing it. For them, the border did not exist." ĘE

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Armenia's diaspora comes home amid challenges and opportunities

HUGO LAULAN

Young Armenians from the diaspora are taking a chance on returning to settle in the land of their ancestors. While the economy's dynamism is appealing, certain integration challenges still make it difficult for them to find their place in society

The signing of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan seems closer than ever, particularly since the Washington summit last August, when the two countries agreed on the basis of an agreement. The prospect of peace and stability finally coming to the South Caucasus could boost "remigration" to the region. In Armenia, this phenomenon has already been accelerating for several years.

The Armenian diaspora is estimated at between five and eight million people worldwide, a significant number when you consider that only three million people reside in Armenia. In fact, the diaspora has an undeniable influence on the country's functioning, both economically (remittances, investment, etc.) and culturally or in terms of soft power. The Armenian state wishes to rely on this population for the country's development. In 2008, a ministry of diaspora was created to facilitate relations between Armenians abroad and their country of origin. In 2019, this ministry was replaced by the creation of the high commissioner for diaspora affairs, headed by Zareh Sinanyan, an Armenian-American and former mayor of Glendale, California.

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Connecting with one's roots

According to figures shared by the high commissioner's office, in 2025, applications for Armenian citizenship have risen sharply, from around 8,000 per year in 2020 to around 20,000 per year in recent years. It is difficult, however, to estimate exactly how many members of the diaspora are "remigrating", as there is no definition or legal status to describe this phenomenon, or even to distinguish it from ordinary migration.

Yet, more and more young people are choosing to return to their ancestral homeland. Several programmes facilitate the integration of these young people, either temporarily or permanently. Birthright Armenia is the largest NGO supporting this process. Founded in 2003 by Edele Hovnanian, an Armenian-American philanthropist and entrepreneur, its main mission is to "strengthen the ties between the homeland and the youth of the diaspora", according to the organization's website.

At the NGO's offices in the heart of the capital, Yerevan, young people from all over the world come together around a common bond: a connection to Armenia. In its 23 years of existence, Birthright Armenia has welcomed more than 3,000 young people from the diaspora, each with their own personal stories connected in varying degrees to the country.



Photo: Hugo Laulan

"It attracted me because I saw professional growth here", explains Meri Karakhanian, 24, who left Toronto, just six months earlier to settle permanently in Yerevan.

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Margaret Oganezov arrived in the capital in November 2025. She grew up in Tel Aviv, Israel. Her father is Armenian and her mother is Ukrainian. In the early 1990s, they left the collapsing Soviet Union to settle in Israel.

"I didn't know much about Armenia before coming here," says the 32-year-old, who is learning her first words of Armenian.

Others, such as Shahan Kasnakian, have a more intimate relationship with the motherland. Born in Montreal to Armenian parents, the 28-year-old Canadian attended an Armenian school as a child. "I feel very Armenian, I used to speak Armenian at home with my family," he says.

After the 2023 lightning war in Nagorno-Karabakh, he began to feel a need to return. "I had to connect with my roots, with where my family comes from. You never know what will happen here politically, so I had to come soon." Shahan has just completed several months of volunteer work, notably with an NGO that helps refugee children from Nagorno-Karabakh. He is scheduled to return to Canada a few days after our meeting in February. But this experience has motivated him to become more involved in his homeland: "I plan to come back every year."

The trips organized by various NGOs allow young people from the diaspora to spend several months discovering the country. As enriching as it may be, this experience can sometimes give them a romanticized image of Armenia, far removed from the daily lives of the country's inhabitants.

Reasons to return

Others from the diaspora take the plunge and leave everything behind to settle in Armenia, the land where their parents or grandparents lived decades ago. This is the case for Meri Karakhanyan and Nelly Poliakov. The first, aged 24, left Toronto just six months ago to settle permanently in Yerevan. The second, who was born and raised in France, made this choice in 2020.

To facilitate the settlement of these populations, the Repatriation and Integration Centre, which reports to the high commission for the diaspora, assists them with procedures such as acquiring citizenship and residence permits, accessing healthcare and education, and starting or relocating a business, as mentioned on its website.

Vartan Marashlyan, the co-founder and executive director of Repat Armenia, an NGO that supports Armenians wishing to return to their homeland, identifies two main waves of remigration over the past decade: "The first took place in 2018, following the change of government. The second was in 2020, when Armenia lost the war in Karabakh." According to the diaspora specialist, these are two fairly

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Photo: Hugo Laulan

"I had to connect with my roots, with where my family comes from", says Shahan Kasnakian.

logical trends: "Repatriation usually happens when the country is doing better and there are prospects for the future, or, conversely, when the country is in danger." Since 2020, the number of returns has remained stable.

"I came back to Armenia because I had a calling," explains Meri Karakhanian, whom we met in Yerevan. Born in Armenia, she emigrated with her parents to Canada when she was ten years old. Nearly 15 years later, she has now made the reverse journey. After several weeks of searching, she was hired as a digital marketing specialist for Birthright Armenia.

"It attracted me because I saw professional growth here," adds the young Canadian, who sees this opportunity above all as a chance to contribute her skills to the country while gaining experience she might not have been able to acquire if she had stayed in Canada. At the same time, she insists that her reasons for returning are also cultural. "I was missing traditional and family culture in Canada. The daily routine is more balanced here between life and work," she says.

This is one of the main factors driving "remigration", as highlighted by Vartan Marashlyan. Despite a lower standard of living, they come in search of a less individualistic way of life, in which they feel happier. The expert emphasizes at least three other factors that make people want to settle permanently: "Some of them want to be part of nation-building; others want to make a difference, which is easier in Armenia than in a large country where you are just one among thousands; finally, some do not want to struggle with assimilation and want an Armenian future for their children."

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For Nelly Poliakov, the decision was just as sudden. Born in Paris to an Armenian mother and a Russian-Armenian father, she grew up with this dual identity. "At home I was Armenian, but outside I was French," she explains, in her flat in the centre of the capital. Poliakov had a revelation in 2018 during the Francophonie Summit held in Yerevan.

"I was so moved to see Armenia hosting this event that I decided to listen to my emotions and start looking for opportunities here," she says. After an initial volunteer assignment lasting several weeks, she finally landed her first job in communications and settled permanently in Yerevan in 2020, just as her grandfather had done in the 1950s after her family had first fled the Armenian genocide to settle in France.

Six years later, the Franco-Armenian is now head of communications for the Hovnanian Foundation. Although she does not regret her choice, Nelly is beginning to consider returning to France. "I'm starting to feel overwhelmed by Armenia. I feel that I need to leave in order to come back better," she explains. Having arrived more recently, Meri remains more optimistic about her future: "The diaspora is helping Armenia for its future, and I think we need to come back here to bring about change in the country."

Despite a lower standard of living, returning members of the diaspora come in search of a less individualistic way of life, in which they feel happier.

Finding opportunities

After several extended stays between 2018 and 2025, notably in the humanitarian sector, Edgar Duymedjian settled in Yerevan less than a year ago. Of Armenian descent through his mother, he grew up in Lyon, France. As well as certain family ties, it was primarily the economic opportunities that drew Edgar to this venture.

