Bimonthly **September-October No 5 (XLVIII)/2021**
20 PLN (w tym 8% vat) | 10 EUR | 12 USD | 7 GBP
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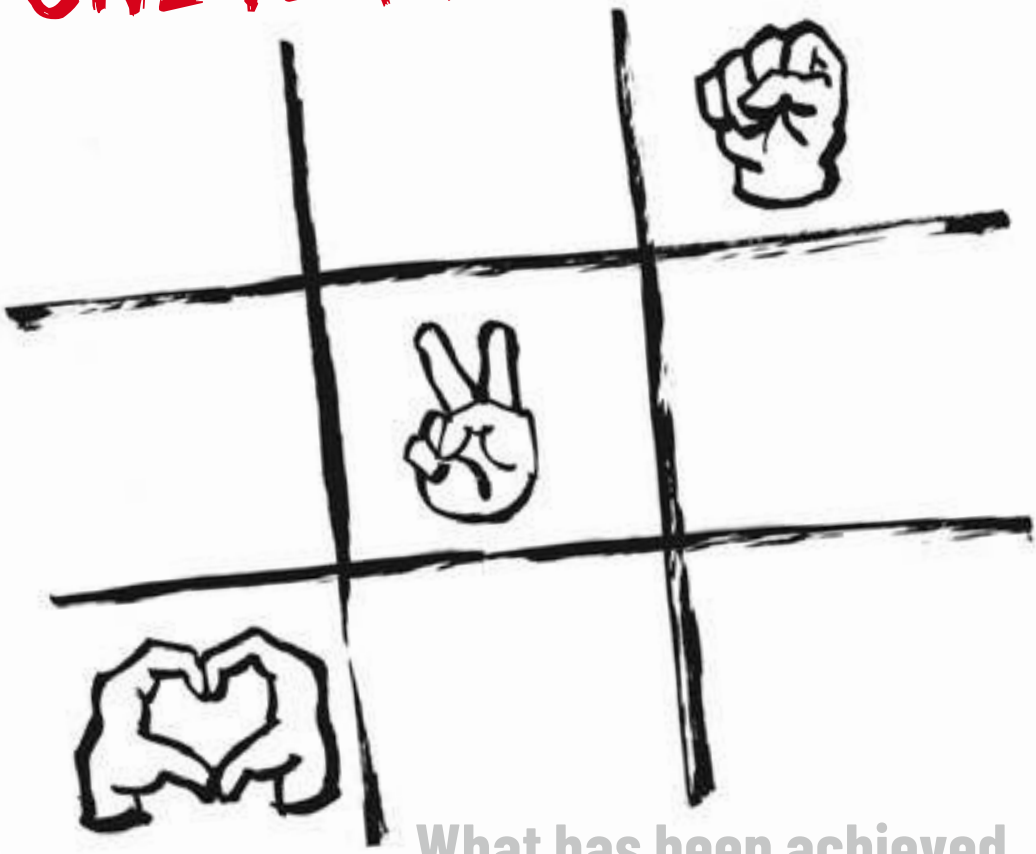
New Eastern Europe

2011–2021

BELARUSIANS ONE YEAR IN PROTEST



What has been achieved, what lies ahead and what hope remains?

ISSN 2083-7372

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DEAR READER,

We are publishing this special issue with an aim to honour the plight of Belarusians whose democratic choice made in August 2020 was shamelessly snubbed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Not only did he blatantly falsify the election results to stay in power for at least another term, but he and his regime brutally suppressed the social discontent that emerged in reaction to the electoral fraud. As a result, we no longer see photos of mass demonstrations or even courtyard meetings that were coming to us from Minsk and other Belarusian cities a year ago. Instead, we receive more and more information about the brutal treatment of political prisoners, whose numbers keep growing week by week, which we cover in this issue. Sadly, the Belarusians are currently faced with few choices for the future, and many have decided to flee.

Yet despite all this we decided that the main theme of this issue should focus on "Belarusians. One year in protests". We choose this theme because we are convinced that regardless of its form and location, the ongoing discontent of the Belarusian people shows that they are not giving up and are determined to continue. As Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of democratic Belarus, said in an interview for NEE: "Victory will come to us in the end, it will be difficult, but certainly well deserved."

This issue also represents the 10th anniversary of *New Eastern Europe*. Our first issue was published in October 2011 – a time when the situation in Central and Eastern Europe was substantively different than what we see today. Nevertheless, our mission over these last 10 years has been to bring the voices and ideas of the region to you and help us all better understand how these countries fit into the global dialogue, breaking down stereotypes along the way. We would like to sincerely thank all of our readers and supporters who have been with us throughout these years. And we hope you will continue with us on this journey. Please also continue to share your feedback with us, we appreciate and enjoy hearing from you.

Lastly, make sure to check our website and social media for special events and activities as we continue to celebrate this important milestone.

The Editors

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New Eastern Europe
www.neweasterneurope.eu

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of Eastern Europe in Wrocław
office@kew.org.pl, www.kew.org.pl

Zamek Wojnowice
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New Eastern Europe is published in partnership with the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk.

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Texts and opinions published in *New Eastern Europe* do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders, publishers and editors.

New Eastern Europe is co-financed by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland

NARODOWY PROGRAM ROZWOJU CZYTELNICTWA

The theme "Belarusians. One year in protests" is co-financed by the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation via the grant line „RAZAM-RAZEM--ZUZAM", funded by the German Federal Foreign Office in the framework of the program "Support for Cooperation with Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership and Russia."

Auswärtiges Amt

CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION

Legal Services Provided by KOKSZTYS S.A.

KOKSZTYS

Circulation: 3000
Printing: Zakład Poligraficzny Moś i Łuczak sp.j.
International Distribution: www.pineapple-media.com
Printed in Poland
Published since 2011

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It is our duty to bring our fight to a victorious end

An interview with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, leader of democratic Belarus. Interviewer: Paulina Siegień

PAULINA SIEGIEŃ: Your life has dramatically changed over the last year. These changes took place even earlier when your husband, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, decided he would run for president. We all know what took place afterwards. What was the most important lesson that you have learnt as a result of all that has happened?

SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA: My life has been in constant change for over the last year and a half. At first, Siarhei decided to run for president, then he was arrested so that he could not submit necessary documents to register with the election committee, which included collecting signatures for his candidacy. My husband gave me these documents along with the power of attorney in case something happened. Nevertheless, the Belarusian election commission did not accept these documents from me and challenged my power of attorney, saying that the candidate must come and sign in person. That is why on the following day, I decided to submit these documents myself, meaning, on my own behalf.

In this way, I wanted to show solidarity with my husband. It was an unexpected decision, both for me and for Siarhei, but also for the Belarusian authorities. It was also from this moment on that these great changes started to take place in my life. It quickly turned out that the responsibility I assumed to express solidarity with Siarhei was bigger than I realised, as seen by the efforts of the thousands of Belarusians who stood in line for hours throughout the country to put their signature under my candidacy. Only then did I realise that I also had a responsibility towards them. Also, once my candidacy was registered, which today I see as kind of a coincidence given the fact that the authorities could have found any excuse not to register

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Photo: Tony Danilov / Shutterstock

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya speaks at a gathering in Prague in June 2021.

me, I met with thousands of people and I better understood that they had great hope in me.

I became fully aware that they count on me and I am accountable to them. And then, after Viktar Babaryka and Valery Tsapkala were refused the opportunity to register as well, I understood that I was responsible for the entire country. Therefore, our staff joined efforts and we pooled our resources to win the election. Unfortunately, after our incredible victory on August 9th 2020, a struggle began with the regime to ensure that the choice made by Belarusians and the results of the elections be respected. This fight continues today. Throughout it all, I have learnt a lot. For example, I acquired

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the diplomatic etiquette, the negotiation rules and all there is to know about political games. I started to understand politics better. I met with foreign leaders and it turned out that most of them are very open and kind people who care about the citizens in their countries. Of course, they also have their political interests which they have to think about, but this is certainly not at the expense of the interests of the states and nations they represent. The authorities in Belarus lack such an attitude. I want to have this attitude but at the same time remain the perspective of an ordinary person that I have remained after all and I want to continue to remain.

A year has passed since the presidential election in Belarus. It was followed by a wave of protests, a civil and national revival, but unfortunately also a wave of unprecedented repressions. How do you evaluate this past year in Belarus from a political perspective? Should we talk about the failure of society that was unable to fight the regime? Or the opposite? Perhaps, what we have been seeing should be called a success and hope for the future?

During my first foreign visit to Poland, I visited the office of the Solidarnosć trade union. I met its leaders, including chairman Piotr Duda. Our Polish friends told us about their struggle for freedom in the 1980s and expressed hope that our fight will take much less time than theirs did. It is true that back then in August 2020 we expected a quick victory. But now we understand that there are no miracles, no freedom is gained without the hard fight. We understand that our victory in the 2020 elections was only the beginning of the revolution when the people of Belarus expressed their will, but their choice was unfortunately disregarded by the former president. In fact, it would be a true miracle if, after 26 years of dictatorship, the dictator said, "OK, thank you for everything" and walked away. However, that would be the most sensible solution for him. Therefore, in addition to winning the elections, we must also win over Lukashenka's attempt to stay in power illegally. Victory will come to us in the end, it will be difficult, but certainly well deserved. Undeserved successes are often underappreciated.

Our country has changed so much over the last year that there is no way of going back to what it was before. There are many reasons why Lukashenka will eventually be forced to leave, but the most important one is that he has been halting our country's development and the people no longer trust him. We are already building a new Belarus. The citizen committee has prepared a draft constitution, which is now open for public consultations. We are working on bills and reforms for our new Belarus.

With the input from our team, the European Union has developed a comprehensive plan to support the Belarusian economy once political change occurs. We also have ByPOL, which is a team of former employees of state security forces that have knowledge on

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how to renew our legal system and retain it during the transition period. We support the workers' movement, which unites employees of various plants in numerous cities of Belarus. Our foreign policy is already paying off – we have managed to build a foundation for co-operation with a large number of countries around the world. More than anything else, however, we are continuing our fight to hold new elections because we understand that everything that has taken place so far cannot go in vain. It is our duty to bring our fight to a victorious end.

Do you think it is possible that in the near future the Lukashenka regime will take real steps to unite Belarus with Russia?

This is a very complex situation. Lukashenka has been clinging to power and understands that if Russia takes over Belarus, he will lose it. On the other hand, Russia has been putting pressure on him because without Russian support, Lukashenka does not have sufficient resources to maintain power. I would like to point out here that the citizens of Belarus, in absolute majority, are in favour of preserving Belarus's independence. That is why I see Lukashenka's and the Russian authorities' game of the so-called integration maps as entertainment by some officials who ignore the interests of the people.

I know that Belarusians want to have friendly relations with all their neighbours, including Russia, whose nation they see as close. Therefore, it would be better if the Russian authorities respected the choice of the Belarusian people rather than ignoring them. The unification of Belarus and Russia cannot bring anything other than conflict, because our citizens do not want such unification. We want to be friends and to co-operate, but not become a governorate of a neighbouring country.

You often meet the leaders of western countries. What kind of support do you expect from them?

Over the last year it has become clear that the people of Belarus and foreign leaders recognise the choice that the Belarusian people made in August 2020. Lukashenka is also aware of it, because if he was not, he would not have organised his inauguration in secret with only the applause of his supporters. Only a handful of supporters remained with Lukashenka while hundreds of thousands of people in Belarus took to the streets against him. The Russian authorities are also aware of it. However, why they have decided to support Lukashenka remains a mystery to me. I believe that this is a big mistake. As I said already, the choice of the Belarusian people is known and recognised in most countries around the world. That is why during meetings that we have with foreign leaders, we always discuss the situation in Belarus, we talk about the assistance that could be provided to its civil society, the media and human rights defenders. We also discuss our future co-operation once changes inevitably occur. I always feel solidari-

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ty from the authorities and people from these countries.

How can ordinary people show their support to the Belarusian people in their pursuit for freedom? What does the Belarusian public need the most at the moment?

For Belarusians it is very important that people show solidarity with them, especially now when the situation is extremely difficult. We are grateful to all those who organise solidarity actions and host Belarusians who have been forced to flee their homeland. We are grateful to those people who constantly draw the attention of their governments and parliaments to Belarus's plight for freedom. We continue to ask for support in this endeavour. We are also grateful and thankful to those who raise funds and help the families of political prisoners. All these acts and much more are done by ordinary people from different countries.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is the leader of the Belarusian opposition and recognised as the leader of democratic Belarus following the falsified presidential election in August 2020. She was forced to flee Belarus and is currently based in Vilnius.

Paulina Siegień is a freelance journalist writing about the Polish-Russian neighbourhood and general Russian developments. Her latest book *Miasto Bajka. Wiele Historii Kaliningradu* (*City of fairy tales. The many stories of Kaliningrad*) will be published later this year.

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One year on

What has changed in Belarus?

DAVID R. MARPLES

The 2020 elections took place in the middle of a pandemic, dismissed by the president as a "psychosis". They were the first elections to be contested by other sectors of the Belarusian elite. Since that day, the situation has changed. Over 38,000 people have been arrested, and over 500 have been declared political prisoners. Peaceful protesters, peaking in numbers at around 250,000 in Minsk but significant in all cities, have been arrested, tortured and in several cases, murdered. What comes next remains an open question.

On August 9th 2021, Alyaksandr Lukashenka held a press conference to discuss the events of the previous year. It was attended by both local and foreign journalists. The de facto leader of Belarus fielded questions in his own style and according to his own perceptions – or stated perceptions – of the world. He expressed his views on the so-called All-Belarusian People's Assembly, on the change of president in the United States and in general about the West's vendetta against his rule, as well as the attacks on his security forces by protesters.

The press conference illustrated one thing above all: the bizarre narcissism of a politician who perceives himself under attack yet continues to see himself as the personification of the republic that he led, and continues to lead through brute force, for the past 27 years. Yet if the elections and ensuring events showed one thing above others, it is that a once-consummate politician has become increas-

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ingly erratic, making the sorts of errors one associates with hapless leaders who try to rule after losing credibility and the support of their citizens.

Past elections

Elections in Belarus have always given hope for the opposition. They provided one occasion at five-year intervals when it might be possible to listen to alternative views on official media, to gather people, disseminate ideas and discuss how the country might improve its living standards, move closer to Europe or Russia, or very occasionally see independent thinkers advance into parliament. Yet, in truth, none of the preceding elections really made a breach in the armor of the Lukashenka-run state. It was always possible to deal with traditional opposition. For one thing, they could be branded as tools of the West, especially if they had worked in any way with, or received funding from, western NGOs, as indeed many of them had.

In 2001, after a violence-filed interlude of two years from the date when the elections should have been held by law, the head of the Minsk OSCE office Hans Georg Wieck, a seasoned German diplomat, helped to ensure a unified opposition campaign led by a trade union leader, Uladzimir Hancharyk. According to official figures, Hancharyk received over 16 per cent of the vote, easily the highest number accorded to an opponent of Lukashenka by the state election commission run by Lukashenka's close ally, Lydzia Iarmoshyna.

In 2006 the attempts to provide a unified candidate resulted in the nomination of an academic, Hrodna professor Aliaksandr Milinkevich, representing the United Democratic Forces of Belarus. The date coincided with a period of "colour revolutions" in Europe that embraced Serbia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, among others. Though Milinkevich officially received only 6.2 per cent against Lukashenka's 84.4 per cent, a lengthy protest followed with a camp being set up in Minsk's October Square. The opposition campaign was also not united because the former Rector of Minsk State University, Aliaksandr Kazulin, decided to run on behalf of the Social Democratic Party. In his brief cameo on official television, Kazulin startled the audience by ripping up a photograph of Lukashenka and stamping on it. He was detained and beaten while trying to enter a meeting of the Belarusian People's Assembly and later given a six-year prison sentence. The camp was broken up after five days of protest involving an average of 5,000 people daily, including many from outside Belarus.

The elections of 2010 also ended in violence and over 700 arrests and the beating of many people, including two of the main opposition candidates, Andrei Sannikau and Uladzimir Niakliaeu. Seven of the ten official candidates were in

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jail on the night after the official results were announced. Lukashenka's vote this time was declared to be just under 80 per cent, and Sannikau's a derisory 2.43 per cent. Just prior to the election, Sannikau's press secretary Aleh Biabenin, one of the main founders of the opposition organisation Charter-97, was found hanged. As with Vitaly Shishov in 2021, there were few signs to suggest a suicide. Biabenin was expected by friends at the local cinema and had been in touch with them shortly beforehand.

These past elections demonstrate several points. First, the selective use of state violence to eliminate enemies. Second, the fabrication of election results after every election other than 1994. While Lukashenka was undoubtedly more popular in those years than in 2020, he could not reasonably have been expected to win more than 50 per cent in a free vote, based on surveys by organisations such as the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI), which operated in Minsk until 2016. Third, each election saw a ritualistic process controlled by state authorities: from the appointment of officials to the commissions; gathering and monitoring of signatures (many were invalidated by the Central Election Commission); and control over polling booths and counting votes.