"From 2023 onwards, I wanted to understand the Armenian market and see if there was anything to be done here. I realized that Armenia had huge potential in the fields of technology, finance and artificial intelligence," he notes.

He has since set up a start-up in the field of AI and has no regrets about his choice. "The country is quite attractive to investors from all over the world, and the fact that we have a very large and rather wealthy diaspora suggests that we have a bright future ahead of us," adds the young Frenchman.

While most returnees are happy with their choice, this does not mean they do not face certain difficulties in their daily lives. This is so much so that, in Gabriel Sabbaghian's case, he decided to head back the other way. Born in Canada

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to Armenian parents, Gabriel first discovered the land of his ancestors through Birthright Armenia, where he undertook a humanitarian mission. At the end of his three months of volunteering, he had not particularly planned to settle there permanently, but a job opportunity was enough to convince him to stay.

"At the same time, the events of September 2023 had a huge impact on me and that pushed me to stay and try to help," points out the young Quebecer. But after just under two years in the country, a number of factors prompted him to return to Canada. "Living in Armenia has become more expensive recently. Rents have risen sharply. My immediate family is still in Canada, and it was a bit difficult to settle in at first, particularly when it came to the language." Indeed, the majority of Armenians in the diaspora speak western Armenian, a dialect different from eastern Armenian, which is spoken in the country.

These communication difficulties were also experienced by Nelly Poliakov in certain situations, such as when dealing with administrative procedures. This is particularly striking because Nelly and Gabriel grew up in families where Armenian was spoken, which is not the case for all emigrants who choose to return. While many manage to get by in Russian or English in their daily lives, communication remains the main difficulty highlighted in the various testimonies gathered.

"The diaspora needs to understand all the opportunities available to them in Armenia," Poliakov says. In her view, there is still a gap between the aspirations of returnees and the support provided by the Armenian state. "People from the diaspora are stepping out of their comfort zone to come and settle in Armenia. The country must be ready to welcome this effort," she stresses.

Two dynamics

"Some institutions or businesses remain rather conservative and do not believe that people with good intentions are coming to settle in Armenia. To them, if you return to the country, it is solely because you have problems abroad," insists Vartan Marashlyan, the director of Repat Armenia. "Conversely, Armenians from the diaspora come to settle here with the idea of changing everything in the country, even though they know nothing at all about how the state functions or how it has evolved," the expert adds.

These are two dynamics that are not necessarily linked, but which fuel a rift between the two sides, who want to work together and need one another, but sometimes fail to understand each other.

"The most difficult challenge is not social integration or cultural differences, but economic conditions. They need to have a certain level of income to be able

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to make a living in Armenia, and without the diaspora, I don't think the country has a future," Marashlyan concludes.

Despite his return to Canada, Gabriel Sabbaghian still sees his future in his homeland. This may involve a few years of working in Montreal to better prepare for his return financially.

"There's something that connects you with the country when you're in Armenia, something that tells you your place is here," he says. "That's why I'm almost convinced that, deep down, I want to come back and settle here for good."

Hugo Laulan is a freelance French journalist covering Eastern European affairs.

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Nostalgia is a drug

JAMES C. PEARCE

A review of *Once Upon a Russia: Voices from a vanished era*.
Edited by: Steven A. Fisher. Publisher: Forest Cat Press.

The cover of the book *Once Upon a Russia: Voices from a Vanished Era* (edited by Steven A. Fisher) fills one with a sense of melancholy. The steps of the Moscow metro descend into an underground abyss of marble, chandeliers, brassiere and religious icon shops. We, the intended reader, know what is down there. Even if you left long ago, it feels like yesterday. The sound of the heaters and muffled announcements as you descend the escalators, watching people going up on the other side. The aromas emanating from the tiny bakeries at the metro stop immediately come rushing back – as does the sight of brown slush on your clothes and the crunching of snow and salt under your feet. For those still living in Russia, approaching the entrance to the metro is certainly a feeling that never gets old.

Once Upon a Russia gathers over 100 essays and personal accounts from foreigners who lived, worked or passed through Russia in the 1990s and 2000s. The authorship of these essays ranges from diplomats and journalists – who are household names in the expert and expat communities – to bankers, lawyers, students and business hucksters who saw an opening to make money. Some stayed for a few months, while others were there for decades. Some of the authors still live in Russia and in their essays wrote of the pain felt on the February morning in 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine.

Act of remembering

The book is divided into six parts: *Mission, Change, Events, Absurdity, Humility* and *Desolation*. Each title is designed to reflect something about how the Russian Federation looked to outsiders visiting in its emergent years. By its own admission,

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the book is not an attempt to explain Russia, but an act of remembering, as kitchen conversations, language barriers, dodgy business deals, and romantic encounters run alongside the flashpoints in Russia's post-Soviet history. It also claims that its contributions reveal a country both maddening and magnetic, where hope and disillusion live side by side. Not arranged chronologically as such, the book dips and dives between the themes of a post-Soviet Russia to personal reflections. At face value, the book looked promising at painting a more accurate picture of a bygone time – and in some places it really does. But by the end, it fails to deliver on what it appears to promise. By the final few essays, it had become nothing more than an exercise in nostalgia indulgence. Nostalgia is a powerful drug to be taken sparingly and cautiously. This book, unfortunately, overdosed.

Yet, parts of the book are undeniably compelling and, at times, genuinely gripping. The opening essays transported me back to my early twenties, when I first arrived in Moscow as a recent graduate ill-suited to the routines of a nine-to-five office job in London. I quickly became captivated by the country and ultimately remained there for more than a decade, without regret. These texts stirred a sense of fond recollection, as long-forgotten memories resurfaced with unexpected immediacy. However, nostalgia soon began to reveal its more problematic dimensions. In several essays, the tone resembled that of a middle-aged pub bore recounting well-worn stories from his arrival in Moscow in 1995, as if his life had remained suspended in that formative moment. It evoked memories of former colleagues endlessly retelling the same anecdotes, conversations one could neither escape nor meaningfully advance. Although more engaging reflections re-emerged later in the volume, it became clear what the book was ultimately trying to achieve. For all its readability and occasional charm, the collection at times seemed to portray the Russian Federation less as it was, and more as western observers had once hoped it might become.

Overcoming misconceptions

Reading stories from such writers as Michele Berdy, Ben Aris and Daniel Satinsky transported me back to moments in my life I had long forgotten. When I reflected back, I realized they had left a profound impact on me. As one chapter aptly put it, only in Russia can the day start with a raid and end with a round of golf. Many more moments described, like trips around the country, are probably what kept me calling Russia home. It never got dull or tiring, and friendships became enduring. The majority of the essays reflect on their authors overcoming misconceptions generated from the Cold War era. The book is very good at capturing the

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eye-opening experiences foreigners went through when they arrived in Russia, as well as detailing how little the country is understood by outsiders.

Other essays show that this ignorance still persists. Two such reflections near the end of the book by Stuart Lawson and Ivan Scalfarotto are good examples. Lawson was unaware until years after leaving Russia that taxi drivers and street vendors consisted of doctors, lawyers and university professors who simply could not find work. As for Scalfarotto, he spoke of a Russia in 2005 "where one could still speak freely". However, this simplification missed the fact that Russia did have somewhat of a free press until relatively recently, and popular protests were never absent. Some protests, like those in 2018, were even able to change the government's mind on things like pension reform, releasing journalists from prison, and closing down certain departments at prominent universities. Though as someone who still considers Russia a home of sorts, I would hesitate to portray everyday life in simplistic terms of visible fear or overt repression. Public behaviour in 2026 often appears outwardly similar to that of a decade earlier. Yet this masks deeper and more consequential transformations, as the political and social climate has shifted in ways that are both subtle and profound.

The majority of the essays reflect on their authors overcoming misconceptions generated from the Cold War era.

The book has a number of clear strengths. It captures elements of everyday life in Russia in a way that many of my academic colleagues – who seldom spend extended periods in the country – often struggle to convey. Several essays describe ordinary Russians in notably sympathetic terms, emphasizing qualities such as kindness, warmth, openness and hospitality. In today's geopolitical climate, such portrayals feel both refreshing and act as a reminder that many ordinary people have themselves been deeply affected by the consequences of this war. Particularly relatable were the authors' recollections of long evenings spent in cramped kitchens, talking, laughing and sharing food and vodka. These scenes ring true across much of the country, as does the familiar experience of navigating vast distances only to rely on the resourcefulness of an unsung local village mechanic.

An additional positive is that the collection neatly captures the often frightening problems of establishing democracy and a market economy in a country dogged by corruption and crime. Quite often those problems were created by those who championed the liberal reforms and freedoms of capitalism. Learning the rules for foreigners also meant participating in that criminality – or at least turning a blind eye to it. Catherine Breen, who is now at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, even admitted a deep unease felt among Russian colleagues in Nizhny Novgorod, who believed the Americans were there to steal from them.

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Good old days

The idea that the "old Russia" has somehow disappeared is also a questionable premise running through the book. In many ways, it is still recognizably the same country, albeit operating under very different circumstances. What stands out, however, is how strongly many of the authors seem to miss the 1990s and early 2000s, and often for reasons that feel somewhat selective. Their recollections suggest that images and assumptions about Russia have remained anchored in those formative decades, leaving the impression that the country was somehow better when they themselves lived there. As two contributors put it, "the pulse of opportunity beat strongly in Russia" and "progress was in reach."

More than a few essays refer to this period as "the good old days". Many authors continue to hold onto the hopes associated with that earlier era, implying that improvement can only come through a return to the Russia they remember. This illustrates how nostalgia can act as a distorting lens. It softens perceptions of the past while clouding judgement about the present, creating a sense of dislocation in which contemporary realities appear diminished or inferior.

By the halfway point, it becomes clearer what some of the contributors may be alluding to: for them, the so-called good old days were also years of personal prosperity. It is difficult not to notice how many essays are written by lawyers, bankers, investors and other highly paid professionals who benefited from the opportunities of that time. To paraphrase Masha Gessen – hardly a pro-Kremlin voice – they came to Russia, were welcomed into people's homes, carried out their research or built their businesses, and then returned abroad to advance their careers. What ordinary Russians gained in return is a more complicated question, and one the book is largely reluctant to explore.

The more one dwells on the book's cover, the more it made me wonder: was it little more than a metaphor of where Russia is today? Descending the dark steps, soon to resurface – but where? What route will it take to get there? There are many directions and destinations on the famous spider map of the Moscow Metro. But nobody can be sure where Russia might end up. For many in this book, their preferred destination seems to be 1995, which is obviously impossible. As David Lowenthal observed in his well-known 1997 monograph *The Past is a Foreign Country*, the past ultimately resists faithful reconstruction. At best, we can offer partial glimpses shaped by our own perceptions and limitations. Once the present becomes past, it cannot be revisited except through memories, impressions inevitably altered by time and further softened by nostalgia. If there is any cautious optimism to be drawn, it lies not in projecting preferred futures onto Russia, but in recognizing that the country's trajectory will be shaped by forces largely beyond

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external design. Its future will emerge through its own internal dynamics and the choices of those who live there.

Whilst the book is good at recapturing memories and strikes a familiar sentimental tone, it was also something of a guilty indulgence. It does little to explain contemporary Russia. Instead, it risks reinforcing the long-standing tendency to view the world's largest country through the prism of external expectations rather than the political realities. This was one of the defining misreadings of the 1990s, and it lingers in here as well. ЁЁ

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New threats of war and how Europe should respond

AGNIESZKA ŁADA-KONEFAŁ

A review of *Wer verteidigt Europa? Die neuen Kriegsgefahren und was wir tun müssen, um uns zu schützen* (*Who Defends Europe? New Threats of War and What We Must Do to Protect Ourselves*) written by: Jana Puglierin. Publisher: Rowohlt.

It is the summer of 2029. Following the Bundestag elections in March, in which the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) achieved its strongest result to date, the CDU/CSU–SPD alliance remains in power in Germany only on a provisional basis, as efforts to form a new governing coalition have so far failed. In the chancellery, the most senior officials responsible for national security sit alongside the head of government. Before them lies a map tracking the movements of Russian troops, which this time have been deployed in unusually large numbers to Belarus under the pretext of the annual ZAPAD manoeuvres. Military experts warn that the situation bears striking similarities to that of 2021, just before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This time, however, they openly raise the possibility of a Russian attack on NATO territory. Germany is faced with the necessity of taking concrete action. A decisive response is required.

This is the opening scenario of Jana Puglierin's book *Who Defends Europe? New Threats of War and What We Must Do to Protect Ourselves*. While hypothetical, this vision does not come as a surprise in Poland. Nor does the notion that governments must prepare for dramatic decisions in the realm of security policy. Yet Puglierin writes primarily for a German audience – one that remains far less accustomed to contemplating the prospect of direct military confrontation or active involvement in armed conflict.

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Rethinking German and European security

The opening chapters clearly define the book's central aim: a critical reassessment of German – and more broadly Western European – approaches to security policy and Russia prior to 2022. This includes a systematic deconstruction of the arguments advanced by the so-called *Russlandversteher*, alongside a forceful call to strengthen European defence capabilities. In this sense, the book constitutes an important contribution to debates surrounding the *Zeitenwende* proclaimed by then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Two features of the publication deserve particular attention. First, Puglierin has for years represented views closely aligned with those prevalent in Poland and the Baltic states. She consistently warned of the Russian threat, criticised the often naïve assumptions underpinning German security policy, and called for closer European cooperation – including enhanced Polish-German collaboration – as well as for greater recognition of Polish analyses in this field. As a result, she does not belong to the group of commentators who, after February 2022, were compelled to revise their earlier positions or acknowledge fundamental misjudgements regarding Russia. This lends her analysis both credibility and analytical sharpness, allowing her to critically assess the illusions that shaped German thinking up until 2022.