After 2010, however, the authorities applied much more force against recalcitrants. Organisations and homes were raided and computers confiscated. Random attacks took place against prominent oppositionists. Public gatherings were banned. Many political leaders fled abroad, including Sannikau, who moved to the United Kingdom not long after his release from prison. People gathering in the streets of Minsk would signal discontent merely by clapping, but they were arrested too. Above all, the detained received heavy fines rather than the lengthy prison sentences deployed hitherto.

Belarus relations with Russia and the EU

In the background to these campaigns was a state with a relatively sound economy and a façade of stability. Belarus achieved high growth rates in 1994–2007, largely through Russian subsidies and low energy prices. Cheap oil could be refined and sold for high profits to the countries of Western and Central Europe. But by 2008, the situation began to change as a result of the global recession that sent oil and gas prices plunging. The economic downtown coincided with a deterioration in Russian-Belarusian relations. In 2008, then Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, broke off personal relations with his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yushchenko, whom he considered too nationalistic. But relations with Belarus also began to decline. By 2012, when Vladimir Putin returned for a third term as president, the

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bilateral relationship was marked by rancour, petty disputes and higher oil and gas prices for Minsk to pay. Exported Belarusian dairy products failed to pass the standards set by Russia.

In 2009 Belarus also joined the European Union-led Eastern Partnership, which included other countries from the former Soviet Union: Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The links with the EU came at a price: demands for more democracy, openness and freedom of assembly. Belarus fulfilled none of them, but since it was the most stable country politically, the contacts were maintained. The vision of Belarus as a go-between country between Russia and the EU, and even as a counter to Moscow, also explains the persistence of the dialogue with official Minsk that continued for several years.

The vision of Belarus as a go-between country between Russia and the EU explains the persistence of the dialogue with Minsk.

In 2015 the EU suspended most of the sanctions against Belarus, imposed after the violent events of 2010. The 2015 presidential elections had taken place smoothly and without violence. The opposition, divided or exiled, chose for the most part to ignore it. An opposition candidate, Tatsiana Karatkevich, representing a "People's Referendum", received 4.48 per cent, placing second behind Lukashenka's 84.14 per cent. Just prior to the election, a NISEPI poll estimated the incumbent's support at 47 per cent.

2020 saw a regime that felt fairly secure. That is perhaps one reason why Lukashenka began to make some fundamental mistakes. Before analysing them, however, it is worthwhile to note several previous examples of his irrational and violent actions, which became magnified after the contentious results of August 9th were declared.

Deaths and explosions

Changes to the Belarusian Constitution that followed referenda in 1995 and 1996 strengthened the power of the presidency over the parliament and constitutional court. Lukashenka then decided to date the start of his rule from 1996, meaning that there would be no elections in 1999 as expected. The parliamentary opposition tried to impeach the president who survived partly through Russian intervention (Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin) as an intermediary. A mock election nevertheless took place, with a new commission chaired by Viktar Hanchar, who had been a key worker for Lukashenka in his 1994 election campaign but later turned against him, joining the opposition United Civic Party.

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Maria Kalesnikava calls for peaceful protest last August in Minsk. Kalesnikava was later taken to the Ukrainian border by regime forces, to be expelled from the country. She tore up her passport before she could be deported and is currently on trial in Minsk and remains defiant.

In September 1999 Hanchar was abducted on the streets of Minsk along with his friend Anatol Krasouski. According to a December 2019 report by *Deutsche Welle* citing Yurii Harauski, a former member of a special unit of the ministry of internal affairs, the pair were executed and the bodies buried. Six months earlier, the leader of the United Civic Party, Hienadz Karpenka, suddenly became ill and was taken to hospital where he died of a cerebral haemorrhage, despite being in good health previously.

Following the 2010 elections, an alleged terrorist attack took place in Minsk at the Kastrichnitskaia metro station on April 11th 2011 during evening rush-hour. A bomb exploded killing 15 people and injuring 204. About an hour later, a grim-faced Lukashenka appeared on the scene, along with his son Mikalai, then aged six, to inspect the scene. Two suspects were arrested a couple of days later; they were tortured and confessed to the crime and executed promptly. They also confessed to two previous bombings, one in Minsk in 2008 and an earlier one in Viciebsk.

But the question that intrigued many was how the president could have known there was only one explosive device and endangered the life of his young son. And why would terrorists have targeted Belarus, a homogenous society without any civil strife? The same question arose after a Ryanair flight was forced to land in

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Minsk in April this year on the grounds that there was a bomb on board planted by Hamas (see below). Suffice to say that selective violence and unexplained events have been a key feature of Belarus under Lukashenka.

The presidential elections of 2020

The 2020 elections took place in the middle of a pandemic, dismissed by the president as a "psychosis". They were the first elections to be contested by other sectors of the Belarusian elite (a banker and a former ambassador), as well as a popular vlogger on social media. The official response mirrored earlier reactions to the more traditional opposition from political party leaders or unified candidates: detain or disbar the most dangerous and control the elections through the official apparatus. Having arrested those perceived as leading opponents (Viktar Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanouski) and with the other (Valerii Tsepkala) fleeing over the border into Russia, Lukashenka miscalculated by permitting the campaign of Tsikhanouski's spouse, Sviatlana, belittled as a housewife with no knowledge of politics.

The three campaigns soon unified with three women leading: Tsikhanouskaya, Veranika Tsepkala (the wife of Valerii) and Mariia Kalesnikava, the campaign manager of Babaryka. Their rallies, even in remote places, attracted thousands – peaking with 60,000 in Minsk's Bangalore Square. Their campaign attracted both young and old, focused on changes in Belarus, and avoided partisanship. There were no Russian or EU flags on display, and both official and unofficial (white-red-white) flags were in evidence at their early rallies.

The three women appeared to herald a peaceful change to the Lukashenka years and indeed signalled a change of generations.

The three women appeared to herald a peaceful change to the Lukashenka years and indeed signalled a change of generations from a 66-year old authoritarian to a 38-year old woman, though the latter insisted that she had no goals other than the release of prisoners and new elections. The decision (presumably on the orders of Lukashenka and Iarmoshyna) to declare Lukashenka the winner with 80 per cent elicited shock and anger, following the initial elation and mass gathering in the streets to celebrate a victory.

Since that day, the situation has changed. Over 38,000 people have been arrested, and over 500 have been declared political prisoners. Peaceful protesters, peaking in numbers at around 250,000 in Minsk but significant in all cities, have been arrested, tortured and in several cases, murdered. The streets are the domain

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of the security forces run by the ministry of internal affairs. The white-red-white flag became a symbol of the protests after the elections but not all the population unites behind it. After some initial uncertainty, Lukashenka remained in his position, firmly backed after a two-month delay by Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation. Tsikhanouskaya fled to Lithuania and her partner Veranika Tsepkala to Latvia. Kalesnikava was taken by her captors by car to the Ukrainian border, but she tore up her passport before she could be deported. She is currently on trial in Minsk and remains defiant.

The future of the Lukashenka regime

Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka, the former Minister of Culture (2009–12), helped to form a coordinating council to organise a transfer of power. Its members in Belarus were all arrested while others fled abroad. Tsikhanouskaya has taken on the role of an international ambassador for her country, explaining the opposition position to political leaders across Europe, the United States and Canada. While she is effective, there is little prospect of her returning to Belarus.

Lukashenka, meanwhile, unrecognised as a leader in the democratic world, goes through the rituals of leadership. He plans to hold a meeting of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly – a hand-picked body that follows his instructions – to discuss constitutional changes. He has rebuffed Russian attempts to set up pro-Russian political parties in Belarus but succumbed to other demands, resulting in the destruction of independent media and the loss of a national foreign policy. Russian propaganda is now predominant in Belarus. Most of Lukashenka's high-level meetings are with Putin, and they are lengthy, but discussions remain secret.

> Most of Lukashenka's high-level meetings are with Putin, and they are lengthy, but the discussions remain secret.

In late April 2021, after the Ryanair flight was diverted to Minsk, while en route from Athens to Vilnius, so that authorities could detain opposition activist Raman Pratasevich, the international outcry far exceeded anything that happened during the mass detentions. Much stronger sanctions were applied by the EU and the United States, this time covering investments, insurance and the exports of potash and tobacco; their impact will be long-term rather than short. Belavia airlines was essentially banned from European airspace. Such measures push Belarus further into the Russian camp. Its borders have been closed and it is in a state of cold war with Lithuania and Poland, where most exiles are now domiciled.

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Lukashenka predictably blames the West and especially the United States for his situation. He believes Donald Trump was illegally removed from office. He claims that he is the victim of a recent assassination attempt – just as prior to the elections he spoke about a terrorist plot to disrupt them. He also maintains he has helped avoid a third world war through his resistance to western intrusions and his friendship with Vladimir Putin. His relations with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy are hostile, ending his role as a mediator in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia over Donbas. Thus, he is very isolated other than to the east with Moscow.

None of this suggests that he has a firm hold on reality. His comments indicate that he regards his presence in the presidential palace as the only guarantor of peace and stability in Belarus. He identifies his own cause with that of the state. If the people transgress, then by his logic, they must be punished. Punishment is harsh, but necessary.

Prognosis

Last month when I spoke by phone to a friend, who is around the same age as Tsikhanouskaya, she informed me that the entire mindset of the country has changed over the past year, but no one is safe from arrest. The incarcerations are often random and unexpected. A middle-aged couple in Minsk, likewise, declared their anxiety to leave "this concentration camp." How long will Lukashenka remain in office? Will he act on his statement to step down "very soon"?

The answers to these questions can only be speculative, but some brief prognoses and conclusions can be made:

1. The opposition cannot hope to defeat the regime by peaceful protests alone.
2. Russia's support for Lukashenka is short rather than long-term. There is a serious risk of antagonising a largely Russophile population otherwise.
3. The ruling elite has remained mostly behind Lukashenka but the situation is not static. The authority of the security council has been enhanced and its membership widened. Conceivably, it could choose to take power itself.
3. No solution to Belarus's problems is likely to emanate from constitutional changes without the prior departure of Lukashenka and the dismantling of the current security council.
4. The European Union, in imposing sanctions, needs to consider how to assist the working population of Belarus that will be most affected.
5. The release of political prisoners will not be negotiable as a bargain chip for ending sanctions, as it was in the past. There are no prospects of a return to normality between Lukashenka and the EU.

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6. Most Belarusians are quite comfortable with Russia as a neighbour and partner. Thus, while asserting the importance of continued Belarusian independence, the EU has the option to approach Russia (including a reduction of current sanctions on that country) in order to assist in finding a solution to the impasse in Belarus. Such a move, which is not so far-fetched, would not be well received in Ukraine, Poland or the Baltic States, but it is rational given the lopsided balance of forces in the region.
7. The United States has not intervened in the Belarusian imbroglio but it is far more concerned about the situation under President Joe Biden than it was under Trump. Its presence as an active but cautious player is critical.

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Repressions reveal the ruthlessness of the Lukashenka regime

STEPHAN MALERIUS

Since August last year, the Belarusian regime under Alyaksandr Lukashenka has instituted a system of repressions which is unprecedented for Europe in the second decade of the 21st century. By the end of July this year there were 604 political prisoners in Belarus, the total number of those imprisoned after August 9th 2020 is estimated at more than 35,000. Thirty-two Belarusian journalists are currently in custody, either awaiting trial or serving their sentences.

For more than 25 out of its 30 years of independence, Belarus has been a country governed by a sophisticated state-run system of repressions. Yet since last year's presidential elections, these repressions lost their sophistication and reached a different level in terms of quantity and "quality". There are at least three perspectives to consider when examining what is happening in Belarus since August 9th 2020.

The first is the global perspective that both US president Joe Biden and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya referred to during their meeting at the White House in July when describing Belarus as being on the frontline of a battle between democracy and autocracy. A second more country-specific perspective is looking at the repressive actions of the Belarusian regime that had led to the democratic community – the US, Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom and numerous other states – to introduce sanctions against Alyaksandr Lukashenka and its entourage

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as a result of human rights violations, electoral fraud and the violent repression of civil society, democratic opposition and journalists, most significantly symbolised by the forced landing of the Ryanair flight in Minsk and the related detention of Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega.

The third perspective is zooming in on what is happening on the ground level, namely, differentiating between police violence on the streets, the forced entry into private homes or businesses, the random fines imposed on citizens, the punishment of family members for alleged offenses committed by their relatives, the removing of children from the custody of their parents, the risk of losing one's job or being expelled from university, arbitrary detentions, torture and killings. All of this is covered by a complete dysfunctional legal system and total lawlessness. All three perspectives are interrelated and equally important with the third one building the basis for, and substantiating, the other two.

New scale of repressions

When writing about repressions in Belarus – it is a good idea to start with numbers. As of the end of July this year there are 604 political prisoners in Belarus, the total number of those imprisoned after August 9th 2020 is estimated at more than 35,000. Thirty-two Belarusian journalists are currently in custody, either awaiting trial or serving their sentences. There have been 4,691 criminal cases related to peaceful protests launched, mostly concerning political graffiti or "insulting government officials". Within a year Belarusians are estimated to have paid more than 850,000 euros in fines for participating in protests. It is difficult to establish an accurate number of ill-treatment but during the post-election unrest between August 9th and 11th, the human rights NGO, Viasna, documented 500 cases of torture. More than 200 raids of offices and apartments of activists and journalists have been reported in July this year alone. Fifty-six NGOs have been forced to close during a nationwide crackdown on civil society in July, including the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Belarusian PEN Centre, the European Youth Parliament, the BelSetka Anti-AIDS group, an organisation that assists disabled people and an animal rights group.

Within a year Belarusians are estimated to have paid more than 850,000 euros in fines for participating in protests.

This does not take into account all those who have been sacked from work, expelled from university, or forced to leave the country. It does not account for the torture that has happened during arrests, the use of electric shock devices and tear

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gas, psychological humiliation, rape and sexual abuse, and the deprivation of food, water, hygiene, sleep and medical assistance. The aim of the abuse is to punish and humiliate – they are intentional, widespread and systematic. They are targeted at protesters, though sometimes bystanders have been assaulted or attacked.

Individual cases further illustrate and underline the magnitude of brutality and inhumanity that is occurring in the middle of present day Europe. For example, a woman on her way to a driving lesson was grabbed by four men in black balaclavas in Minsk. They told her she was dressed improperly. The reason? She was wearing white socks with red stripes. A judge ordered her to pay 2,320 Belarus roubles (780 euros), according to a law banning unauthorised protests. Alexander Gazimov, 35, a construction worker, was detained in the aftermath of a protest last August in northern Minsk. Trying to evade arrest, he broke his leg. When the officers caught him, they threw him into a van and beat him for about 10 minutes. The police repeatedly stepped on and kicked his broken leg, inquiring "Is your leg really broken?" They also threatened him with rape.

In Homiel, Dmitry Lukowski, arrested on the street by police, described a corridor full of OMON officers waiting to beat him and other detainees, recounting: "At first, I kept silent, but then I started screaming. I fainted, but they splashed water into my face and continued to beat me. There was blood everywhere and I saw a few teeth on the floor [not my own]." At some point a policeman grabbed him by the hair and said, "So, Lukowski, you want a lawyer?" When he answered, "Yes," the officer beat him again and asked, "So, Lukowski, you still want a lawyer?" Despite many proven cases of torture, abuse and arbitrary arrests, not a single member of the security forces has been put on trial.

International reaction

One reason for the ruthlessness of the Lukashenka regime is that there seemed to be a momentum for the protest movement after the election day in August 2020. Tens of thousands attended rallies that were creative, almost cheerful, attracting international attention. Protesters would organise decentralised meetings in courtyards after it had become impossible to peacefully gather in central places, making it harder for the police to control them. But with time, the brutality of the security forces against the protesters resulted in this momentum fading away.

The EU, its member states and (transatlantic) partners began to support the peaceful protesters in Belarus: Lukashenka was not recognised as president, instead that went to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the likely actual winner of the elections. Lithuania and Poland provided support for activists fleeing the country. Moreover,

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206 European politicians have taken on the role of god-parent for political prisoners. In June this year the EU imposed the fourth package of sanctions against the Lukashenka regime. In Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany legal inquiries into the regime's conduct are being prepared. And, perhaps most importantly, an international accountability platform for Belarus was established, collecting and preserving evidence of torture and other serious human rights violations in a secure manner.

What can be done?

In light of the above, what else can and should be done? Three points seem to stand out. First, the EU has already provided significant support to civil society in Belarus. However, bureaucracy in Brussels is often making its support less effective – poor management of funding, lengthy decision-making processes and administrative requirements. In this exceptional situation, procedures for support programmes need to be simplified as much as possible, including the provision of humanitarian funds that directly help people and families of those who are imprisoned or need to flee abroad.

Second, some (geographically) relevant EU member states like Germany are still not flexible enough when it comes to issuing visas for Belarusians in need. EU member states need to be as flexible as possible in granting visas for repressed Belarusians.

Lastly, the international community has so far stopped short of naming Russia as the sponsor, agitator and instigator for the actions of the Belarusian regime. The key to ending violence is in Moscow, and international anger to what is going on in Belarus should be directed at Lukashenka the same way as at Putin. In the joint communication of the EU on EU-Russia relations from June 16th this year there is no mention of Russia's backing of Belarus. The EU, the US and their partners need to be much more outspoken, making it clear to Putin that he too will be made responsible for the violence in Belarus. NEE

Stephan Malerius is a member of the board of the German-based NGO Human Rights in Belarus and former head of the Belarus office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

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Who bears the costs of the EU's sanctions?