Second, the author adopts a direct and engaged narrative style, frequently shifting to the first person to clearly articulate her own position. She avoids vague formulations and generalities, instead drawing explicit conclusions from the evidence presented. This approach strengthens the clarity of her argument and enhances the book's contribution to the broader European debate on security. It is worth noting that the book was completed at the end of 2025, prior to subsequent shifts in global security discussions, including those triggered by the war in Iran.

Facts that are (not) debated

Puglierin avoids generalisations. Rather than reducing German debates to a single narrative, she presents a range of perspectives, analysing their underlying assumptions and confronting them with fact-based counterarguments. A key theme running throughout the book is that European decision-makers misjudged Russia not once, but twice – both before the annexation of Crimea and prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. They assumed that an attack on Ukraine would not be in Russia's interest and dismissed warning signals as exaggerated or merely tactical. Puglierin cautions that Europe must not repeat this mistake by assuming

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that an attack on NATO is impossible. Such thinking, she argues, would be both naïve and strategically dangerous.

Equally flawed is the belief that Russia's actions can be explained primarily by its opposition to Ukraine's potential NATO membership. According to Puglierin, this interpretation overlooks deeper strategic motivations. She identifies three key objectives guiding Russian policy: imperial ambition, revision of the European security order, and the pursuit of a multipolar system dominated by great powers. At the same time, Russia has been successful in shaping narratives that portray NATO as the aggressor, thereby justifying its own actions as defensive. This contributed to western complacency and delayed reactions.

Looking ahead, Puglierin then challenges the assumption that Russia's limited progress in Ukraine will deter further aggression. In her view, Russia's strategy is not necessarily aimed at large-scale territorial conquest, but rather at undermining European unity, fuelling internal divisions and eroding mutual trust. At the same time, Europe – despite its considerable resources – remains insufficiently prepared. Fragmentation and lack of coordination reduce the effectiveness of its military capabilities. Puglierin's conclusion is unequivocal: Europe must support Ukraine in achieving a sustainable peace that ensures its sovereignty, independence and capacity for self-defence.

Finally, Puglierin argues, Europe can no longer take US security guarantees for granted. Maintaining the American military presence remains essential, but Europe must accelerate the development of its own defence capabilities. Puglierin calls for stronger coordination of European defence policies, greater leadership among major states, and deeper cooperation within NATO and the EU. The book concludes on a strikingly personal note about reconciliation, highlighting the enduring importance of humanity even in times of conflict. EE

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Into the wild: tales of foraging in Armenia

KUSHANE CHOBANYAN

In Armenia, wild foraging sits at the intersection of survival, tradition and rediscovery. Once a quiet means of making ends meet, it now raises broader questions about people's relationship with nature, knowledge and responsibility.

Anahit Yesayan, 62, has never stopped wild forest foraging over the last 25 years. The single mother says she raised her four children through foraging. Back in the 1990s, when Anahit's husband died, she moved from Yerevan to Berd, in the province of Tavush. While born in a Tavush village (Tovuz in Soviet times), she does not remember going to the mountains or foraging as a child because she was focused on her education. Her father and brother were famous animal hunters, but she herself never approved of hunting.

"The 1990s were hard to survive, and people were trying to find ways to keep their families," Anahit says. "I can't imagine seeing a reindeer in the forest and taking a hunting rifle to kill it." She never dreamed of a comfortable life, big houses, or luxury places to stay. The woman laughs that her "Dubai vacation" is in nature, where she feels in harmony with herself and the world. Her passion for education was interrupted when her husband suddenly died in a car accident. She and her sister started doing anything that could bring in some money for the family.

"For 15 years, we were mowing grass with a scythe, and I really enjoyed the process. I love the smell of grass. I do everything with passion," she recalls.

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Enormous power

Once, when one of her lenders demanded money she had borrowed, Anahit ultimately decided to start foraging, a line of work that was not popular in Tavush as a source of income. The region was known for animal husbandry, especially pig keeping, or distilling vodka. Sometimes people went to collect mushrooms. One of her friends, who was probably the only person at the time to forage regularly, suggested she try it as a source of income.

"She took me once to the mountains, and I fell in love with it. We didn't just collect specific greens that people would then buy from us in the city, we explored nature, and we saw the challenges it faces," she recalls.

One of the most interesting facts about foraging is that over the last 30 years, almost every product in Armenia has become more expensive, yet what people take from the mountains and sell in the city remains almost the same price (the difference is minimal, especially outside the capital, Yerevan).

Wild foraging is aging in Armenia, and many young people do not take it up, either as a hobby or as a source of income. While researching this topic, I came across Ani Haroutiunian, the founder of Ootelie Bakery in Dilijan, as well as Caffeine Coffee Roasters. Born in Yerevan, she has been living in Dilijan for years and researches Armenian foraging and the challenges it faces, simply because she cares. From a very young age, her father used to take her fishing, and instead of telling her fairy tales, he told Ani about nature. That is how she developed a desire to do something with all this, to explore it.

Wild foraging is aging in Armenia, and many young people do not take it up, either as a hobby or as a source of income.

"I think habit has enormous power, especially habits related to food and everyday life – domestic habits," Ani recalls. "For example, in Dilijan, if you ask people what greens they eat, they'll name only a few: spinach, sorrel, Solomon's seal."

Ani started exploring wild foraging in Armenia back in 2017 when she moved to Dilijan. When she first began going to the mountains, she would ask the elders in the neighbourhood about different greens, showing them pictures. They often did not know what she was talking about. Later, she ended up going deep into the forest literally and figuratively to study it. She asked locals what they recognized, then began researching on her own: testing, smelling, reading, identifying, finding botanists, and asking many questions.

"Essentially, for me it wasn't about finding something edible as an end in itself, but about understanding what edible resources we actually have, how much we use them, and what kind of flavour potential they hold," Ani highlights.

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Another question Ani was intrigued by was if Armenia were in a blockade (in 2023, Nagorno-Karabakh, where an ethnic Armenian population lived for centuries, experienced almost a year of blockade from Azerbaijan), then what would people eat beyond Lake Sevan whitefish? Food security and related issues are pivotal for her, driving her to explore them deeply and meticulously. It made her curious about what wild nature holds that people could use intelligently.

"I would not suggest anyone go to Alaverdi and collect plants or greens from there, simply because it's not healthy anymore. Moreover, it's unsafe because of the mining industry in the city," Ani says. "I want to encourage people to pay attention to what they eat. When they go to the market to buy greens, it often doesn't matter to them where those greens come from – they don't even want to know whether harvesting them was appropriate or forbidden."

Mindset

Anahit Yesayan, for example, highlights that she never collects everything because one should be grateful to nature. The foraging veteran says there are a handful of men who forage every day like she does. Men usually act as drivers, taking women to the mountains when the road is too dangerous to walk. Women pay about 2,000 Armenian drams (approximately five or six US dollars) for a ride and return in the evening. But if the territory allows to go on foot, Anahit never misses a chance to walk. Twenty thousand steps per day is the average for her.