DANIEL KRUTZINNA

The current sanctions by the West against Belarus might end up being ineffective, if not counterproductive. They will certainly contribute to the economic stress of the population at large and current independent business owners in particular. But it remains doubtful if they will achieve their aim of ousting Lukashenka.

In June 2021 the European Union announced a new package (the fourth one) of sanctions against the Belarusian regime, including sectoral sanctions aimed at restricting commodity exports of oil products and potash. Many have argued these sanctions will force financial difficulties on the state and thus increase pressures on Alyaksandr Lukashenka to step down, making way for new and free elections. Yet the question remains how effective they really will be if the aim is to ultimately bring down Lukashenka and bring democracy to Belarus?

There is a wide variety of sanctions now in place. Restricting regime officials from entering the EU is certainly a symbolic gesture, but it does not largely affect the regime economically, especially if members of the elite are more oriented towards the East. Cutting financial ties for state enterprises will certainly increase the costs of capital for the domestic economy, thus making it less competitive and lowering GDP.

Who will be affected?

As a result of the sanctions, the local currency (the Belarusian rouble) will eventually have to depreciate, thus decreasing the purchasing power of the Belarusians

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traveling abroad. With a highly dollarised economy, the National Bank (Central Bank) of Belarus has limited options (and resources) to intervene, thus it is very likely that inflation will rise. All these factors, rather than forcing the regime out, will lead to a lowering of living standards.

Sanctions such as limiting the national airline Belavia from flying to destinations across the West will hit Belarusians and limit them from one of the few transit channels remaining. Sectoral sanctions will have a significant impact on the important refinery and petrochemical industry, and it will make the export of Potash more expensive as the Klaipėda port will be closed to Belarusian ships. Yet this will not block exports completely. Of course, some Belarusians – a small minority – will find it appropriate that the West is interfering, but for most ordinary people it is hard to explain why they should suffer the consequences. State propaganda channels – which are getting more media savvy over time – are easily blaming the West for the worsening economic conditions in the country. In other words, the sanctions will hit Belarusians citizens harder than being able to destroy the domestic economy.

State propaganda channels are quick to blame western sanctions for the worsening economic conditions in the country.

Another key question is whether sanctions will force the local elite to turn against Lukashenka. For business elite, from the public and private sectors, the sanctions will affect the Belarusian model of acquiring resources and markets in the East, and financing and modernisation technologies from the West. For years now, Belarus (and Lukashenka in particular) have been successful in extracting huge rents from Russia (around 100 billion US dollars between 1995 and 2015) for little more than political loyalty and some economic integration (Union State, etc.). Yet after the Minsk Peace accords on Ukraine in 2015, Lukashenka was able to put himself back in the spotlight as a neutral buffer state, being economically integrated with Russia, but also doing business with its EU neighbours such as Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

It is ironic that the Belarusian-based Mozyr oil refinery, running on Russia's crude oil, has provided most of the fuel for Ukrainian tanks in its war with forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. The Belarusian business elite had profited significantly from this quasi-neutral status, doing business with all sides, without any serious concessions; yet most members of the elite are dissatisfied with the situation where Belarus has been drawn into a geopolitical conflict where it has to choose between the West or Russia. Most of the traditional elite, however, will probably side with Russia for the following reasons: economic integration and dependence; rental gains are higher with Russia than the West; and the threat of a full Russian intervention in the case of a new government.

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Not so private sector

It has been argued that the private sector has been growing in Belarus over recent years and that it has the potential to be an agent for democratic change. This is certainly true in part (such as the IT sector), but the private sector that is functioning under normal market conditions is still less than 20 per cent by my estimates (with an overall private sector of around 55 per cent by 2020). The remaining 35 per cent is formally called the private sector but is still dependent on the state and its distribution system – for instance, purchasing equipment from state factories, distributing state products abroad, producing goods from state-owned facilities, production with state subsidies, retail business using state properties and licences, or simply using state connections for protecting businesses from international competition.

The business elites (which add up to around 75 per cent of GDP) have therefore little interest in radical change. They might understand that long term reforms are necessary, but in the short term they will act against any changes they will not be able to adapt quickly to. What is more, many of these business leaders earning real assets inside the country might dislike (or even hate) Lukashenka, but they did not speak out during the protests last year. As a result, they are now in a position where they fear regime change, as they could be held responsible (at least partly) for some of the events in 2020. A new regime could expose their ties with Lukashenka and highlight their personal wealth. Hence, they would probably prefer substituting Lukashenka with a more neutral figure – ideally Russia because the Kremlin would certainly not prosecute them for their ties with Lukashenka.

In regards to regular workers, it is often argued that if they have nothing to lose, they will finally make some decisive moves. Yet, all evidence so far suggests that even during the peak the protests were largely engaged by the elite not dependent on the old rent distribution system, mostly from the IT sector, or truly independent private enterprises. The protest mood at state enterprises were brought under control relatively quickly due to the fact that most of them are overstaffed and employees could easily be substituted by other workers. And with average wages of factory workers decreasing, many workers did not have much financial security to take time out of work to protest.

Russian view

It is sometimes argued that sanctions will increase costs of Russia's support for the Lukashenka regime and that could help in removing him from power. How-

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ever, in my view, quite the opposite is true. Politically, a weakened and cornered Lukashenka is a lot easier for Moscow to handle and much easier to negotiate with. The additional costs of maintaining Lukashenka in power could add up to a few billion dollars over the next few years, which is actually not very much considering how much the Kremlin has already spent.

Russia would certainly not like to show that public street protests can be successful in a neighbouring country and they would certainly not tolerate a pro-western candidate winning a presidential election in Belarus. Recall Putin's response after the August 2020 elections. He immediately recognised Lukashenka as the winner (even as Lavrov was talking about questions concerning the election process and the unnecessary use of violence). Putting the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardia*) at the border with Belarus in Smolensk was certainly not a sign for change, but more a signal for the local elite to keep quiet.

In this respect, Putin made it very clear that any attempts to force Lukashenka out would be considered as instigated by the West and would lead to Russian intervention. The Belarusian elite were scared, both in terms of personal safety and financially, and decided to wait for a new window of opportunity rather than risking a conflict with Russia.

Ultimately, the current sanctions by the West could end up being ineffective – if not counterproductive – especially if their primary aim is to move the country onto a more democratic track, independent of Russia. To be sure, sanctions will hit many Belarusians economically and limit their capacity to travel. Yet the sanctions can be interpreted as a moral response to human rights infringements, but it is not clear enough whether European businesses really want or support them.

Alternative approach?

Taking into account the above, I do not propose any easy alternatives to the current situation. Yet there are a few real policy options which could be considered if the EU, and the West in general, want to have an impact on the current regime (rather than struggling Belarusians).

First, use the current sanctions to demand freedom for political prisoners in Belarus; once that happens, then start a de-escalation path to calm down the situation and try and find an agreement for protecting civil society organisations in the country. In my opinion, this is the most that the EU and the US can achieve without a real confrontation with Russia. There is also the option of positive sanctions (i.e. carrots) that could bring about reforms by opening up markets or offering additional financing. This would assist a return to the longer-term strategy of

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promoting market-oriented reforms in the country and waiting out the old guard which is set to retire in the next 10–15 years. In fact, if a revolution would have happened in the next presidential election of 2025 or 2030, it might have succeeded due to an even greater critical mass.

Another important step should be engagement with Russia in a difficult, but unavoidable, dialogue over Belarus. The aim would be to try and offer Russia some guarantees that a Belarus without Lukashenka will not mean an anti-Russian Belarus. Objectively, the situation in Belarus, where 80 per cent or so of ordinary citizens want Lukashenka out, is different to the situation in Russia, where the leadership is still largely supported for putting Russia back on the global stage. These ambitions are fully absent in any part of the Belarusian elite. They would like to retain their status within the country.

The 2020 protests are an illustration of the weaknesses of the fully centralised decision making system, where one person – completely detached from reality – can cause a lot more damage than a system with proper checks and balances. It took Lukashenka just a few months to destroy the few remaining checks and balances within his own system, and is now fully dependent on a hard line fraction that will divide the country for many years to come.

This division will not be along the lines of ethnic or religious conflict, as in many other countries, but of culprit and victim within the same nation; along the lines of "Yabatka" and "Smagary", often even within the same families.

At some point we could see even larger numbers of Belarusians on the streets, with more violence, arrests and torture in prisons. The judiciary is not independent and many innocent people will be forced to participate in the falsification of elections or in controlling protests in the factories. Every family has had, or will have, contact with both sides: the culprits and the victims. For the moment, many on the side of Lukashenka fear that they will go to jail if there is a change in power. It will take many years more, if not a generation, until it will be irrelevant which side you took during the summer and autumn of 2020. NEE

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The essence of Belarusian solidarity

MAGDALENA CHODOWNIK AND OMAR MARQUES

Thousands of Belarusians have fled to Poland. They include students, pensioners, mothers, and the children of parents who were arrested. Yet, these Belarusians continue the fight, despite the risks. They have formed structures and organisations which provide aid, political analysis and cultural promotion. And they have managed to turn the world's eyes on Belarus.

Since the rigged presidential elections in Belarus last year, thousands of Belarusians have come to Poland seeking refuge from the repressions of the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime. Almost a thousand of them have already received political asylum and protection. However, their struggle for democracy in Belarus did not end with their departures. In exile, they grouped, got involved and created initiatives that allowed them to not only maintain a spirit of solidarity, but to continue the fight for a free Belarus.

From victim to guilty

During one of the first protests in Minsk, Vitali* was hit by a grenade. The blast ripped a piece of his skin and muscle away. He lost a lot of blood while lying on the street. He waited a long time before receiving help, because no one could get through the blocked streets. He spent weeks in hospital healing. When he was

* For security reasons, the names of some activists have been changed.

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due to be discharged, his friends advised him not to return home. People already knew that victims of Lukashenka's brutality were searched by the authorities and then accused of participating in illegal protests (the infamous article 23.34 part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code punishes those who "conduct" illegal demonstrations or other mass public events), or, in the case of those who have actively opposed the regime, they could be accused of terrorism or an attempted coup. Victims were immediately labelled as guilty of crimes against the regime. Punishments include fines, imprisonment and torture.

Vitali did as he was told – he did not go back home. He was advised to inform his immediate family and to try to leave the country as soon as possible. "I was told that it would be possible to travel to Poland, that the Polish Embassy would help us to leave," Vitali explains. "So my wife packed the most necessary things, we took the children and we left Belarus with the first possible transport."

Two employees of the Ministry of Light Industry peek into the cardboard boxes placed in the rooms – one with clothing, the other with bed sheets. There are dozens of other boxes here as well. Women take out each item, unfold it, check it and, if good enough, put it back into the box. Items include women's blouses, men's trousers and children's sweaters; there are toys in other rooms of the ministry, towels and shoes.

"Once we sort everything, we will take it to the Belarusians in need. Those who had to flee immediately usually have nothing except what they were wearing on them at the very moment", they explain to us. The Ministry of Light Industry, as they call themselves, is part of an initiative called "Partisan", carried out in Poland jointly by Belarusians and Poles. Their activity focuses on many aspects of assistance to respond to the basic needs of Belarusians fleeing to Poland, like Vitali's family. The Ministry of Light Industry is responsible for material aid, the Ministry of Language for help in learning Polish, and the Ministry of Housing helps newcomers find a place to live. The alternative Belarusian government is based on solidarity and kindness.

One of the activists of "Partisans" is Jana Shostak, a Polish-Belarusian activist known for "The Minute of Scream for Belarus" (a performance during which, wearing a white and red dress, Jana Shostak screams in order to draw attention to the Belarusian issue). She brings clothes to the ministry, drives to refugee centres and other places where Belarusians are to distribute help, knocks on the doors of Polish politicians, fights for a faster process of issuing visas for those in need, creates an info-line for newcomers and strives for better migration policy in general.

"I have this strength from people who share with me their stories of torture through which they went. I take my strength from political prisoners who still write, in their letters, asking not to give up. I take strength from every family I see

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here in Warsaw, and despite the terrible situation, the separation of their families, the death of individual family members, they still want to fight for a new Belarus. New and free," she concludes.

"Victory" Plan

Not only do the victims of the regime and their families flee to Poland, so do former employees of the regime – employees from the lower and higher levels of Lukashenka's apparatus, including member of the police force of the "siloviki", security forces. In Warsaw, they created an organisation called ByPol, which – thanks to its contacts, knowledge and information obtained "from within" – carries out investigations into the activities of the regime, as well as mobilising Belarusians inside the country.

"With the help of our specialists, we started the so-called 'Victory' plan – a plan for the mobilisation of the mass public, which is taking place inside our country. Specifically, we have created an anonymous bot, so that people can join or sign up with us via Telegram. They answer a small questionnaire, a few questions, and after we receive these answers, we already know how and where to group them. It is important for us to be able to form groups out of them in order to be able to give them specific tasks later," explains Alexandr Azarov, one of ByPol's employees and a former Lieutenant Colonel with the Belarusian police. He quit his job and came to Poland to work for the organisation.

> Even the slightest display of disagreement with the authorities is enough to end up being beaten or imprisoned.

The street protests in Belarus are over for now. Even the slightest display of disagreement with the authorities is enough to end up being beaten or imprisoned. As Azarov explains, during the big wave of demonstrations, the special forces and police were ordered to beat demonstrators so that they would not be able to physically return to the streets to demonstrate. "Now people don't want to go out anymore, but they still want change," he continues. "It ends with arrests and fines. And if you count all those fines together, it would be millions of dollars. And why should we finance the regime with these fines?"

That is why ByPol has developed a different strategy, although its goal is the same as that of the majority – to remove Lukashenka from power and bring democratic change to Belarus. "There must be enough people, and then we will only wait for the right moment, when we can put these mobilised groups into action," Azarov explains. "When that moment comes, it will be a bloodless revolution in the country."

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Alex (age 20) speaks with Alex (age 40) as they enjoy warm weather after finishing their physiotherapy session as part of his long-term therapy in a Rehabilitation Centre in Duszniki Zdroj, Poland. The Polish Government and the Belarusian House organised an initiative providing visas, transport and medical assistance for protesters injured during from Belarus.

Photo: Omar Marques

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Belarus, Ukrainian and Polish citizens wear protective face masks, hold up Belarusian flags, banners and lights from their phones during a solidarity march supporting opposition protests against Lukashenka in Kraków, Poland.

Photo: Omar Marques

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People hang paper aircrafts on a string during a protest demanding freedom for the Belarus opposition activist Raman Protasevich in front of the European Commission representative's office in May 2021 in Warsaw.

Photo: Omar Marque

The exiled Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya delivers a speech to Belarusians and Poles in June 2021 in Warsaw.

Photo: Omar Marques

The fight

"Today's emigration is different than earlier ones, the one that has been fleeing Belarus since last year. Before, mainly political activists, civil activists and journalists have fled the country. Today, even ordinary people who have never dealt with politics are forced to escape in search of safety. Today, one can be repressed for really anything," says Aleś Zarembiuk, head of the Belarusian House in Warsaw.

The scale of repression is also unprecedented as is the number of people seeking refuge. Thousands like Vitali fled to Poland. They include students, pensioners, mothers, the children of parents who were arrested and people whose only crime was to take to the streets and voice their opinion. Among them are Belarusian politicians, Olga Kovalkova, who was forcibly driven out of the country, and politician Pavel Latushko. The group of asylum seekers was recently joined by the Olympic athlete, Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, who received threats for criticising the Belarus Olympic Committee. As a result, she had to hide in the Polish Embassy from Belarusian officials and did not return to her country from Tokyo. After being granted a humanitarian visa, she flew to Poland, where her husband and child are about to join her.

Despite the risks, even abroad, Belarusians continue the fight. They have formed structures and organisations that operate in many sectors – aid, political, cultural and information. They managed to turn the world's eyes on Belarus. For the past year, the Belarusian community in exile, has been a loud voice of their country, a voice of constructive opposition to Lukashenka's rule.

When Vitali and his family were leaving Belarus, it was still possible to cross the Polish-Belarusian border. Over time, however, the government of Belarus has closed its land borders, and after diverting the flight with Roman Protasevich on board earlier this year, Poland stopped all direct flights to Belarus (as well as flights over Belarusian air space). Today, it is more difficult for Belarusians to escape – they have to organise flights through other countries, such as Russia, Ukraine or Turkey, or cross borders illegally. But Belarusian migrants in neighbouring countries do what they can to help to make such trips possible and to help others to reach a safe place. NEE

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The power of internet as a game changer for Belarusian protests

VERANIKA LAPUTSKA

The Telegram platform and online news outlets have succeeded in covering the events of 2020 and 2021 very well and they were used to announce demonstrations during the peak of the protests. Thanks to them, the sense of unity and solidarity disseminated quickly among Belarusians inside the country and the diaspora abroad.

When the 2020 presidential election campaign launched in Belarus, the government authorities did not pay much attention to the enormous popularity of the online media, especially social media. Being confident in his "elegant victory" (this was the term used by the long-term head of the Belarusian Central Election Commission, Lidziya Yarmoshyna), Alyaksandr Lukashenka did not invest much effort on any inventive campaign tools. His campaign team mainly relied on the monopolised television and radio channels, and state financed newspapers.