She has encountered many situations while foraging. She usually goes with her sister, but prefers to stay alone with her thoughts and emotions. She does not talk much. The challenges she faces in the mountains teach her to overcome dangers, become resilient, and develop problem-solving skills.

"On foggy days, your sense of direction can fail. You can go left instead of right, even after walking the path hundreds of times," Anahit recalls. "It's important to know how to forage, what to wear, what to take, and how to behave when an animal appears on your way."

Ani also highlights the importance of raising public awareness about wild foraging in Armenia. Sometimes, people from Yerevan or other major cities travel to the Dilijan forests to rest and pick a flower, without knowing that it is listed in the Red Book. Ani believes a mindset needs to be developed in people, so that before reaching out and picking something, they pause and ask themselves: what is this, is it worth picking, or not, and why am I picking it at all? That is why the ethical side of foraging, the culture of gathering, and awareness around how wild foraging fits into people's diets are all so important.

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Foraging is one of the very first human experiences. Before hunting, people were gatherers. Our ancestors foraged for a long period of time, yet the world has changed significantly since then. "Naturally, when you take something from nature, you take a part, leave a part for nature, and leave a part for the people who will come after you. You don't strip everything," Ani explains.

"I think this is not a matter of knowledge, education, or technology. It's a human quality – gratitude towards nature. You gave something to me, and I won't greedily take everything from you."

Ani goes to forests with groups of people with different backgrounds. She does not just collect, she also creates a friendly atmosphere of conversations, questions and discussions. That is where people's curiosity stands out, and a lot of things are revealed. For her, foraging clearly is not something that will sustain people nutritionally, simply because humanity does not need it for food. In this context, foraging is more about knowledge, about getting to know nature, and about getting to know yourself. "We've become disconnected from people, and we've become disconnected from nature as well," she explains.

Raising awareness

If someone hunts a bezoar goat now, everyone will know about it. There will be public outrage, fines, legal cases, and so on. But if a person collects three kilos of wild herbs, no one will ever know. Clear rules or laws should be implemented to prevent this. As Ani clarifies, cutting down one large tree can have a serious impact on the entire ecosystem – on life itself: fungi, insects, birds, rodents, everything. Armenia, known for its rich biological diversity, faces a unique challenge as it is a forest-poor country, with only 11.2 per cent of its territory covered by forests.

"Things should be taught from first grade – how to behave, how to care," Ani argues. "So our challenge, and the challenge of the state system, is to take successful experiences and apply them in our own context."

Sustainable foraging helps ecosystems recover quickly. Raising awareness about wild foraging will promote it as a lifestyle, a cultural experience, something that can feed you and make you feel good. But according to Ani, people should clearly understand that they cannot collect along roads, for example, because mushrooms absorb harmful substances like sponges. More importantly, they cannot collect everything. Nature needs time to recover, to breathe again, to regenerate.

"I would like to see more research, for example, young scientists who are interested in Armenia's flora and fauna having the opportunity to conduct studies with a decent pay," Ani says. "That would be a huge service to the country. We don't

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know a lot, and much of what we do know is still based on Soviet-era books and research. We need new knowledge now."

Anahit conducts her own research and does not read much about foraging, as her experience guides her everywhere. "No one can teach you to read the sounds of nature," she says. "Once, I went very early, before sunrise. The fog was so dense that I could barely see my hands in front of me. I had to rely on the sound of the streams, the crunch of stones under my feet, and the slope of the land to know where I was going. At some points, I had to stop and listen carefully – there could be wild animals, or I could slip."

There is also a part of the mountain that is extremely steep. You cannot drive there. You have to climb on foot, using your hands on rocks and branches, sometimes sliding through loose soil. On some days, the fog lifts a little, and the sun starts to shine through. That is when everything feels magical: you see the valleys, the rivers below, and the forests stretching as far as the eye can see. You feel small, but alive, and grateful for the beauty and the challenge. Foraging has always existed in Armenia, and everywhere in the world. In the West, it disappeared for a while and has now become trendy again. In regions like Scandinavia and North America, foraging is deeply rooted in food culture, and some professionals make a living teaching, supplying wild foods to restaurants, and participating in culinary and educational projects around wild ingredients.

Aging practice

In Armenia, a few technical barriers make foraging as a source of income difficult. If someone climbs the mountain, collects wild greens, and brings them down, they are required to register a business, pay a 20 per cent tax, and navigate numerous other fees. Wild products are seasonal and inconsistent in quality and availability – one day the mushrooms are perfect, the next day they are subpar, and sometimes there are none at all. Restaurants prefer to simplify their operations, which is why such collaborations rarely succeed.

"I forage myself and use only what I need. Large-scale commercial use is questionable without strong regulations. In Europe, there are thousands of rules to protect nature. Here, it could easily turn into pure extraction and business," Ani tells *New Eastern Europe*.

"Even with good intentions, control is hard. If someone says, "Bring me ten kilos a day," no one sees where or how it's collected. The only way is strict standards – quantity, method, quality. That's how a culture can form, where better, smaller quantities are paid more."

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Throughout her foraging experience, both Yesayan and Ani have found many plants that locals do not recognize. Ani knows they were edible from studying international literature and practices. For example, there is a plant called sweet woodruff. It grows in huge quantities under trees in forests, but locals do not use it. Ani would collect it, dry it, and make syrup from it – the plant has a very interesting vanilla-like aroma and taste.

At some point, Ani started documenting what she found so she would not forget, because there is just so much. She also began cataloguing her discoveries. Ultimately, wild foraging in Armenia is not dying, but it is aging. In the regions, there are still young people who forage as part of daily life, but overall it is declining because young people do not stay in villages. Villages are losing this connection. "I think the most important thing is for people to stay in rural areas, engage in agriculture and animal husbandry. That connection to the land might revive interest more than worrying about foraging "aging,"" Ani says.

Anahit highlights that the mountain teaches patience, resilience, and respect for nature. Sometimes one may spend hours finding the right bush with berries; sometimes you return with only a few handfuls. It is not just about the harvest – it is about learning the rhythm of the mountain, understanding its moods, and adapting to them.

Foraging is not only about collecting; it is about creating a unique dialogue with nature. What could be more beautiful than recognizing the world around us, step by step? The wild world surprises us. Sometimes it can be frightening or dangerous, yet in an age of ever-growing technology, it is essential to step back and return to the place we all come from.

Kushane Chobanyan is a freelance journalist and documentary podcaster. Her work focuses on the human side of violent conflict, social issues, and inclusion. Since 2020, she has been researching the food memories of displaced communities, using food as a lens to explore deeper human stories.

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The return of the despot

JENS MALLING

The philosopher Karl Jaspers, writing in the aftermath of the Second World War in Germany, maintained that only a nation prepared to recognize its own guilt can recover from the moral and spiritual catastrophe of totalitarianism. The Germans slowly came to understand this after 1945. In Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new authorities never acted on this realization.