In contrast to this, Lukashenka's opponents in the presidential race were largely relying on new media. Unregistered presidential candidate, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, gained his popularity thanks to the YouTube channel Country for Living (*Strana dlya Zhizni*), and later during his campaign (which was taken over by his wife Sviatlana after his arrest), he became recognisable in many Belarusian cities and towns. Presidential candidate Viktar Babaryka was extremely active on Instagram, similarly to his counterparts, Andrei Dzmitryieu and Hanna Kanapatskaya.

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Trusting bond

Following the arrests of Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktar Babaryka, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maryia Kalesnikava (from Viktar Babaryka's election headquarters) and Veranika Tsapkala (the wife of another candidate Valery Tsapkala denied registration) as a trio became media sensations. The three women toured around the country holding massive rallies – something not seen in Belarus since the 1990s.

Telegram enabled anonymous accounts to share leaked information from state institutions and hospitals about the real pandemic situation.

Kalesnikava, Tsapkala and Tsikhanouskaya were actively using social media to share insights from their election campaigns, often doing live streams from their meetings with citizens. This was so unusual for the people of Belarus who could finally comment on videos and photos shared by their favourite candidates and see, on a daily basis, the work they were doing. This created a sense of bond and trust between the three women and their supporters. Belarusians appreciated the fact that through social media Maryia, Veranika and Sviatlana seemed to be very down-to-earth and genuine, unlike politicians of the previous generations.

All major independent media channels and websites enabled live streams using Instagram, Facebook and YouTube – channels most suitable for live transmission. Such images not only provided Belarusians with the most recent news updates, they also contributed to Belarusians' emancipation. It encouraged more people to come out onto the streets when online they could see supporters of oppositional candidates participating in the rallies. By August 2020 Telegram became the crucial source for news in Belarus, given the condition of information vacuum and dominance of state propaganda on the main television channels. In the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe and Belarusians were desperate to find out about the real health situation in the country, the authorities remained unwilling to publish figures on infection numbers and death rates. However, Telegram news channels enabled anonymous accounts to share leaked information from state institutions and hospitals about the real pandemic situation.

When the election campaign started, major channels on Telegram – such as *NEXTA, Belarus Golovnogo Mozga, Maya Kraina Belarus* – were already trustworthy news sources in the eyes of Belarusians. These channels became the driving force that called for anti-government protests in case the victory of Tsikhanouskaya was not recognised. Thanks to Telegram people were able to follow the dramatic events unfolding on the streets of Minsk. Independent Telegram channels also

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shared instructions how to avoid the internet blockage which the authorities imposed a couple of days after the election.

Marches via Telegram

After August 12th 2020, when the internet was unblocked, millions across the world witnessed the brutal scenes of violence against the citizens of Belarus; giving a new level of protest potential. People began to self-organise through Telegram chats and attend protests together. It felt safe for participants to be in such chats as it allowed partial anonymity and made it easy for users to create a specific chat and invite participants. Belarusian women wearing white clothes went out to protest carrying flowers and calling upon the authorities to stop the violence.

> On the day of demonstrations, Telegram channels would update users about the location and any change of protest routes.

Day after day more people joined. First, doctors stood against the violence after seeing thousands of injured in the hospitals. Then employees of the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company went out to protest as they refused to broadcast the lies on TV and radio. Workers of major Belarusian factories and companies left their workplaces demanding the authorities to stop the violence and for Lukashenka to resign. Musicians, actors, pensioners, students, persons with disabilities, women, drivers, athletes and other groups were uniting thanks to Telegram and organising their protest activities there.

Telegram news channels succeeded in covering all these events. The sense of unity and solidarity disseminated quickly among Belarusians inside the country, as well as the Belarusian diaspora. On Sunday, August 16th 2020, hundreds of thousands of people marched in a peaceful demonstration called the March of Freedom. In cities and towns across the country, and indeed around the world, people demonstrated their support.

Since that Sunday, every Sunday was given a special name by leading Telegram channels – such as the march of wisdom, the march of the people's tribunal, the march of the brave, unity march, and the peace march. In addition, Telegram channels were announcing marches of various societal groups – women's marches for every Saturday, pensioners' march for every Monday, and so on. On the day of demonstrations Telegram channels were updating users about the location, sporadic detentions of protesters and change of routes. The significance of Telegram's role in the protests led to the international scandal in May this year when one of the former editors-in-chief of *NEXTA*, Raman Pratasevich, was detained

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in Minsk by the Belarusian authorities after forcefully diverting a plane he was on from Athens to Vilnius.

The self-organisation of the protesters took on a horizontal approach. Neighbours would organise special chats, via Telegram, in their local area, and then would gather nearby before heading towards the main protest. Local chats then transformed into "yard chats" where those living nearby would gather in common yards to drink tea together, watch films or listen to local musicians. This started happening in most cities and towns across the country.

The "yard chats" became a unique phenomenon for the protests of 2020. The website Dze.chat accumulated all such chats inside and outside Belarus on its platform. Later in 2020, when the Belarusian authorities started to identify and detain those active in their local chats, others often pulled back from neighbours' activities. The death of Raman Bandarenka, who was beaten to death after his detention in a famous yard called "The Square of Changes", last November terrified many Belarusians. With the beginning of winter and further repressions and emigration of many yard activists, the chats became less active. Since the spring of 2021 the Belarusian ministry of information has named most yard chats as "ex-

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tremist" activities; thus imposing potential criminal charges on participants and further discouraging people from active participation.

The power of YouTube

Most independent Belarusian media have been using YouTube for many years before the 2020 elections. Some channels, such as Belsat TV – the only independent TV channel broadcasting from Poland – had only been able to operate either via a satellite or YouTube. Other outlets like *NEXTA* initially started by hosting content on YouTube and then established a Telegram channel following its development and the new possibilities the platform was providing.

At the beginning of 2021 *NEXTA Live* announced that they would focus on international news with special attention on the post-Soviet countries, whereas *NEXTA* would remain devoted to domestic news. However, *NEXTA* revived its activities on YouTube this autumn with a number of live streams discussing the protests and major events in Belarus and abroad. In March *NEXTA*'s YouTube channel premiered a film titled, *Lukashenka. The Golden Bottom*, about Lukashenka's alleged corruption schemes, his family's wealth and his close ties. This, in a way, was a response to the film by Alexey Navalny, premiered in January, about Russian President Vladimir Putin and his alleged palace. Later *NEXTA* continued to produce documentaries and regular live streams to discuss hot Belarusian topics.

Many active figures maintained their YouTube presence. The important YouTube channel – The Country for Living – previously led by Siarhei Tsikhanouski still functions. Pavel Latushka, a former politician and former minister of culture and ambassador, established his own YouTube channel to stay connected with his supporters.

Many prominent initiatives such as *Kupalaucy*, actors who left the most prominent Belarusian Kupalauski theatre after August 2020, and *Volny Chor*, composed of musicians and singers who left the Belarusian Philharmonic, created YouTube channels to share their performances no longer possible in Belarus. The *Volny Chor* (Free Choir) became famous when they started to emerge in different places in Minsk, including shopping centres and on regular streets, singing Belarusian folk songs and songs associated with the Belarusian anti-Soviet opposition.

An important YouTube trend was the emergence of interviews of Belarusian protests leaders and activists given to Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian bloggers and journalists. Thus their personalities became known among Russian-speaking YouTube audiences. In September 2020 the famous Russian journalist and blogger Yury Dud published his interview with Stsiapan Putsila, founder of *NEXTA*.

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In October another Russian blogger and journalist, Irina Shikhman, interviewed Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya about her new role as representative of the Belarusian people. In February 2021 Ukrainian journalist Dmitry Gordon also published his interview with Tsikhanouskaya.

A new YouTube project created in June 2020 by Mikita Melkaziorau, called *Zhizn Malina* (in English, *Raspberry Life*, meaning, *Dolce Vita*), features interviews with key leaders and activists connected with last year's election and the protests that emerged afterwards. This includes many who were imprisoned or were forced to leave the country.

Without a doubt, social media's influence on the protests continues to grow and evolve despite the massive scale of emigration and the ongoing repressions and imprisonments taking place within the country. With a new wave of anti-media campaigns and the inability of citizens to organise street demonstrations, the virtual space has become the only field to express discontent with the Belarusian regime. As long as the regime remains brutal and unchangeable and as long as the protest determination and anti-Lukashenka sentiment does not disappear, this trend will remain in place and continue.

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The Belarus book

An interview with Kasia Syramalot, author of *The Belarus Book* – a visual story of Belarus over the past decade. Interviewer: Anastasia Starchenko

ANASTASIA STARCHENKO: You refer to *The Belarus Book* as a visual story of Belarus, a reflection of its authenticity and travel discoveries. There has been a growing impression that the true identity of Belarus and its culture are poorly documented outside the country and hidden behind common clichés. Would you say it's still true?

KASIA SYRAMALOT: I started photo-documenting Belarus about 15 years ago. In fact, the last decade of the documentary work found their way into the book. Yes, unfortunately, I had to wade through many of the clichés that were common. Perhaps it was because even the Belarusians themselves perceived their country as something ordinary and uninteresting. Social poverty had a role, too. It was considered prestigious to go see the countries of Europe or beaches with exotic flora. For a long time, villages and old monuments were thought of as "ruins", and only the intelligentsia would find them interesting.

Practically every Belarusian can trace their roots to the village, everybody has relatives or grandparents in the village community. In some peculiar way, it had preserved culture under our skin. The generation of 30-somethings reminisces about drinking fresh milk, their grandmother milking cows in the countryside, and making simple meals; they have a perfect memory of using wells. In other words, my generation is a unique generation of transition – we know the old ways of life from our childhood, which was commonplace to us, but we also managed to travel across continents, because it is so accessible today. And what surprises me is that it is so easy to find images of any place around the world, but there are so few photos of Belarus. I am glad that some strange feeling had kept me documenting Belarus over the past decade, even though many people told me they did not see a story in it. The value of photographs, especially photo archives, increases throughout the years; what seemed ordinary today might, in a few years, become a historical document. This is what, for exam-

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ple, Napoleon Orda's prints are now for Belarusians and Poles.

There is a typical view of Belarus that is circulating in the media – the view of a foreign journalist or photographer. I have been observing what exactly my visiting colleagues were shooting and it would always make me feel frustrated as a Belarusian. I could see clear patterns – arriving in the country in a clammy November, taking photographs of gloomy, small town streets, people wearing dark coats against the backdrop of Soviet monuments. Then there is slush, cheerless faces, some blurred roads, the abandoned Soviet sanatorium, and the young girl – the brighter her makeup, the shorter her skirt the better. Nobody seemed to be interested in anything beyond this isolated fragment of reality. Although many out there are working on some cool projects, there are some beautiful places and ordinary, kind people – it just wouldn't make such an interesting and scandalous story, it certainly wouldn't bring a photo contest award.

Perhaps my view in the photo book differs from the generally accepted image of the country, even inside Belarus. After all, the official Belarusian image appears to be entirely the opposite of the western one – it worships fields of wheat, the pseudo-national dress, the unprofessionally restored monuments of architecture, and the endless drone photography. From the very beginning, I did not intend to create the country's "brand" image; instead, I was able to focus on everything that I find interesting and what matters to me – places, people, ordinary life scenes, obviously the life in Minsk, and the rapid development of the Belarusian music scene, which I had the chance to witness, practically backstage, in recent years. Since my job deals with media, it was the process of weaving the threads together and watching them become a canvas of the Belarusian story that interested me the most. In any case, the visual narrative ended up being rather characteristic and quite personal. It is the ongoing search for answers to one question – what does Belarus mean to me.

Not only did Victor Martinovich write the preface to *The Belarus Book*, he also was the mastermind behind the project. How did the concept come about? How has Belarus changed over the past ten years?

It just so happened that I had a large archive collection of photos in my hands – everything I documented during my travels or shooting reports for *34mag* and our *Go To Belarus* project. This archive is quite different from what many people are used to seeing. Also, I thought it would be a great idea to summarise the decade of 2010–2020 – a critical time for Belarus, I think. This is the time when the nation was very slowly becoming itself, growing stronger; when progressive Belarusians who deliberately stayed in the country after the events of 2010 realised that everything depends on them and began to take small steps to do their thing. Some opened a bakery, some organised music festivals and

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some founded small stores. All of this eventually led to tremendous change, part of which we still must deal with. It might seem as if nothing had happened over the last ten years if you look from abroad, but in fact those invisible changes we witnessed internally were the most significant ones. But, most importantly, these changes were cautious and gradual, owing to the lack of money inside the country. When you don't have a large infusion, only your own capital – it teaches you a lot. There are also serious bureaucratic obstacles awaiting you at every step in Belarus, so every step you need to take in Europe can be multiplied by 20. Each process drags on indefinitely until you tell the officials why you're even trying to create something here. It takes a lot of persistence but having learnt this lesson it helps you not to give up. It's a hardening experience. So, on the one hand, everyone has learned how to make money and do business, and, on the other, we safeguarded the old village culture. It is almost a miracle that much has not been destroyed or demolished but preserved, because no one cared about the villages for quite some time – neither big corporations nor the state. I think that everything will soon speed up and our development will take another turn. That's why I wanted to keep such a unique period of transformation in our memory. That was the purpose of the book. I shared these thoughts with Victor Martinovich and Anton Kashlikov – they supported me and agreed to write forewords to the book, at my request. I think the three of us have a very similar view of what is happening, and we have been working together for quite a long time, so I am grateful to them for the fact that the book includes important textual explanations of the era.

Where to go in Belarus, what to see in Minsk and outside the capital? Can you share with us the unknown Belarus? With the book, Belarusians themselves will discover their origins from a new perspective.

I think it would be correct to say that Belarus is basically a country you just have to go to and see. The right question is not where to go, but why to go. When a Belarusian understands it, the answer will reveal itself. I think the main fear is of making a mistake, fear of seeing places that lack infrastructure and exist according to their own slow and quiet laws of the province. Belarus is beautiful if you remember that nobody has to entertain you – everything around you is entertainment instead. We have beautifully preserved villages that are definitely worth seeing. Belarus has a truly amazing nature and a huge number of animals and birds, which never ceases to amaze scientists from Europe. Maybe my main task, as an author and a photographer, is to be something of a guide to that wonderful Belarus. To show that what's around is not terrible; that you can always find interesting things around – all it takes is just a conversation with the locals. I would say that it is comfortable enough to travel around Belarus, and the distances are small.

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Photo by Alexandra Kononchenko

The Belarus Book is not only a visual documentary but also a very personal story about the life of big cities and small towns– a reflection of living history, culture, aesthetics, and stories about everyday life. Which images left the strongest imprint on your memory?

I do not think it would be right to single out any individual photos from the book. Over the years of my work as a photographer, I have amassed quite an impressive archive of photos of Belarus which I constantly replenish. That is why I chose only shots that could tell a story of the past decade, which I wanted to keep in my memory. I intentionally put villages next to cities, modern music with rural landscapes, urban scenes with forests. I tried to avoid conventional angles of familiar places to avoid that commonly unrealistic advertising. This is not just a collection of photos – it is a movie you

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have to watch frame by frame, and there is a certain logic to the narration. I specifically put the photo captions at the end of the book to avoid distraction and make sure the atmosphere of the shots absorbs the viewer as much as possible. Some photos come in pairs; some have an individual statement, so they cannot be put next to others. You can think of the book as a walk through the Belarus I would like others to discover.

Art can have a therapeutic effect – it helps us express our emotions, heal trauma and build resilience. It is especially relevant in light of current events. Your book, full of love and optimism, received so many touching reviews. What is it like, the Belarus worth living in, worth telling the world about?

Belarus is a country of kind people who have just begun to feel their own wings. It is a country that Belarusians themselves will have to get to know again. The country's development over the past decade has shown what can be achieved if you put faith and love it. We witnessed the development of a full-fledged creative cluster and numerous businesses, a real breakthrough and revival of the music scene. A new, progressive force, which at first no one believed in, suddenly grew in confidence to the point when it practically inspired the minds of all intelligent – but initially distrustful – people who were used to tolerating the status quo. Obviously, the book shows the very turning point when Belarusians were privately becoming people who believe in themselves, in their culture and its development. There is now a long phase of cultural confrontation that everyone has to experience and the results will be unpredictable.

At the time of writing, my younger sister, who is only 21, has already been in prison for eight months for the so-called students' case (she and many other students were detained on November 12th 2020 in Minsk; on July 16th, 2021, the court sentenced ten of the students and a teacher to two years and six months, respectively, in prison on charges of violating public order – interviewer's note). This is the flip side of the progress that the Belarusians have experienced, but the state has yet to undergo. All Belarusians are now facing a serious test of loyalty to their beliefs, no matter what.