As Russia's aggression against Ukraine continues, so too does the rise in popularity of Joseph Stalin across the Russian Federation. Monuments honouring the Soviet dictator have been erected in different cities across the country. Sochi has one. So does Novosibirsk. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Moscow has a few as well. According to the media platform Re:Russia, in September 2025 there were 176 memorials bearing the features of Stalin in Russia. Two years earlier, a study cited by Radio Svoboda had recorded 110 of them. All but 15 have been inaugurated in the quarter century that Vladimir Putin has been in power, as Radio Svoboda also writes.

The trend first intensified after Russia started its war activities in Ukraine in 2014 and even more since it started its full-scale invasion of the country on February 24th 2022. Thus, Re:Russia also reported that in the first seven months of 2025 as many as 18 new monuments honouring Stalin were raised. The most recent one was unveiled on December 18th 2025 in the city of Smolensk.

Unable to come to terms

The American historian and journalist David Satter, author of *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway* (2011), argues that there is a clear connection between Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the emergence of

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numerous new memorials honouring Stalin. "The invasion of Ukraine feeds dreams of empire and no one created a more extensive empire for Russia than Stalin," states Satter, whose book with the telling title examines the failure of Russian society to come to terms with Stalin's crimes.

The surge in the newly erected monuments parallels Stalin's growing popularity among ordinary Russians. Two years before Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014, 28 per cent of Russians had a positive view of Stalin. By 2023, that number had risen to 63 per cent, according to opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center. According to a Levada survey carried out in June 2025, Stalin tops Russians' list of the world's most outstanding people ever. As many as 42 per cent of the population hold such an opinion.

For the Russian writer Sergei Lebedev, now living in exile in Berlin, the rehabilitation of Stalin amounts to a mockery of the victims of his terror. Among them are millions of Ukrainians who perished during the artificially induced famine – the Holodomor of 1932-33. The persistent legacy of Soviet-era crimes, mass violence, and an unexamined contempt for human life in contemporary Russia are recurring themes in Lebedev's novels. "The creeping return of monuments to Stalin destroys

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the meaning of – the already far too few – monuments to the victims of repression and creates the effect of systemic ethical corrosion," he says.

In his book, Satter describes a scene from 1988 when it briefly seemed as if Russian society was finally taking steps toward confronting Stalin's legacy. It took place near the Aeroport metro station in Moscow. In order to expose and inform about the crimes committed under his rule, a group of activists had just founded the human rights organization Memorial and opened a small office: "The room was open from ten in the morning to nine at night, six days a week, and persons who had been affected by the terror began arriving in a steady stream. Lines sometimes stretched out of the office, down the steps of the building, and out onto the street. Some came to look for lost relatives, others to find witnesses who could tell how a relative met his or her death. Children of "enemies of the people" who had been raised in orphanages and had their last names changed wanted to learn the identity of their parents. As they told their stories, people often fainted or cried uncontrollably. The walls were soon plastered with appeals for information: "Who knew my father … ?" "Who knew my husband… ?" "Has anyone seen… ?""

In 2022 Memorial received the Nobel Peace Prize. At around the same time as the full-scale invasion was launched against Ukraine, the organization was banned in Russia. Several of its prominent members are in prison or have fled into exile. This is a clear indication of how uninterested the Kremlin is in trying to get Russia to come to terms with its gruesome past in a constructive way.

Rehabilitation of the henchmen

Satter argues that Russia has never fully accepted that traumatic historical events can be confronted, processed, and incorporated into the national consciousness. "I'm afraid we are not likely to see a serious reckoning with Stalin's crimes for many years to come. Commemorating the victims has always run against the grain of the desire among many Russians to partake – at least vicariously – in their country's "greatness" and its ability to intimidate," he observes. In his view, sustained attention to decades of state terror and the oppression of millions of innocent people would quickly clash with the renewed sense of national and historical pride that the current Russian regime seeks to cultivate.

He turns to the philosopher Karl Jaspers, writing in the aftermath of the Second World War in Germany. Jaspers maintained that only a nation prepared to recognize its own guilt can recover from the moral and spiritual catastrophe of totalitarianism. The Germans slowly came to understand this after 1945. In Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new authorities never acted on this realization.

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Not only do Russians honour Stalin now with more than 177 memorials, as Putin ordered Volgograd Airport to be renamed Stalingrad Airport last year. In this way, he honoured the Soviet general secretary who gave the city its name until 1961. The Kremlin's attempt to exploit the cult surrounding the former dictator also includes rehabilitating his henchmen. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a monument was unveiled in Magadan honouring the Chekists, as the Soviet security service in charge of the Gulag camps was called. "To the employees of the territory's security agencies," reads the inscription.

The revival of the cult surrounding Stalin has also brought renewed attention to some of his most notorious collaborators.

Magadan, located in the far north-east of Siberia, was the gateway to some of the most gruesome Soviet forced labour camps around the Kolyma river. "A place of grief, a place of horror, a place of pain. A place where a monument to the Chekists could never, under any circumstances be erected," says Lebedev, who calls the gesture outrageous and compares it to commemorating the German SS on the premises of the former Auschwitz concentration camp.

The revival of the cult surrounding Stalin has also brought renewed attention to some of his most notorious collaborators. Last year, the Russian occupying authorities opened a museum dedicated to Andrei Zhdanov in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol. During the height of the Great Terror in 1937–38, Zhdanov signed no fewer than 176 execution lists containing the names of innocent victims.

According to Russian media reports, his 65-year-old grandson – who bears the same name – has expressed satisfaction that his grandfather is finally receiving what he regards as due recognition. The familial link between the two Andreis is provided by Yuri Zhdanov, Stalin's son-in-law. In reality, there is something almost inconceivably brutal about first razing a major city to the ground and thereby killing tens of thousands of peaceful inhabitants, as the Russian army did in the spring of 2022, and then establishing a museum in the same place that honours one of the worst Stalinists from the height of the Soviet Union's reign of terror.

Reserved roles

For Lebedev, the numerous new statues, the glorification of the "Red Czar", and the whitewashing of his regime serve a specific purpose. They send an unmistakable signal from the Kremlin leadership to Russian soldiers and FSB employees, who are committing atrocities against Ukrainians. In essence, this message is that they should hunt down and shoot more civilians. Fire more missiles into residen-

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tial areas. Pulverize more maternity clinics. Hit more playgrounds. Commit more rapes. Abduct and indoctrinate more children. Carry out more massacres. Be more like Stalin, like the perpetrators of that era. You will never be held accountable. We will honour you.

Who should be honoured? The perpetrator or the victim? In Russia, it seems as though the roles are reversed. They are reversed when it comes to the past. And they are reversed in the present. This was certainly the case when Putin personally awarded an honorary title to the brigade that carried out the mass murder of Ukrainian civilians in Bucha.

For Ukrainians, Stalin's return is a clear message, as was the unveiling of his bust in the occupied Ukrainian city of Melitopol in May 2025. By conjuring him up, it is as if Russians are speaking with one voice through him. We murdered you, sent you to camps, and incorporated you into our empire back then. And we are doing it again, now. EE

Jens Malling has worked as a journalist since 2010 specializing in Eastern Europe, especially Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, for international media. His work has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Huffington Post*, among others.