What the past year has brought us, first and foremost, is that the Belarusians *en masse* have finally started to focus on their own country, its history, and support for everything local – as they never did before. For the first time since the Soviet collapse, Belarusians have stopped wondering if the grass is greener on the other side and started to create their own meanings. We obviously cannot speak about the lack of meaning here, because, I think, for the next 50 years or even century, history will be reflected upon and reconsidered. *The Belarus Book*, therefore, will have a crucial role in capturing the memories of a time when everything that is taking shape and growing will soon be thriving – as was the case of Berlin in the early

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2000s. About the music artists in search of themselves; about Minsk which many people I know were making better with their own efforts and letting me observe the transformation with my own eyes. I witnessed the process of reviving Kastrychnickaja Street in Minsk from the ground up. It's a metaphor for the country in miniature. I remember the public scepticism at the very beginning, and I remember the fervour of everybody involved in the transformation – they were opening galleries and bars, holding festivals, finding opportunities for creativity and international co-operation. And the widely disregarded street suddenly became interesting to everyone around. I hope the future holds something similar. I would like the book to be a harbinger of this enduring era.

Kasia Syramalot is a Belarusian designer, photographer, art-director of *34travel* and author of *The Belarus Book* – a visual story of Belarus over the past decade. Fragments of the book are available on *New Eastern Europe*'s website.

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Between history and magic

PAULINA SIEGIEŃ AND WOJCIECH SIEGIEŃ

The protesters and Belarusian commentators adopted the role of colonised objects. The scale of the protests surprised everyone. As soon they erupted, the clichéd accounts that the protests represent the birth of the nation were repeated like a mantra. Apparently it emerged suddenly and Belarusians were formed as a nation in that moment.

A year has passed since the presidential elections in Belarus, which initiated an unprecedented social uprising, often referred to as the Belarusian revolution. Like most revolutions, the Belarusian one created its own symbols. Their appearance and dissemination among the protesters had primarily a unifying function. Symbols express the intentions of a revolution. Their interpretation allows us to reconstruct the vision of the future that could emerge on the ruins of the overthrown regime. It raises the following question: one year after the start of protests, how can we describe the symbolism of the Belarusian revolution and can we say it will be an unfulfilled one?

Women's revolution?

The mass protests in Belarus started as a result of Lukashenka's rigging of the presidential election. He eliminated his main rivals from the race: Viktar Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Valery Tsapkala. Their removal forced three women, who quickly became a symbol of the entire Belarusian protest, to enter the political game. These were Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maryia Kalesnikava and Veranika

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Tsapkala. They formed something that we could call an electoral coalition. Like three female musketeers, they spoke together at rallies and meetings with Belarusians. The visual side of their performance included powerful symbols – each one assigned a characteristic hand gesture symbolising victory, love and fight.

Tsikhanouskaya's gesture was her fist clenched to fight. And, indeed, it was her, whether she wanted to or not, who ran for the presidency. We can consider her decision a forced fight because both during the campaign and while in exile, she repeated (like a mantra) that she is not a politician or a fighter, but a wife and mother who, by a twist of fate, has become a symbol of the opposition. Kalesnikava was quite different. She showed a real heart for the fight, but put forward the gesture of love. Yet it was her who refused to leave the country; she destroyed her passport and was arrested. Her trial has recently started and it is expected that she will be handed a prison sentence. The third musketeer, Tsapkala, joined her husband abroad and disappeared from the scene.

The Belarusian revolution, as we can see, is a women's revolution. It was these three women who took to the centre stage after the male candidates were arrested. They became the face of the protests. However, this fact should not be treated as evidence of general progressivism within the opposition. On the contrary, it is rather a confirmation of the traditional gender stereotypes which are characteristic of quasi-conservative post-communist societies. In Belarus, where the myth of the Great Patriotic War is especially strong, the image of women, forced to bear the burden of the struggle to survive, is a repetition of the war and post-war narratives which have been exploited for decades in official historiography.

Female heroism is that of the victim. It is a non-political activity, which is clearly visible in the figure of Tsikhanouskaya, who consistently avoids calling herself a politician. In a recent interview with the Russian television channel Dozhd (TV Rain), she nodded with understanding as the journalist said to her: "People listen to you because you speak from the bottom of your heart. Because you are not a politician and that is so great!". As paradoxical as it sounds, Tsikhanouskaya's consent to depoliticise her own role confirms Lukashenka's campaign statement that Belarus's political system does not foresee female leadership, and that Tsikhanouskaya is an ordinary housewife who only accidentally found herself as a candidate.

In Belarus, the image of women forced to bear the burden of the struggle is a repetition of the war and post-war narratives.

Thus, the Belarusian revolution can be called a female revolution, but in a stereotypical sense. It comes down to a paradigmatic confrontation: on the one hand, the protesters represented by women, are gentle and peaceful, empathetic and im-

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maculate; on the other hand, Lukashenka's regime is male, aggressive, militaristic, political, physical, dirty and dark. We have iconic images of women's marches with participants dressed in white, carrying signs with peaceful slogans, handing out flowers to security forces. On the other side we have officers in black balaclavas with guns, brutally pacifying defenceless victims. A year after the protests, when this paradigmatic confrontation was taking place on the streets of Minsk, we can see that the ruthless force has won.

Belarusian revolution – Polish or Russian?

Today, it is not difficult to find entire playlists on Spotify that refer to last year's events in Belarus. They are dominated by Belarusian performers (both old and young) who were previously involved, if not in political then cultural, opposition to Lukashenka's Soviet-kolkhoz aesthetics. They played both popular and underground bands. Some of their songs are quite old while others have been created recently, during the wave of protests. However, none of them has become a universally recognised anthem of the revolution. This is something different from the Ukrainian revolutions where hymns of revolution were established.

During the Revolution of Dignity, it was the Belarusian group Lyapis Trubetskoy that, on the Maidan, sang in Russian its protest song "Voiny Sveta". However, the group's lead singer, Siarhei Mikhalok was not an important voice of the protest in Minsk. What we saw in Belarus was quite different. Foreign media reported that there were two songs of the revolution: "The walls" by the late Polish singer and guitarist Jacek Kaczmarski and "Peremen" ("Changes") by the late Soviet and Russian singer, Viktor Tsoi. In fact, Polish and Russian media competed in emphasizing their own national inspirations for the Belarusian protest movement. To them it did not matter that the protesters could well have sung NRM or NIZKIZ songs.

> As opposed to Ukraine, none of the protest songs in Belarus has become universally recognised as the anthem of the revolution.

The reaction of the two neighbouring countries, which have been pursuing colonial policies towards Belarus for hundreds of years, shows something else. Namely, to them Belarusians are *carte blanche*. In other words, they see Belarusians through the prism of colonised people, deprived of their own voice. Hence, it was very easy for Polish and Russian journalists to take patterns of resistance they knew from their own countries and apply them to the protests in Minsk.

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Maybe the Belarusian public should have expected a unifying song from one of its biggest stars, the hip-hop performer Max Korzh. However he made the protesters wait until October 2020 before releasing his video clip *Her Fault* which made references to the summer events. The public, however, interpreted this more as Korzh's desperate attempt to become part of the movement than genuine support of it. Interestingly, in November 2020 the Russian hip-hop band, Kasta, also released a clip dedicated to Belarusian protests. It was titled "Go for a walk" and its message is incomparably stronger than Korzh's.

Korzh showed young men in a typical hip-hop setting. They are standing in groups in urban neighbourhoods, swaying to the rhythm of music. This provoked jokes such as: "Ah, all those Belarusian men who did not come out to protest and instead sent their women there. They're now in Max Korzh's music video." The clip of the Russian band tried to recreate the real context of the Belarusian protests, showing tensions in families, beaten faces of protesters and how they were running away from OMON forces. It even includes powerful torture scenes from detention centres. This presents a particular paradox – Russian artists have managed to create a deeper and more compelling picture of the Belarusian revolution.

The historical Belarusian flag, which became a central symbol of the protests, turned out to be incomprehensible for Russian audiences.

At the same time, it is necessary to emphasise the shock of Russian media when they saw the Belarusian white-red-white colours instead of the red-green post-Soviet flag. These historical Belarusian flags, which were widely displayed during the protests and became its central symbol, turned out to be incomprehensible even for Russian liberal audiences. The journalists of TV Rain had to explain to viewers why the Belarusian crowds marched with this flag. In this sense, the Belarusian protest movement could only be understood from the outside when it was assigned symbols they were familiar with. Consequently, autonomous Belarusian elements, such as the flag or the Pahonia (the coat of arms depicting a charging knight on horseback), turned out to be difficult to decode. Again, it was as if Belarus or Belarusianness were empty labels.

Miracle birth of a nation under a white-red-white flag

In one sense, the protesters and Belarusian commentators adopted the role of colonised objects. Evidently, the scale of the protests surprised everyone. As soon they erupted, clichéd accounts that the protests represent the birth of the nation

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were repeated like a mantra. It emerged suddenly and Belarusians were formed as a nation in that moment. This apparent fact was not even described as a kind of a national awakening, but as birth. In the abovementioned interview with Tsikhanouskaya, the Russian journalist blissfully claims that Belarusians just woke up as a nation. In response, Tsikhanouskaya corrected her by explaining that maybe it took more than one day, but agreeing that it was something amazing. Naturally, the rhetoric of the miracle birth of a nation is part of protest language, but we should recognise that it also expresses some elements of magical thinking.

This rhetoric of the (re)birth of the Belarusian nation, so often repeated in various commentaries, deserves special attention. Clearly, it results from the scale of the protests and the belief that, this time, they are qualitatively different than previous anti-Lukashenka protests. Commentators repeated the thesis about the emergence of a new opposition, something different from the old one, which was associated with the nationalistically-minded intelligentsia and was seen as detached from reality.

And yet this new protest and the rebirth of the nation did not find any other symbols than the white-red-white flag of the Belarusian People's Republic and its Pohonia coat of arms. In other words, it used symbols of the old opposition, which was criticised for its overly nationalistic nature when it was stressing the need to use the Belarusian language and national symbols. In this sense, the agenda for the unfinished revolution of 2020 does not differ from previous protests. Its main, and only, postulate is the removal of Lukashenka from power, while the omnipresence of national symbols suggests that, for the protesters, it is important to preserve the sovereignty of the Belarusian state, to which Lukashenka and his multi-level integration game with Russia is a threat.

> The agenda for the unfinished revolution of 2020 does not differ from previous protests – to remove Lukashenka from power.

All these elements – the character of the protest and its female face – found a perfect combination in Nina Baginska, a petite pensioner who walked around Minsk with a large white-red-white flag during the protest. Baginska, who consistently tries to speak Belarusian, is not yet a "child" of this revolution. Neither is she an accidental heroine whose image visually fit the revolution's visual narrative. She is someone who for decades has been associated with the Belarusian democratic opposition and made her first anti-Lukashenka speech immediately after his rise to power. The fact that the media presented her as a gentle grandma of the revolution corresponds with the dominant magical thinking about the political and social events in Belarus. The apparent sudden and unexpected birth of the nation is accompanied by

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the expectation that the dream of a new Belarus will come true in an equally sudden and unexpected way.

And yet the symbols of this revolution did not come out of nowhere. They have their historical roots which have been cherished by the Belarusian opposition. Similarly, the behaviour of Belarusian protesters did not emerge unexpectedly. They have their roots in the authoritarian model of the Belarusian state, which has been educating its citizens for several decades.

Strength in unity

In his article titled "What Americans should learn from Belarus" the historian Timothy Snyder points to six Ps – preparation, predominance, protest, peace, persistence and pluralism – as positive features of the Belarusian protest which should ensure its success and may serve as a model for protests elsewhere. The article was published in August 2020, when Snyder could not have known the revolution would not end with instant success and that Lukashenka would remain in power.

Careful observers of the Belarusian reality realised early on that the model behaviour of the protesters can be explained by specific Belarusian character traits based on the self-stereotype of a quiet, peaceful and clean nation. The sterile cleanliness of Belarusian cities has been described many times as the spatial implementation of an authoritarian model. Yet, in the context of the ongoing struggle for freedom, dignity and prosperity and the care for the cleanliness of city benches was not criticised as a reflection of the year's long educating citizens to live in an authoritarian state. Today, we can reflect that perhaps it was society's behaviour patterns – which have been shaped by the authoritarian regime – that explains why the Belarusian revolution has not been successful thus far.

Nevertheless, the protests in Minsk and other Belarusian cities have demonstrated that the strength of the nation comes from unity. This may sound obvious, but in the context of previous ineffective attempts, last year's protests were clearly an unprecedented moment. The white-red-white flags fluttered over the heads of thousands of people and proved that the work of the old opposition was not in vain. Years of struggle to preserve the Belarusian language and national identity have finally brought results.

However, it should also be emphasised that there were not many EU flags at these protests. This marks a difference from Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity and says a lot about the aspirations of the protesters: while the Ukrainian revolution, from the beginning, was clear about its demands to continue the country's western integration, the Belarusian leaders stubbornly tried to manoeuvre, repeating

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clichés about the sovereign Belarusian path. In this way, the Belarusian protests proved to be, in fact, a negative project. It narrowed down without offering a specific vision for the future. And perhaps that is why, on a symbolic level, the Belarusian revolution turned back to history, to symbols and myths rooted in the Great Patriotic War and the velvet revolutions that took place in Central Europe during the late 1980s and early 90s. It thus used second-hand songs.

Overall, neither the protest leaders nor the Belarusian protesters or media collectives, such as NEXTA, have proved able to define and maintain the future trajectory of the movement. When protesters reached the Palace of the Republic in Minsk and tensions were reaching its peak, the demonstration would turn back to disperse shortly afterwards. On the other hand, the satrap, hidden behind the security forces, knew he had nowhere to turn. Therefore, he struck back. As paradoxical as it sounds, in the battle between good and evil, it was the tyrant who played according to the rules of the revolution.

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Constitutional reform process in Belarus

Recent trends and developments

HANNA VASILEVICH

Constitutional reform is a hot topic in and outside of Belarus. Two approaches are currently underway: one led by Alyaksandr Lukashenka and another by the opposition, led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouksaya.

The need for change to the Belarusian constitution was announced long before the events of 2020, and both Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the opposition have initiated a process after the election. The opposition has emphasised the need for changes to the constitution by the political crisis while Lukashenka's initial interest in constitutional reform was two-fold: to calm the protests and to assure Russia that he can maintain control over the situation. Based on an official proposal recently announced, the changes proposed by Lukashenka's constitutional commission do not encompass substantive change to the existing non-democratic model, making it even more bureaucratic and slow. Progress to date indicates that the languid process serves as a way to quell the protests, secure Lukashenka's influence as a potential head of the All-Belarusian Assembly, and assuage Russia – a key Lukashenka ally and backer – to accelerate a promised loan.

The political opposition, which includes Sviatlana Tsikhanouksaya's team and the National Anti-Crisis Administration headed by the former minister of culture Pavel Latushka, is undertaking its own constitutional reform process. This endeavour aims to restore democracy in Belarus through rebuilding a system of the

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separation of powers with effective checks and balances between the executive, legislature and an independent judiciary. It also calls for reducing the powers of the presidency. While there is disagreement within the opposition – which remains fragmented – on the best legal foundation for democratic constitutional change, there is a broad consensus that democratic forces need to provide an alternative to Lukashenka's proposals, even if such alternatives could only be enacted after significant political change.

Lukashenka's approach

By the end of July 2021, it became clear what the main changes to the constitution would be under Lukashenka. After nine meetings, organised since March 2021, the constitutional commission presented draft amendments to Lukashenka for comments, which should be presented for public debate at some point. As initially expected, the presented version confirms the initial criticism that the expected amendments would mainly focus on vague substantive concepts and cosmetic adjustments.

> There is a broad consensus among the Belarusian opposition that democratic forces need to provide an alternative to Lukashenka's constitutional changes.

One of the main changes proposed by the constitutional commission affects the criteria for becoming the next president. As mentioned by a member of the commission, Yury Vaznesenski, Lukashenka does not plan to participate in the next election. Thus, strengthening the criteria is clearly aimed at limiting who can participate. The draft proposes to increase the candidate's minimum age from 35 to 40. An uninterrupted, permanent residency in Belarus may be increased from ten to 20 years. Moreover, candidates must not have citizenship or residency in a foreign state. The maximum number of terms one can serve is proposed to be limited to two.

Another important amendment is to increase the parliament's term from four to five years, while expanding the powers of the government and its independence in decision-making. The government is suggested to be more empowered with the right to submit proposals to the president on the appointment and recalling of Belarus's diplomatic representatives abroad. Additionally, it is proposed to remove the president's right to nullify governmental acts. The proposed changes are clearly aimed at weakening the position of the president, reversing amendments introduced by previous referenda, used by Lukashenka to secure his powers. Lukashenka believes that a new president might not be ready for the type of authority

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that he has wielded, even warning that a new president may request that foreign troops enter the country.

Lukashenka's future

The promotion of an All-Belarusian People's Congress (ABPC) as one of the political powers and granting it constitutional status can be viewed as an attempt to secure Lukashenka's own personal authority through his leadership of the ABPC, while the powers of any potential future president will be limited. Vaznesenky indirectly confirmed that Lukashenka's plan is to head the ABPC, though it seems that he would still remain in power until 2025 and stay on as head of the ABPC.

The ABPC is an assembly initiated in 1996 that meets every five years. It operates ostensibly as a means of representative public consultation on the direction of the country, but the attendees are mostly connected to the government and state-owned organisations. In February 2021, the ABPC met with 2,700 people (mostly regime loyalists) amid the COVID-19 pandemic to discuss Belarus's social and economic development for the next five years, including constitutional matters. Many in the opposition opposed the ABPC's reduced size and lack of inclusion.