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The myth of the Dalwitz saboteurs

IHAR MELNIKAU

The history of the Dalwitz Battalion reveals the gap between myth and reality in narratives of Belarusian wartime collaboration. Far from constituting a coherent anti-Soviet resistance, the unit was part of a late and largely unsuccessful German attempt to deploy local collaborators in sabotage operations. Its rapid collapse exposes the limits of both Nazi strategy and later attempts at myth-making.

For a long time, the history of the Dalwitz Battalion – a collaborationist military unit in German service composed of Belarusians – was shrouded in fantasies that were born amongst post-war Belarusian emigration. Unfortunately, in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, fantastic stories about post-war Belarusian resistance were actively replicated in Belarus itself. Meanwhile, not many people tried to analyse the history of those who joined the Dalwitz sabotage unit created by the Nazis, what goals they sought to achieve, and how this whole game of the Belarusian commandos ended.

Origins

On June 23rd 1944, Soviet troops launched the Belarusian offensive, also known as Operation Bagration. As a result, by the end of the summer of 1944, the entire territory of Belarus was liberated from the Nazis. Hundreds of collaborators also

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left Belarusian territory as part of the convoy of Germans who fled in panic under the Red Army advances. This included many of those who, during the German occupation, carried out the dirtiest orders of the Nazis – from the extermination of Soviet POWs and Jews, to anti-partisan actions and the burning of Belarusian villages together with their inhabitants.

After the loss of the territory, the Germans had planned to use the collaborators in combat operations against the Soviet army, as well as guerrilla-sabotage missions. By the end of June 1944, a collaborator by the name of Usievalad Rodzka, on the orders of the Germans, gathered at his apartment other collaborators in order to discuss the organization of the struggle in the Soviet rear. As a result, it was decided to form five armed detachments to carry out sabotage and espionage work in the rear of the Soviet Army.

The collaborators called these units *Kalinoushchyki.* In the Vilna region, the sabotage squad was commanded by Siarhej Marcinkevich, a former teacher of the Belarusian Teachers Seminary in Vilnius and the former district head of the Union of Belarusian Youth (SBM). He was joined by the former district head of the SBM Aleh Lapotski, and others. All these underground units were destroyed by Soviet special forces.

However, even after the liberation of Belarus, the Nazis continued to rely on Belarusian collaborators. In this regard, in July and August 1944, 25 kilometres from Insterburg (now Chernyakhovsk) in East Prussia, on the basis of German intelligence in Vilnius, the Dalwitz espionage and sabotage school was established. In German, this was called the *Landung Batalion zur besonderen Verfügung "Dalwitz"* ("Dalwitz" airborne battalion for special tasks). This institution was subordinate to the *Abvehrkommando 203*.

The Belarusian collaborators also relied on saboteurs from Dalwitz. At the end of August 1944, when Soviet tanks were already on the Bug river, the lead Belarusian collaborator, "president" of the Belarusian Central Rada Radasłaŭ Astroŭski, visited the Dalwitz spy and sabotage school and spoke to the cadets.

Who were the personnel of this school of Nazi saboteurs? First of foremost, they were former policemen who were later mobilized by the Nazis to the Belarusian Regional Defence group. The Dalwitz Battalion was supposed to receive the reserves from the 1st Personnel Battalion of the Regional Defence, which included 196 officers and soldiers. The second category of cadets were members of SBM, an organization that the Nazis explicitly created to control Belarusian youth. In addition to the above-mentioned sources of recruitment for sabotage activities, the Germans relied on the fact that their accomplices from the administration of the spy and sabotage school in Dalwitz would be able to recruit cadets from the Belarusian civilian population who were forcibly taken to work in Germany during the

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occupation of Belarus. At that time, there were more than 390,000 Belarusians on the territory of the Reich and the countries occupied by it. They were also seeking saboteurs in camps for Soviet POWs.

Workings of Dalwitz

The Dalwitz Battalion consisted of 200 men. The commanders of this collaborationist formation from the Belarusians included Rodzka, who was engaged in political training. In addition, the propaganda officer in this collaborationist formation was Mikhas Hanko, the former head of the Belarusian youth organization.

In the archives, there is a description of how one cadet of the school recalled the activities of Hanko: "I met Hanko during my stay in Albertin in March 1944. He came there with lectures for cadets, in which he talked about the emergence of an independent Belarus, praised Germany, and scolded the Soviet Union. He came to Albertin several times and stayed there for several days. He was wearing a green uniform. He always had a gun with him. Hanko spoke excellent German. Later I saw Hanko at the congress in Minsk, held in June 1944. Hanko was present during the transfer of the palace to the Belarusians in Melningen, where he spoke after Astroŭski." In addition, the cadet noted that in 1949 he saw the collaborator Hanko in Wrocław, Poland, which contradicts reports that Hanko died in Prague in 1945.

The saboteurs were taught subversive work, shooting, how to manage topography, and methods of guerrilla warfare.

The Dalwitz Battalion consisted of two companies: the "Northern" (consisting of natives of the northern parts of Belarus) and the "southern" (natives of the south). The companies were divided into platoons, and platoons into squads. In addition, the school had a group of assistants and a deployment group. The second group there were saboteurs who were preparing to be dispatched to the Soviet rear.

The saboteurs were taught subversive work, shooting with various types of small arms, and how to manage topography. In addition, tactical exercises were conducted. The cadets were also taught methods of guerrilla warfare.

According to a former cadet's interrogation: "The students of the Dalwitz school were introduced to Soviet weapons: rifles, submachine guns, and pistols. We were also taught infantry tactics, movement on the ground, the basics of medical training, and political information ... One of the teachers was German. He spoke Polish well. There was another Pole and four Belarusians. All the teachers, except the German, had Polish citizenship before 1939. [...] The main task of the school was the practi-

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cal and theoretical preparation of people for transferring them to the rear of the Red Army with tasks of sabotage, as well as collecting intelligence information."

Among the cadets were girls, members of the youth organization who were taught how to work at a radio station. In September 1944, the sabotage school was transferred to the village of Komarowo. At the same time, the "Northern" company was located in the Walbusz estate near Bydgoszcz, and the "Southern" company was located in the Can estate.

Final operations

Soon the saboteurs from Dalwitz had to evacuate again. The Northern Company retreated through Kołobrzeg, Szczecin, and Świnoujście to the Neubrandenburg area. Located there was a sabotage squad of the Russian Liberation Army, in which there were a lot of people from Belarus. This unit also became part of the Dalwitz Battalion. The sabotage and reconnaissance school was evacuated and the "Northern" and "Southern" companies joined it. Graduates of the school were awarded officer and sub-officer ranks, and after that a number of new collaborationist officers were sent to camps for Soviet POWs in Germany to look for potential candidates for cadets at the Dalwitz school.