To counteract excessive presidential powers, Lukashenka has proposed granting constitutional status to the ABPC and endowing it with some of the current presidential powers. In his post-presidency, Lukashenka would be able to head the ABPC where he could block decisions made by parliament, government and the future president. Lukashenka therefore seems to be following the model employed by the former president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who, upon leaving office after 29 years, became head of the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan.

The 2021 ABPC resolution included a call to confirm the body's special legal status as per Lukashenka's recommendations, to create a constitutional commission to forward proposals in 2021, to amend the constitution, and to submit proposals for public discussion and national referenda. Substantive recommendations include redistributing authorities between government bodies – including between local and self-government bodies, strengthening political parties and promoting patriotic education and traditional values. Lukashenka established the 36-member Constitutional Commission by decree in March 2021. All representatives, appointed by Lukashenka, are from the state machinery and pro-government parties. Representatives of the opposition and human rights organisations are excluded.

The constitutional commission has also proposed to create the position of a commissioner for human rights to extend the protection of human rights and freedoms and maintain effective communication between citizens and authorities.

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However, it is unlikely that this institution would be fully independent – taking into account the structure of Belarus's state machinery and considering the recent raids on human rights defenders and unrecognition of the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on Human Rights. One unexpected amendment includes a proposal to explicitly define marriage as a union between a woman and a man in order to preserve traditional marriage and family.

The commission convened twice a month, with its first meeting held in late March. The commission's draft proposal was submitted to the president on July 22nd 2021 in preparation for a referendum that is reportedly scheduled for early 2022 (allegedly, February). However, considering Lukashenka's criticism on the length of the amendments, which is 170 pages, as unacceptable and thus needs to be reworked, one can once again identify oversimplification and avoidance of significant changes to the constitution by Lukashenka. Another aspect to consider is that the proposed amendments could still be reworked by Lukashenka, who might come with some unexpected suggestions. The final version of the constitution's draft will be submitted for public discussion and subsequently, with possible amendments, put to a national referendum.

Opposition's version of constitutional reform

The democratic opposition is comprised of several key actors and organisations. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenka's opponent in the 2020 elections and currently in exile, leads a team comprised of long-time opposition politicians and democracy activists. Her group is headed by the former deputy of the supreme council and ex-chairman of the United Civic Party, Anatol Liabiedzka, and ex-speaker of the supreme council, Mechyslau Hryb. While Tsikhanouskaya's camp is among the largest and most internationally connected of the opposition groups, other key leaders and organisations are actively involved in the democratic movement. Nevertheless, the opposition is not a cohesive group: it is a collective of activists, jurists and opposition politicians who reject Lukashenka's undemocratic facsimile of constitutional reform, but who also hold differing visions of how best to pursue democratic transition.

The key difference among the groups is which document should be the foundation for constitutional reform: the original 1994 constitution, which was developed through a four-year process of pluralistic negotiations, or the current constitution, as amended by referenda in 1996 and 2004. Many argue that the 1996 amendments, and thus the current constitution, are illegitimate since the arguably manipulated referenda formalised Lukashenka's already unconstitutional consolidation of power

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by eliminating core safeguards of democratic governance. As a matter of pragmatism, Tsikhanouskaya's camp is developing a constitutional amendment proposal based on the current 1996 constitution and initiating a public consultation process.

Former constitutional court judge Mikhail Pastukhou, on the other hand, argues that since the 1996 constitution is illegal, it is essential to restore the 1994 one as the basis for further amendments and the revival of democracy. He suggests that ongoing attempts to create a new constitution would fail due to the lack of legitimate legal mechanisms to adopt the changes. Pastukhou has also criticised Tsikhanouskaya for ignoring the principle of constitutional succession. Debates around the optimal approach continue among the opposition.

To support public discussion on the proposed amendments, Tsikhanouskaya's team has developed an online platform to enable debate.

In the meantime, Tsikhanouskaya's side has developed a draft constitutional amendment proposal and on March 10th released it for public consultation and debate. The proposal would restore core democratic principles and institutions, including separation of powers and a system of checks and balances across the three branches of government. A key element of the Tsikhanouskaya draft is a transition from the current form of (hyper) presidentialism to a semi-presidential system with a directly elected but less powerful president and a prime minister. The proposal would shift appointment powers to the legislature, strengthen the independence of the judiciary and create a collaborative appointment mechanism, reduce executive law-making authorities, align electoral principles with international standards, revise referenda powers, mandate direct elections of local governance bodies and enhance decentralisation. The president would be limited to two terms of four years and his or her main focus would be foreign policy, security and various aspects of internal affairs. Suggested amendments also include the abolition of the death penalty, a crucial issue for Belarus's future prospective membership in the Council of Europe. To support public discussion on the proposed amendments, Tsikhanouskaya's team, in co-operation with the Anti-Crisis Administration, has developed an online platform to enable debate. Consultations are currently taking place and will be used to prepare a revised, full version in the autumn.

Is there any feasible result?

Considering that Lukashenka's constitutional commission does not propose any significant governance reforms apart from ensuring Lukashenka's continuing

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influence, the amendments are more declarative and decorative than substantive. More than that, following the 25-year tradition of undemocratic referenda since 1996, one should not expect a legitimate referendum nor anticipate transparent and inclusive discussions.

The major role of the opposition in the current situation is to find a way to ensure fair and transparent elections, or find a way to push Lukashenka into dialogue on meaningful change. The opposition should continue its work to prepare a comprehensive proposal for a new, democratic and people-driven constitutional text that could be used in case the opportunity for political change occurs – either through a negotiated agreement or other means. This will ensure the opposition is prepared for political transition and that a new constitution enjoys legitimacy. For that, consolidation within the opposition itself is needed, as well as a consensus on which legal basis the proposed new draft constitution should rest upon.

The preparation of the new constitution is important regardless of the political processes and Lukashenka's willingness to engage in dialogue with the opposition (which is very unlikely). First, a draft of the new constitution and its implementation plan will provide the opposition with a strategy for change. Second, it will serve as an essential consolidation factor backed by inclusive and transparent deliberations involving all relevant political and civic actors in drafting the proposed revised constitution. Third, it will create greater transparency.

Lukashenka's main goal in proposing constitutional reform is primarily based on his wish to exclude the opposition, suppress open dialogue and to secure political influence after he steps down as president. For the opposition, it is a tool for consolidation, legitimisation and a wider acceptance by civil society. It is also grounds for future reform after Lukashenka's departure.

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Redefining US strategy in the region

DMYTRO TUZHANSKYI

The time has come to strengthen Euro-Atlantic unity on its Eastern flank. A new US-led strategy should be aimed towards redrawing the line between Europe and Eurasia and to send a signal that the transatlantic community and the region of Central and Eastern Europe can be truly united, and that America is back.

The tenacity shown by President Joe Biden's administration in their attempts to restore unity in the West has made others quickly forget all the tensions within the transatlantic community during Donald Trump's four years. It is not only interesting to follow all the steps being taken by the new US administration, they also inspire optimism and confidence, creating expectations of geopolitical momentum. However, the consolidation of the West seems a far more complicated matter than previously thought. The question is not only about overcoming the unsystematic approach of the 45th president of the United States. Nor is it about restoring trust between Washington and Berlin, or about restraining Russia and China.

Challenges that change the current geopolitics

This complexity can be seen best in Central and Eastern Europe – a frontier of the transatlantic West. It is in this region that the unity of the West goes beyond the official borders of the European Union and NATO. Despite the framework of the EU and NATO uniting part of CEE, the region is still confronted by illiber-

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US President Joe Biden addressing the Ukrainian parliament in 2015, then as Vice President. The United States is the only power in the transatlantic community that can act in the region not simply as a leader of the West, but also to play the role of a uniting force.

alism, right-wing populism, corruption, a lack of social cohesion and traditional nationalism.

In other words, Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania are more united by these challenges than divided by the Schengen Area or membership of the EU or NATO. Similarly, these countries are also united by energy security issues, which may reach a critical point should Nord Stream 2 be completed. In Central and Eastern Europe, the idea of "selfish diplomacy" (i.e. the feeling of being neglected by the "big nations") have triumphed over transatlantic unity. This leads to an instrumentalisation of the West – even by the EU and NATO member states, when they look at the transatlantic community as a security shield and cash machine. Such a vision, along with this challenge, has unified the countries of the region, despite their disunity caused by different levels of integration. Moreover, in the case of countries that are not members of the EU or NATO (i.e. Ukraine), this challenge is compounded by the uncertainty of their Euro-Atlantic prospects.

This vulnerability has turned the region into a springboard for Russia and China to promote their strategic interests in Europe, and to challenge the transatlantic

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community from inside. In the past few years, Russia and China have achieved considerable success in the region through well-coordinated actions and by deploying familiar tricks – blackmailing and spreading disinformation.

It is important to understand that Russia and China do not care much about the borders of the EU or NATO. Their actions and strategies constitute something larger than mere attempts at expanding "grey zones" in Europe. This fact is corroborated by explosions at military depots in the Czech Republic, the military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, and of course the Belt and Road Initiative. This is a clear sign to the West, and the US in particular, that a new strategy for the region is needed that would go beyond the current borders of the EU and NATO. It is more obvious than ever that the inclusion of Central and Eastern Europe as part of a fully consolidated transatlantic West is no longer possible without Ukraine's involvement. Yet, Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO in the next few years appears uncertain at this moment. At the same time, it is this uncertainty that demands a new strategy which includes Ukraine. The US should take the lead in this unification and consolidation process, adding Ukraine and drawing a new line between Europe and Eurasia.

Legacy that matters exactly now

This would mean the implementation of Zbigniew Brzezinski's legacy on US primacy and its geostrategic imperatives, presented in his book *The Grand Chessboard*. He wrote that "if Ukraine is to survive as an independent state, it will have to become a part of Central Europe rather than Eurasia, and if it is to be a part of Central Europe, then it will have to partake fully in Central Europe's links to NATO and the European Union. Russia's acceptance of these links would then define Russia's own decision to be also truly a part of Europe. Russia's refusal would be tantamount to the rejection of Europe in favour of a solitary 'Eurasian' identity and existence."

There are few specific reasons why the US should initiate a close strategic involvement of Ukraine into the consolidation of CEE. First, Washington should provide a mirror response to Russian and Chinese actions in Central and Eastern Europe, where Ukraine is part of the unified springboard of Moscow and Beijing. Second, it is in America's interest to strengthen the effect and irreversibility of US and western support for Ukraine in countering Russian military aggression and providing reforms that could have multiple effects. Third, the US should compensate for the current uncertainty of NATO and EU enlargement in the East due to the "keeping Russia engaged" approach in containing China (which is seen

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as more urgent). The US is the only power in the transatlantic community that can act in the region not simply as a leader of the West, but also to play the role of a uniting force, despite all the institutional limitations of the EU and NATO. Fourth, Ukraine's engagement in a new US strategy may play an important, wider consolidating role and provide a new agenda with new incentives. Considering all the problems with corruption, the judicial system and the inconsistency of the elite, Ukraine still pursues its western course, withstanding Russian aggression and holding free elections.

Multilateral diplomacy for CEE

The fifth reason for engaging Ukraine is to further promote transatlantic multilateralism and inspire a new "division of labour" in the region, which is now the core principle of Biden's foreign policy. What does this mean in practice? Ukraine could become the "success story" of its neighbours among EU and NATO countries, which could take more responsibility for Kyiv's engagement with the West. Simultaneously, it means states taking more responsibility for transatlantic unity on the eastern flank. In fact, it is dictated by time: in the next seven years, the Council of Europe will be chaired by four countries in the region – the Czech Republic (2022), Hungary (2024), Poland (2025) and Lithuania (2027). This could mean seven years of successful multilateralism.

Effective multilateralism in the CEE with a new US strategy in this region should also not be based solely on the leadership of the US or its alliances with Berlin and Paris. They should provide intermediary support and strategic thinking. It also means not to be stipulated by the sole need of restraining China and Russia, but implying the co-operation of the countries of the region as a part of a united West. In other words, the main goal should be not containing China and Russia, but to make CEE states find it more profitable to co-operate under a rules-based order. As mentioned above, the new strategy should go beyond the institutional framework and borders of the EU and NATO. It should also be based on emerging challenges and have a long-term approach. Yet at the same time, it should not replace EU integration, but build upon it.

> The new strategy should go beyond the institutional framework and borders of the EU and NATO, and based on emerging challenges.

Paradoxical as it may sound, for the last four years during Donald Trump's presidency, the US returned to the region after years of neglect. In this regard, we could mention Wess Mitchell's (Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian

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Affairs from 2017 to 2019 – editor's note) intellectual ambitions to implement his own doctrine of supporting "America's vulnerable frontier allies", over a full-fledged and long-term US strategy in the region. However, Washington's attempts were undertaken with a clear plan, which produced good results. First, the US signed a military agreement with Warsaw (the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement) and a wide range of other contracts for delivering military equipment to countries in the region (i.e., Hungary, Slovakia). And the US extended its military presence in Poland by adding another 1,000 troops stationed there.

The US also organised a series of visits to the White House by many of the state leaders from the region to discuss the enhancement of bilateral relations with Washington. For Hungary and Slovakia, for instance, this was the first visit of their leaders in over a decade. The LNG-terminals were launched in Poland and Croatia in order to reduce the dependence of Central and Eastern Europe on Russian gas by means of other liquefied natural gas, including from the US. Meanwhile, Washington provided support for the Three Seas Initiative, which stands every chance of becoming a serious non-political platform for co-operation in the region, since it possesses the mechanisms for attracting new projects from EU states and beyond.

Washington supports the Three Seas Initiative, which stands every chance of becoming a serious non-political platform for co-operation in the region.

During this time, Washington also took effective steps beyond the official borders of the EU and NATO, taking care of their interests and the unity of the western world. The US played the role of moderator in a feud between Ukraine and Hungary over education policy. It also tried to build new bridges with Belarus – the then Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, even visited Minsk at the beginning of 2020. And there was clear Washington support for the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Yet, all of these initiatives lacked a systematic approach, leadership or a vision. There are not enough such initiatives within the EU, either. Yet as I have argued here, such a role could be assumed by Washington. The first steps of the Biden administration in Europe – particularly the prioritisation of Ukraine in CEE – are already proof of this path.

Tools for consolidation

How should a new US strategy in the region be implemented? If Washington is really planning its own infrastructure and investment response to the Chinese Belt

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and Road Initiative, which Joe Biden has discussed during a recent phone call with British prime minister Boris Johnson, this could be "the hard basement" of such a new strategy here as well. Such an initiative could consolidate the region in a sense of connectivity, cohesion and mutual commitment. The existing instruments of the Three Seas Initiative along with the EU's neighbourhood programmes make it possible to involve Ukraine as much as possible. This could add up to 3.7 trillion US dollars of combined investments.

Another possible initiative, "the soft basement" approach, could be the development of a separate programme of the German Marshall Fund for Central and Eastern Europe. This programme, for instance, could be initiated by the Ukrainian MFA, the Lublin Triangle, The Visegrad Fund, and USAID with a strict goal to consolidate the region in dealing with common challenges. All this would enhance and systematise previous US efforts on the Eastern flank, and top them up with strategic thinking and a long term vision.

Indeed, similar attempts were undertaken by the US in the 1990s in the Baltic states and some Central European states, which led to the start of the region's consolidation process. The time has come to strengthen the Euro-Atlantic unity on its Eastern flank. This strategy should aim towards drawing a new line between Europe and Eurasia, and send a signal that the transatlantic community and Central and Eastern Europe can be united. NEE

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A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES FROM THE CITY OF FREEDOM AND SOLIDARITY

In Gdańsk we are followers of Benjamin Barber's philosophy that the mayors will rule the world. Despite a slight exaggeration of this prophecy the fact is that it is the local government that is promoted to the role of the incubator of democratic and civic attitudes. It is predestined to set the tone in building positive bonds among collaborating communities.

We need to intensify our actions, so that the positive climate produced by us - the local government officials - may radiate and constructively influence the actions of the central authorities.

Following this lead, Mayor Aleksandra Dulkiewicz from Gdańsk developed for the Committee of the Regions - a kind of EU parliament of local governments - an opinion entitled "European action plan for democracy". A pretty sad conclusion of this work is the observation that many phenomena undermining our European communities can be identified in countries of our region.

For example, just as Mayor Dulkiewicz's opinion was gaining the official acceptance by the Committee of Regions, the Polish parliament initiated work on the so-called "media law", aiming at limiting the rights of private broadcasters, thus monopolizing the media market by state-owned television. And, as we know, where free media weaken, democracy is not doing well.

It is also worth mentioning that the new Mayor Paweł Adamowicz Award was established upon the initiative of the European Committee of Regions, ICORN (the International Cities of Refuge Network) and the City of Gdańsk. By design, this distinction recognizes organizations and individuals who support local integration, the promotion of equal opportunities, respect for human rights, civil liberties, and combating prejudice and xenophobia.

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Russia at war with COVID-19, again!