The Nazis dropped the first landing of saboteurs from Dalwitz on the night of September 16th to 17th 1944. The head of the group, nicknamed "Andruk", landed at the village of Gesgala-Belitsa in the Dziatlausky district of Belarus. In turn, a second group landed near Vilnius. The saboteurs were dressed in Soviet military uniforms. The task of this group was to determine the locations of Soviet airfields in the Baranavichy region and collect information about the facilities. On the ground, the saboteurs were to receive support from Security Service (SD) agents recruited from among local residents and left behind by the Germans during their retreat. In addition to supporting the activities of sabotage groups, the Nazis left storages with weapons and other military equipment during the retreat from Belarus. For example, during one of the interrogations in 1948, a former guard of the Kaldycheva death camp recalled this information. According to him, the Nazis built a concrete box near the village of Arabaushchyna in which they hid automatic weapons and radio equipment. The same weapons storage was found in the 1980s, when the old school building was demolished in the village of Haradzishcha.

On September 28th 1944, in the village of Boyarskie, a saboteur fell into the hands of an operational group led by the head of the district department of the NKGB. The Soviet special forces were able to get information from the saboteur and launch Operation "Contact", which later led to the detention of Rodzka. On the

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Soviet partisans reading a Nazi newspaper printed in Minsk.

night of November 17th to 18th 1944, Nazis organized the transfer of the second landing group from among the Dalwitz cadets (27 people) to the Vilnius area. The saboteurs of this group were dressed in Belarusian Home Defence (BKA) uniforms and were armed with two light machine guns and two mortars in addition to personal arms. The purpose of this group was to prepare a base for the organization of anti-Soviet partisan units in Naliboki Pushcha in particular, and in the rear of the Soviet Army in the territory of the Belarusian Soviet republic liberated from the Nazis.

Most of the saboteurs were captured by soldiers of the Polish underground Home Army. Later, some collaborators joined this Polish unit, participating in a battle against Soviet soldiers on January 7th 1945.

A quick end to Dalwitz

By the end of 1944, Soviet security forces had identified and arrested most of the remaining saboteurs still operating in the Soviet rear. In December, one of the landing groups was intercepted shortly after deployment in the Berezyna district. Its members had been tasked with establishing contact with German soldiers operating near Minsk and assisting in their evacuation by air. The group was equipped

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with machine guns, pistols and grenades, but its mission never materialized. Within days, Soviet counterintelligence dismantled the entire unit.

Another group deployed in December 1944 in the Pastavy district managed to operate for a longer period. On its basis, a small armed formation emerged, remaining active into the early 1950s. For years, Soviet security services were unable to eliminate this group. Ultimately, however, the group's leader was located and killed in 1955. During its existence, the group carried out numerous attacks, robberies, and assaults on local administrative institutions, blurring the line between sabotage activity and criminal violence.

The Dalwitz-trained saboteurs were also involved in evacuating collaborationist archives from Riga. In early 1945, the coordination of sabotage operations was taken over in part by Otto Skorzeny, who sought to use such units to disrupt the advancing Soviet army. By then, however, the strategic situation had deteriorated irreversibly.

In the spring of 1945, the Dalwitz sabotage school was relocated to Czechoslovakia, near Goblenec. At the end of the war in May, its personnel were intercepted by local partisans, disarmed, and ultimately released. Some of the former saboteurs attempted to move towards Poland, but many were arrested in the following months. Several were transferred to Soviet custody, where they faced trial and, in a number of cases, execution for treason. Others managed to evade immediate arrest, hiding in forests or blending into civilian populations until the mid-1950s, when they were eventually tracked down by Soviet security services. Some former cadets also concealed themselves in Poland, posing as civilians or forced labourers. In both Soviet Belarus and post-war Poland, security services continued to search for former members of the Dalwitz network. Those who were captured were prosecuted and sentenced.

The story of the Dalwitz saboteurs thus ended not in sustained resistance, but in rapid collapse, dispersal, and eventual repression – far removed from the myths that later sought to portray them as a coherent national underground. EE

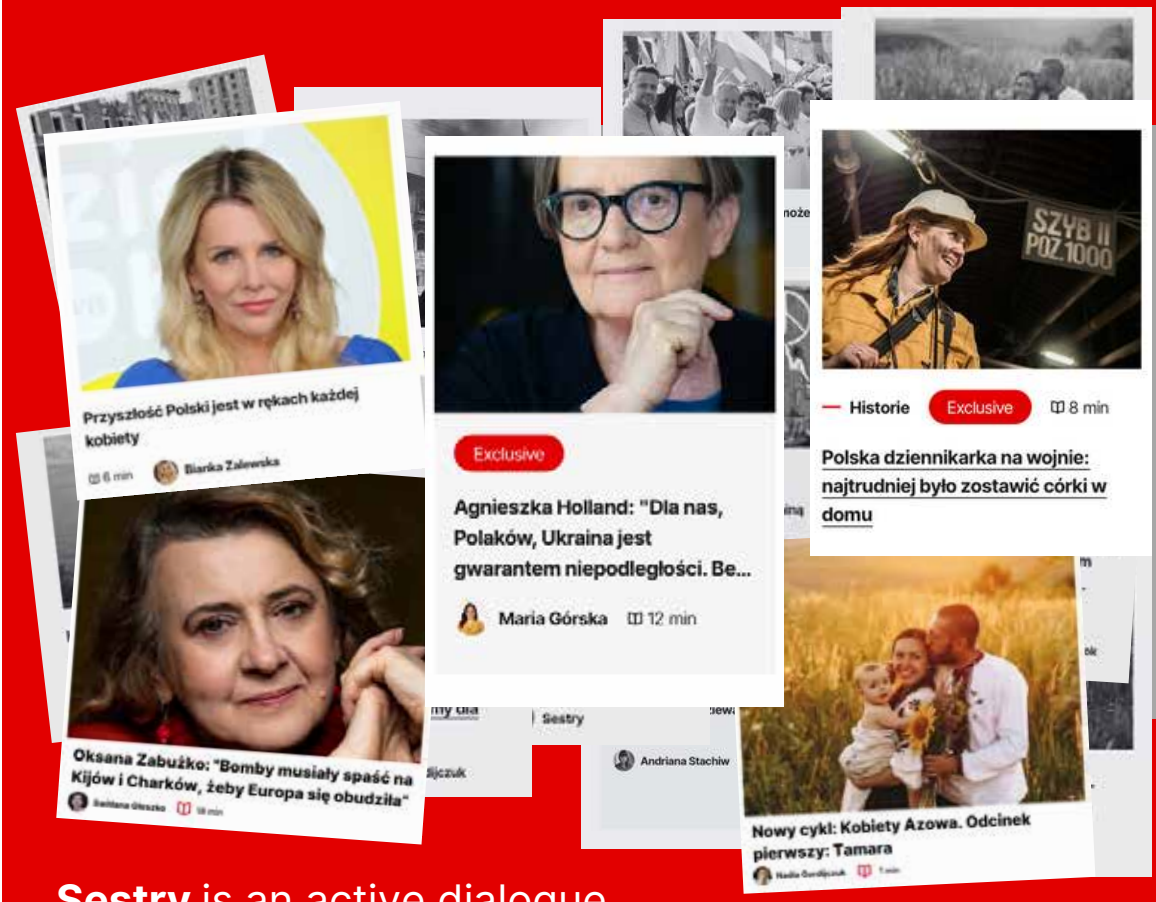
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