AGNIESZKA LEGUCKA

Many Russians have refused to get vaccinated for COVID-19. Several factors explain this. First, people do not trust the authorities or the Russian vaccine. Second, the pandemic is now considered history by many who see no need to get vaccinated. Third, disinformation has created a lot of uncertainty surrounding the vaccine.

In early July 2021 a new wave of COVID-19 hit Russia. This time it came in the form of the more transmissible Delta variant. As a result, Russia began reporting new infections and the largest number of deaths (nearly 800 per day in early August) since the beginning of the pandemic in March last year. At the same time, vaccination rates have remained extremely low, especially when compared to countries in the European Union and the United States. In fact, Russia is the only vaccine producing country with such low vaccination rates. A mere 19 per cent of Russians have gotten fully vaccinated since December 2020.

Why are Russians against vaccination? Is this their way of showing passive resistance to the authorities? And why is it that, when the world is starting to slowly recover from the pandemic, the Russian authorities are announcing mandatory vaccinations?

Let's start with successes

In a way, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic worked well for the Russian authorities. In February 2020 Russia quickly closed its border with China, which

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halted the rapid spread of the virus onto its territory. Russian media were meticulously reporting on the catastrophe happening in Italian and Spanish hospitals, often implying that democratic states were not able to cope with the health crisis. In addition, the Russian public was receiving all kinds of assurances that the virus would not affect their "unique Russian spirit". This, among other things, explains why, still today, as many as 55 per cent of Russians, according to the independent research organisation the Levada Centre, are convinced that they will not catch the virus.

As many as 55 per cent of Russians are convinced that they will not catch the virus.

State media were eager to show China and Russia as successful countries which have controlled the virus; it compares them with western states, unable to respond to the demand for masks, protective gear and vaccines. Russia came "to the rescue". In March 2020, at the request of the Italian government, the Russian ministry of defence sent medical equipment to Italy as part of its "from Russia with love" campaign. The propaganda machine that accompanied this was astonishing. It included online videos showing Italians removing EU flags from their homes and singing Russia's national anthem.

In August 2020 Russian President Vladimir Putin triumphantly announced that Russia was the first country in the world to register an effective COVID-19 vaccine, called Sputnik V. However at the time of the announcement, Sputnik had not gone through the full testing and approval process. Later, the authorities boasted about producing other vaccines: EpiVacCorona by the Vektor State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology and CoviVac by the Chumakov Centre. There was also a single-dose version of Sputnik, called Sputnik Light.

All these vaccines were supposed to serve as testimony to the success of the Russian state and show the superiority of its technology and science over the West. "Russia has won the vaccine race", the authorities and media claimed. As a result, vaccine orders from all over the world were expected. It was also believed that western states would eventually lift the onerous sanctions they imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea.

Thus, vaccines became a tool of Russia's soft power. The Russian authorities, with their rhetoric, skilfully used a humanitarian narrative about helping protect the rest of the world against a dangerous virus. According to some estimates, around 35 countries received Sputnik vaccines. However in its own neighbourhood, the Kremlin's vaccine diplomacy was less successful. In Europe demand for Sputink V and other Russian vaccines remained low. It was ordered by three countries: Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia; Slovakia returned its supply a few months after receiving it. With only 6,000 people willing to take the Russian vaccine, public demand was interpreted as too low.

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Slovaks were not the only ones that were not interested in the Russian vaccine. Only seven per cent of Europeans trusted Sputnik V. This is probably because none of the Russian vaccines have been recognised by the World Health Organization (WHO) or the European Medicines Agency (EMA). The EMA delayed Sputnik V's approval due to Russian failure to submit the required data and documentation on time.

Communication chaos and disinformation

Domestically in Russia, trust in COVID-19 vaccines remains low as well. One of the reasons given is poor public communications. During the first wave of infections contradictory messaging and chaotic decisions were coming from state officials. The most illustrative example was the obligatory two-week quarantine on anyone who wanted to meet with Vladimir Putin, who was hiding in his Novo-Ogaryovo estate. People jokingly referred to this as his "bunker", while opposition activist Alexei Navalny called Putin a "grandpa in a bunker". To reduce his distance from the public, Putin issued six appeals to the nation between March and May 2020. It was more than the three previous years together, but did not help. In April 2020 his approval rating dropped below 60 per cent for the first time. Though Putin managed to avoid catching COVID-19 (unlike Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin or Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov), many still did not like his behaviour. They felt the authorities neglected them at this very challenging time.

In addition, regional and local authorities, whom Putin passed responsibility for pandemic management onto, were reluctant to provide direct financial assistance to residents and small and medium-sized enterprises. In some cases they even introduced drastic restrictions. Such was the decision of Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who closed the border between the republic and the rest of the Russian Federation.

According to the Levada Center, as many as two out of three Russians do not trust the official pandemic related statistics. From the outset, low mortality rates were the result of an adopted methodology, which was based on an artificial distinction between "COVID-19 patients" and "patients with COVID-19". In terms of recording deaths, only the former are included in official figures. The Moscow Health Department issued a statement confirming that over 60 per cent of COVID-19 deaths were the result of "other causes" such as heart attacks, strokes, incurable cancers or other diseases. Official figures reflect this as well: while 143,000 Russians are reported to have died of COVID-19 since March 2020, the country's excess fatality count reached 483,000, according to the *Moscow Times*. This means that,

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both in absolute terms and per capita, Russia has one of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the world.

Conspiracies

Meanwhile, Russian media and Kremlin propaganda in particular has continued praising Russian vaccines and slandering western alternatives. In one event, where Putin had met with a group of young people, he claimed that a dozen or so in Switzerland died after having received the Pfizer vaccine. Known for his praise for the regime, state media journalist and TV host Dmitry Kiselyov, scared his audience with information that the AstraZeneca vaccine could turn them into monkeys. The film director Nikita Mikhalkov released a video on YouTube asserting that the pandemic was a conspiracy created by Bill Gates to implant chips into Russians. In several TV programmes, doctors – or at least people dressed in white uniforms – confidently declared that there would be no subsequent waves of infection in Russia, and that the lockdown only favoured the spread of the virus. The argument in the latter was that a family locked up in one apartment or house is in close proximity with each other. In addition, a plethora of disinformation from other sources (including Chinese ones) was successfully spread on social media.

Throughout the pandemic, the English-language TV channel directed at foreign audiences, currently known as RT (previously Russia Today), constantly reported about the failures of western governments. On its website, for instance, there were several statements expressing anger at the restrictions various western governments imposed on their citizens. RT also widely reported on anti-COVID demonstrations organised in other countries. As a result of these contradictory signals, state authorities and pro-Kremlin media had almost no choice but to say that Russians cannot depend on anybody and need to take responsibility on their own.

On June 21st 2020 in an interview with Rossiya-1, Putin announced that Russian authorities have "managed to complete the task and defended Russian citizens against this infection". Putin clearly needed a victory, even a symbolic one, over COVID-19. That is why he issued this statement just before the popular vote on the constitution, which gave him the right to run in the next election and rule until 2036. The proposal naturally passed in the referendum.

However, the success of the propaganda strategy to convince the public that the pandemic was under control led many to conclude that there was no point in vaccinating. Putin himself did not get vaccinated until March 2021. And, moreover, there was no video or photo of the act, a common practice in many countries where political leaders were recorded getting the vaccine. Evidently, at the time of Putin's

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vaccination there were no cameras, no photos, no flashes. The mystery was only dispelled three months later when it was confirmed that Putin was vaccinated with Sputnik V. Yet the opportunity to get vaccinated was not offered to every citizen.

The announced victory over the pandemic was to be final. Occasionally, public health concerns were used to crack down on the opposition. It was very easy to accuse the opposition of breaking restrictions during mass demonstrations, like those held in support of Navalny, his brother Oleg and his associate, Lyubov Sobol. However different standards were applied during events organised by authorities – for example, the seventh anniversary of the annexation of Crimea, organised at Luzhniki stadium in Moscow. During this event only a tiny minority of the 80,000 attendees wore protective masks. On stage, Putin once again declared the greatness of the Russian state.

Turning the clock again

When the third wave of the pandemic hit Russia, Kiselyov announced that "Russia was at war" and it was the fault of citizens for not getting vaccinated. Proposed incentives such as lotteries and vacations did prove alluring enough to increase the uptake. Neither did vaccination points set up in shopping malls. Even RT workers were offered extra bonuses if they got vaccinated.

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Many Russians still refuse to get vaccinated. In July it was estimated that 54 per cent of the population have no intention of getting the jab. Several factors explain this reluctance. First, people do not trust the authorities or the Russian vaccine. Second, the pandemic has now been recognised as largely over and many see no need to fear it anymore. Third, disinformation has effectively created a lot of uncertainty around vaccines.

For the first time, the pandemic has ceased to favour Putin. In September this year Russians will be electing members of the Duma in national elections. With declining support for the ruling party, United Russia, authorities will not impose another lockdown. Like elsewhere, the most difficult situation is in densely populated cities, such as Moscow and St Petersburg. To counteract it Sergei Sobyanin, Moscow's mayor, introduced compulsory vaccinations for service workers employed in public transport, restaurants and beauty salons. As a result, as many as 60 per cent of these employees are to be vaccinated. Access to restaurants and public events, like concerts, are also closed to those without a QR code certifying vaccination. Moscow's lead was followed by 20 other republics.

In response to these restrictions, many Russians have obtained fake vaccination certificates. They are becoming increasingly more popular given that the majority of the population (58 per cent) do not support compulsory vaccinations. Their attitude was best expressed by the actor Yegor Beroyev, who performed on stage with a yellow Star of David pinned to his jacket. He spoke about "waking up in a world where being vaccinated has become a sign of whether you are a citizen … whether you can visit institutions and take part in events, or you can enjoy your rights and benefits". He received huge applause. Meanwhile, psychologist Aleksey Shustov argues that it would be better if the Kremlin would stop lying about the statistics and stop spreading disinformation about the "vaccination threat". NEE

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Is the Georgian Dream committed to democracy and European integration?

SOSO DZAMUKASHVILI

Georgia is currently undergoing a political crisis which has led to an unprecedented amount of European Union involvement in resolving it. The mediation of the crisis, led by the president of the European Council, has demonstrated how important Georgia had become for the EU. Yet, the government's decision to completely annul the deal has sent signals that it may be deviating from its pro-EU path.

After coming to power in 2012, the Georgian Dream party officially set out to uphold democratic values and support Georgia's European integration. However, after the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union and obtaining visa-free travel for Georgian citizens to Schengen Area states, the Georgian Dream party soon started to display authoritarian tendencies as it harassed independent media and politicised the judiciary system in order to weaken the opposition. The party was utilised as a tool by its tycoon founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, for adapting legislation to fit his personal business interests.

As a result, Georgia gradually became a "captured state" with declining media pluralism and freedom of speech, a politicised judiciary system and elections with irregularities. Thus, the increasing democratic standards started to stumble several years after the 2012 change in power. Protests demanding electoral and judiciary reforms started in the summer of 2019 and turned into a never-ending cycle of political turmoil. Despite these negative shifts, the party's rhetoric has always

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highlighted the necessity for the democratic development of Georgia and its future European integration. Nevertheless, ambitious statements of the Georgian Dream government were not backed by substantial commitments – since 2019 almost none of the party's promises on democratic reforms have been implemented.

European integration without reforms

In January, the Georgian government revealed its willingness to submit an EU membership application by 2024 to fulfil its aspiration stated in the country's 2018 constitution. The announcement was made amid a political crisis in the aftermath of the 2020 parliamentary elections, which the majority of opposition parties claimed was rigged. The OSCE electoral observation mission concluded that the vote was "competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected", however it had serious irregularities, such as "pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and a blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state". As a result, most opposition MPs refused to take up their mandates and demanded new elections.

The post-election crisis was further exacerbated by the court's ruling to arrest a leader of the United National Movement opposition party, Nika Melia, for allegedly provoking protesters to seize parliament building in the summer protests of 2019. The decision of the ruling party both domestically and internationally was deemed to be politicised as it revealed grave issues in the Georgian judiciary system. Despite a boycott from the majority of opposition parties, the Georgian Dream repeatedly stated that the elections were generally "competitive" and there were no political prisoners in Georgia. Yet, representatives from the EU and United States expressed serious concerns about the situation, referring to it as a "dangerous trajectory" for the country. The EU released a special statement saying that Melia's sentence damaged Georgia's democracy and underlined that "an inclusive parliamentary process" was paramount for the country's future relationship with the EU.

The way out of Georgia's prolonged political turmoil was mediated by the EU. In March, the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, visited Georgia and immediately prioritised the resolution of the political crisis. Michel initiated several stages of inter-party negotiations and urged the government to follow democratic frameworks, reform the country "more ambitiously" and compromise with the opposition. He prepared a working agenda encompassing a number of key issues, such as electoral and judiciary reforms and the release of political prisoners. Michel made two trips to Tbilisi to personally mediate between politicians and in an unprecedented move; the EU even paid the bail, about 11,700 US dollars, for Melia to facilitate constructive dialogue.

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The EU five-point agreement document, known as the Michel Document, was approved on April 19th, after which the opposition parties took up their seats in the parliament. Opposition alliance members led by Melia's United National Movement, which did not sign the document, also accepted their mandates in parliament on June 8th, following a seven-month boycott. One group of MPs even named itself the "Group for Charles Michel's Reforms" faction in honour of the negotiator. The EU-mediated agreement seemed to have successfully paved the way for further democratisation of Georgia as the ruling party compromised to pause all judiciary appointments, pursue electoral and judicial reforms. The ruling party also agreed to hold a snap parliamentary election in case it failed to garner at least 43 per cent of votes in local elections, slated for October this year.

Leaving EU Orbit?

July marked a turning point for the government's commitment to democratic reforms as the ruling party started to undermine the progress achieved in previous months. The government's credibility was put to the test as the Georgian Dream party demonstrated its unwillingness to deliver promises. Electoral changes were modest and did not receive the endorsement of the opposition; and even though two political prisoners had been released, the ruling party endorsed six supreme court judges on July 12th without considering the implementation of judiciary reforms and revising the appointment process. The European Commission stated that the appointments contradicted key provisions of the April Agreement as the selection process of judges had not been revised in compliance with the recommendations drawn by the Venice Commission and might have negatively affected the disbursement of the second tranche of EU macro-financial assistance to Georgia, as a mutually agreed condition.

The European Commission declared that the Georgian authorities missed an opportunity "to prove their commitment to a genuine and comprehensive reform of the judiciary". The US also expressed concern about the appointments and according to the statements of the US Department of State and US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, the supreme court judges should have been selected only after the transparent and inclusive judiciary reforms. The statement highlighted that this step undermined Georgia's democratic development and the resilience of its political institutions.

Despite domestic and foreign criticism and discussions on possible sanctions led by the government's reluctance to implement reforms, the Georgian government went even further announcing its decision to completely back out of the

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agreement mediated by the EU. Georgian Dream Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze announced that the agreement "had already served its mission and exhausted itself". The opposition accused the ruling party of reneging on the deal after which three opposition members immediately boycotted parliament. Eighteen local civil society organisations made a joint statement highlighting that the ruling party's actions constituted "a straightforward rejection of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course and the peaceful development of the country through democratic reforms". The party's decision was criticised by EU and US representatives. Western partners started to raise questions about the government's commitment to achieving democratic goals, which the ruling party itself set out to achieve. Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, a lead member of the European Parliament's democracy support and election coordination group for Georgia, said the decision was a "damaging step for Georgia's interests" that "benefited the Kremlin" and that the EU would "reconsider its relations with the Georgian government".

Even though Georgia underwent a political crisis, the EU's active involvement in resolving its issues has been unprecedented. The mediation of the crisis, led by the president of the European Council, has demonstrated how important Georgia has become for the EU. Yet the government's decision to annul the deal, on which EU representatives worked for months, sends the wrong signals to the country's largest partner. Thus, the government's decision might lead to severe consequences regarding the country's European future, which it has strived for more than a decade.

Desire to stay in power

Opposition parties insist the government abandoned the agreement due to fears they would not be able to clear the threshold of 43 per cent of votes in the local elections necessary for the government to circumvent a new parliamentary election, as per the April Agreement. Similar criticism has been voiced by a coalition of civil society organisations which agree that the ruling party wanted to strengthen its position by rejecting "Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course" and sacrificing the country's prosperity, foreign policy orientation and relations with strategic partners. However, Georgian Dream party representatives blame the United National Movement opposition party for their decision. Even though the United National Movement entered the legislature in June, the party had not been part of the April Agreement due to a disagreement on the clauses on political prisoners and amnesty. The government representatives stated that the holding of elections according to the April Agreement "would damage state interests" as the major

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opposition party would try to "sabotage" election results should the government receive more than 43 per cent of votes.

Georgian Dream party representatives vigorously claim the party will be able to obtain more than half of the votes in the upcoming elections. Nonetheless, recent polls have demonstrated that support for the incumbent party barely reaches 40 per cent. According to Edison Research, around 39 per cent of the public support Georgian Dream, whereas an IPSOS poll shows only 32 per cent support for the ruling party. Hence, rejecting democratic reforms and undermining the Michel Document could be in the interest of the incumbent party as it could release them from the obligation of holding early elections and to remain in power until at least 2024.

By linking opponents to marginalised groups and fuelling hatred, the government has tried to undermine the opposition.

The lack of commitment to democratic values and European integration, for the sake of staying in power, was also manifested when the government failed to provide adequate civil protection during a homophobic protest against Tbilisi Pride, led by radical groups and the church. Their goal to thwart an LGBT+ parade succeeded as the event did not take place that day. Yet the protest pushed further, including the burning of an EU flag and turning it into a pogrom against journalists and activists. Far-right groups attacked 54 journalists, including Lekso Lashkarava, a 36-year-old cameraman, who died the following day.

The government failed to mobilise the police to secure the safety of citizens, which, according to representatives of the opposition, was a deliberate move. Instead, the government provoked radical groups and accused opponents of conspiring with LGBT+ activists; they declared the opposition to be "anti-state" and "anti-Christian". Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili stated that the government obeyed the decision of the majority of the nation who are "against holding the propagandistic parade" and declared that the only parade that would be held in Georgia would be "that of the Georgian army".

By linking opponents to marginalised groups and fuelling hatred, the government tried to undermine the opposition. Many believe that the violence against the media was condoned by the ruling party to create an atmosphere of fear in the run-up to the local elections in October. Despite that, several days later, at the Batumi International Conference, Gharibashvili reiterated that the implementation of the Association Agreement remained "at the top of the Georgian Government's agenda". He declared that the government continued "reforms aimed at stronger democratic institutions", which is very far from reality, considering the previous developments.

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Sitting in two chairs

The ruling party cannot change its official rhetoric on European integration since the majority of Georgians have actively supported EU membership in the EU. Paradoxically, due to these factors, even the most conservative voters support Georgia's pro-European policy. The question is how the Georgian Dream party can continue sitting in two chairs – making promises of a democratic future and European integration and simultaneously undermining the democratisation processes.

Western partners have already raised serious concerns about the government's commitment to democratic values and have even considered the possibility of sanctions. While Georgian Dream's pro-European aspirations are revealing to be only a façade in order to legitimise its power, the only winner in the game is Moscow. The Kremlin's media applauded the burning of the EU flag in Georgia, while Aleksandr Dugin, a key ideologist, declared that the country had "at last embarked on the right path". Russia has long been directing its aggression towards Georgia, while the West has become the only hope to its path to democratic and sustainable development. NEE

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Pashinyan, the defeated winner

TIZIANO MARINO AND TATEVIK HOVHANNISYAN

There is no doubt that Nikol Pashinyan was able to connect emotionally with a section of Armenian society. The repetitive use of the slogans "you are all prime ministers", "you decide your own future", "it is all the previous regime's fault" has enabled Pashinyan to quickly win the hearts and minds of the Armenian public. While all these tactics certainly helped Pashinyan to win this snap election, his real achievement was to make Armenians forget about the recent war.

In 1945, Winston Churchill showed the world that winning the Second World War was not enough to get re-elected. More than 70 years later, Armenia has taught another lesson. In June 2021 Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, despite a heavy defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh, managed to win in the snap elections and was confirmed as prime minister. With this victory, Pashinyan was able to falsify the long-standing assumption that losing Karabakh means losing power. How was this possible? Pashinyan's re-election was facilitated by both the socio-cultural characteristics of contemporary Armenia and a weak opposition.

But the great electoral performance of the Armenian prime minister can only be fully understood if we focus on his skilful use of populist rhetoric. Pashinyan masterfully succeeded in shifting the political discourse away from the genuine security threat Armenia currently faces to a fight against the old regime's comeback.

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Unexpected shock

Usually an inability to implement a political programme and growing distrust towards the ruling parties or simple scandals are enough to prevent a sitting government from getting re-elected. In other words, governments that lose wars do not get re-elected. Nikol Pashinyan, however, shows us that this is not always the case. Pashinyan won early elections in June 2021 despite the fact he was leading the country when Armenia lost the six-week war with Azerbaijan last autumn. With his election victory, Pashinyan falsified the belief that losing Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) would mean losing power.

Moreover, the defeat in the war has forced the Armenian government to accept extremely harsh conditions that do not have the merit to guarantee the nation's security. For months after the Russian-brokered ceasefire was signed, Azerbaijani troops continue to attempt incursions on the country's border in the regions of Syunik, Gegharkunik and Ararat. However, the current instability has not undermined Pashinyan's ability to remain in power.

There are at least three main reasons that have allowed Pashinyan to stay in power after the war. First, the Armenian public did not expect a large-scale war. The history of the conflict shows that the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan was sufficient to curb further escalation of the conflict. Moreover, Russia's active presence in the region has always been a further guarantee of stability or, at least, the absence of escalation. Even the skirmishes in the summer of 2020, which were later considered as a dress rehearsal of the war, did not seem to prelude a full-scale battle.

Second, the Armenian public was confident since the country for many years enjoyed a sort of regional superiority due to the competitiveness of the Armenian army. The unpreparedness of Armenians in the face of last autumn's conflict was absolute, both politically and psychologically. This misperception was exacerbated by government-imposed information filtering. The government's call to follow official media and distrust international information resulted in a total lack of understanding of what was happening on the ground during the six weeks of war. Against this background, the high legitimacy of Pashinyan left no space for the public to question the way in which the executive was handling the war. In particular, Armenians were bewitched by the slogan "We will win", which the government put forward and could foresee everything happening but a defeat.

In light of the above, the shock of defeat was massive and Armenians became paralysed – only a small number of citizens mobilised to demand the resignation of Pashinyan after the ceasefire was agreed with the November 9th statement. And the election turnout was very low, with just under half of Armenians (49.37 per

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cent) going to the polls for the June elections. This is the second-worst turnout ever, taking into account all presidential, parliamentary and referendum elections held since 1991. In other words, the inaction of the majority of citizens ensured Pashinyan's stay in power.

The absence of credible alternatives

Another decisive element which allowed Pashinyan's party Civil Contract to win 53.9 per cent of the vote, with peaks of 67 per cent in the countryside, was the presence of a weak opposition. In the June elections, all other party leaders ran in an attempt to challenge Pashinyan. The alternatives to Pashinyan had nothing new to offer. In addition, excessive polarisation within the opposition camp, as well as a rhetorically-violent election campaign favoured Pashinyan. As a consequence, more than 20 parties did not even pass the five per cent threshold during the elections.

A good example of the electoral failure of the opposition is Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of Armenia (1991–1998), who did not even receive two per cent of the vote. Although his candidacy was solid, the image of a "weak" candidate developed over time. During his tenure he suggested improving relations with neighbouring countries, which might lead to economic development of the region. In particular, Ter-Petrosyan proposed to put aside demands for recognition of the genocide by Turkey and to hand over the seven regions conquered during the war with Azerbaijan in the 1990s without demanding immediate recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh's status.

More than 20 parties did not even pass the five per cent threshold during the June elections.

Ter-Petrosyan's vision, explained in his famous 1997 article "War or Peace? Time for Reflection", suggested that Azerbaijan would become stronger and the international community would never accept the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh. In light of this, defeat was just a matter of time and an internationally-recognised solution was impossible to reach. Although Ter-Petrosyan's ideas proved to be correct, they were received negatively in Armenia and he was forced to resign. In the June elections, he once again was punished for his original approach. His proposal for the opposition leaders to run together against Pashinyan was also rejected.

Among those who rejected the Ter-Petrosyan proposal was Robert Kocharyan, the second Armenian President (1998–2008). Although he was Pashinyan's main rival, he ended up with just 21 per cent of the vote. The disagreement between Ter-Petrosyan and Kocharyan is rooted in their ideological differences over Nagorno-

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Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during the June election campaign. There is little doubt that Pashinyan used the art of rhetoric brilliantly, particularly during the last election campaign.

Karabakh. Kocharyan would never have accepted the cession of the seven regions unless in exchange for the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh's status. Many have linked this to Kocharyan's emotional ties to Nagorno-Karabakh, the land where he was born and raised, and for which he fought in the war during the 1990s.

No return to the past

Despite being an independent candidate, Kocharyan was, and still is, supported by the Armenian Revolutionary Party (ARP). Although the initial slogan of the ARP was "A Free and Unified Armenia", today the party limits its demands to the independence of Artsakh (the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh). In the elections Kocharyan, together with the governors of the Syunik region, formed the Armenia Bloc, which includes the ARP.

His decision to replicate the same old political strategy and play the role of a strong man did not produce the desired outcome. Moreover, Kocharyan was pe-

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nalised for his bad reputation. Indeed, Armenians did not seem to have forgotten the two tragic events that occurred during his presidency: the assassination of Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan in 1999 and the crackdown on civil disobedience in March 2008. At that time, opposition leader Ter-Petrosyan and former journalist and up-and-coming politician Pashinyan led mass protests to contest the electoral triumph of Serzh Sargsyan, the third president (2008–2018). As a result of the police clashes, ten people were killed and Pashinyan was sentenced to imprisonment for civil disobedience. As soon as Pashinyan came to power in 2018, a trial against Kocharyan, seen as a vendetta, was initiated. Although the allegations of "overthrowing the constitutional order" and, more specifically, orchestrating the clashes between the police and citizens, were dismissed for lack of evidence, the trial contributed to bringing Kocharyan back into the political arena. Today, another trial is underway against him for corruption. This certainly affected his image during the recent campaign.

The electoral performance of Serzh Sargsyan was also poor. He was hindered by the fact that his mandate was punctuated by allegations of corruption. The Armenian oligarchs were strongly reinforced when Sargsyan was in power. Leader of the nationalist Republican Party of Armenia, he founded the political coalition "I Have Honour" with a former intelligence chief appointed by Pashinyan who later switched sides. Sargsyan's bloc received 5.3 per cent of the votes. Notably, Sargsyan was the "loser" of the 2018 revolution and thus represents the past – a past already defeated by Pashinyan three years ago. This is why he could not be a credible alternative to the incumbent prime minister.

Pashinyan: popular or populist?

There is no doubt that Pashinyan was able to emotionally connect with a section of Armenian society. Similarly, there is little doubt that he used the art of rhetoric brilliantly, particularly during the last election campaign. Pashinyan was able to instil into the people's minds that he was one of them. Armenians, deprived of any ability to influence the destiny of their country for many years, finally felt like they have a leader who is an ordinary person like them, at least in appearance. This feature has accompanied Pahinyan throughout his political career to the extent that, during the revolution, people called him by his first name, Nikol, rather than his surname.

The repetitive use of expressions – "you are all prime ministers", "you decide your own future", "it's all the previous regime's fault" – has enabled Pashinyan to win the hearts and minds of the Armenian public, especially in rural areas. The formula

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of "I am proud of you, I bow to you, I kiss you" to close his rallies and speeches helped create an emotional bond with the people. At the same time, Pashinyan's use of humour and insults disguised as ironic gags allowed him to break down any barriers with the voters.

While these tactics certainly helped, his real achievement was to make Armenians forget about the war, at least for the duration of the electoral campaign. In other words, in shifting the political discourse from the external front (i.e. security issues) to the internal front (i.e. the risk of the old regime returning to power), Pashinyan managed to win an election that seemed lost.

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Ukraine deserves better analysis than it has

An interview with Cédric Gras, French writer and former director of Alliance Française in Donetsk. Interviewer: Clémence Lavialle

CLÉMENCE LAVIALLE: Could you tell me how it happened that you started your career in Russia?

CÉDRIC GRAS: Well, I never had a clear career plan. Therefore, I started my professional life by doing what I had always wanted to do – travelling and climbing mountains. I was able to make a decent life out of it. But to make a living out of it, I knew that I had to tell a story through reports, writings, and photographs. In this way, I try to show the world in different forms: academic and more artistic. I try to tell the story of today's world.

How did you end up in Ukraine?

To be honest, Ukraine at first did not appeal to me at all. It was Russia's Far East that interested me the most. I lived in Vladivostok and travelled through Siberia. The big cities of western Russia were much less interesting to me at that time. Ukraine was also way too far west. When I got there for the first time I felt too close to France, which I was fleeing from at the time. Additionally, Ukraine was flat, without mountains, without wide open spaces. I only moved there in 2010 only because I was offered a job there. I was 27 years old and had to earn a living. It was a good job – a director of the Alliance Française, which is an institution promoting French language and culture abroad. I was tasked to set up a branch in Donetsk. To be honest, when I say Ukraine was not my dream place, Donetsk was even less so. If I had to choose a place in Ukraine, it would not be Donetsk…

But you ended up there and established the branch of Alliance Française. What were your beginnings like there?

I arrived in Donetsk from Russia, while all my colleagues had come from France. Clearly, my vision was very different from theirs. To tell you the truth,

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setting up a branch of Alliance Française in Ukraine was much easier than it would be in Russia. There were far fewer obstacles. The difference between the two countries did not even lie in the level of bureaucracy, which is still very present in Ukraine, but was rather a reflection of their political choices at that time. Russia was already starting a discussion on the law regarding foreign NGOs and was introducing more surveillance over the sector. When in Russia my status was that of a foreign worker who had a residence and work permit, in Ukraine, I received an embassy employee card, even though I did not work at the embassy.

However, what struck me when I arrived there was that, contrary to what I thought, Ukraine was light years behind Russia in terms of economic development. When I lived in Russia, it was at the time of high oil prices, and its middle class was starting to live well. Ukraine was less economically developed. This was especially true in Donbas where everything was still very Soviet – the mines, the architecture, even the statues. Donetsk still had statues of Felix Dzerzhinsky (a Bolshevik leader who is known for setting up the foundation for Soviet state security organisations – editor's note), something that was not to be found then in Russia. There were also one or two Stalin monuments and nothing was de-Sovietised. I felt like I had landed in the USSR. In Russia I had such sentiments in only very remote areas. This was very surprising for me.

Were you then interested in political developments in the region? Could you observe any tensions between the two nations?

Yes, I could see some tensions. When talking about 2010, which was three and a half years before the EuroMaidan, tensions would have been too strong of words. For the Russian-speaking part of Ukraine, Donetsk was the stronghold of the Party of Regions and its boss, Viktor Yanukovych. It was his basecamp, one that he frequently visited. The locals supported his party not because they particularly liked Yanukovych, but because they thought that by supporting him, they were defending their culture, which is a Russian-speaking Ukrainian culture. Let me also emphasise that by saying this I do not mean they are Russian. They feel Ukrainian, but they are Russian speakers. Economically speaking, they were also defending their region's coal and steel industries. We could then speak of a distant confrontation between the eastern and western regions which seemed far away. No one thought there would be an armed conflict. There was a political and cultural fight.

When I arrived in Donetsk, I looked for a Ukrainian language teacher, which turned out to be difficult. I finally found a woman who could not stop complaining about not being able to speak Ukrainian in Donetsk. Her resentment was interesting. The division was noticeable, but it was more along south-east versus north-west lines. In between, there were people speaking *surzhyk*, which is a hybrid of Russian and Ukrainian. Al-

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ready back then my impression was that Ukraine was a buffer zone between Russia and the European Union. So, I would say that more than tensions there was a cultural and economic confrontation. The war in Donbas is indeed a product of a plethora of economic interests, geopolitical visions and identity issues. It is not a war between Ukrainian-speaking versus Russian-speaking sides. Another important factor to keep in mind is that the Soviet-era factories did not undergo transformation. Up until 2014 Donbas was a region of the past, one that did not question its Soviet identity in the 1990s. All these things were fertile ground for war, but no one saw it coming.

And what about the pro-Russian economic preferences of the region?

It was not only the Ukrainian speakers who wanted their country to move towards Europe. Russian speakers wanted that too. Overall, Ukrainian businesspeople wanted to expand much further internationally than just Russia. However, it is also true that because of their outdated industrial practices, they could sell their products better in Russia. While most of the coal from Donbas went to Russia, only a fraction was sold to other states. The same was with metallurgy and industrial products. Russia would purchase them accepting that they did not comply with European standards.

Were you afraid for your life at the beginning of the war?

In the beginning of the war I was not afraid as there was no military activity in the city. It was outside it. There were skirmishes here and there, fighter jets were flying over Donetsk but there were very few explosions in the city itself. It started to escalate after the first battle at the airport; a lot of fighting took place there. In fact, I was on the last plane before the explosions started. I was on my way back from Kyiv where I had a meeting at the French Embassy. I arrived at two o'clock and the fighting started at around five or six o'clock. We were really afraid that we would get stuck in Donetsk. There were no more flights and the roads had checkpoints. That was real fear: what if we get stuck on the wrong side of the front line?

In your 2016 novel, *Anthracite*, Donbas is not presented as a region involved in the Maidan. It is far away from it being indeed Yanukovych's "land". And yet you also notice some grassroots initiatives initiated by its local population.

Yes. For example, in Donetsk there is still a statue of Taras Shevchenko, a Ukrainian writer and symbol of the Ukrainian language. He was the first literary man to write in Ukrainian. Spoken for a long time, Ukrainian was only formalised in writing by the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. It was the language of the common people, and Shevchenko raised its rank by writing in it. It is, therefore, a fairly new language. There are statues to Shevchenko in every Ukrainian city, including

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Photo courtesy of Cédric Gras

Donetsk. What is more, Donetsk inhabitants have never taken it down. Every evening, when the revolution was still under way in Kyiv, there were peaceful gatherings around the statue. At the beginning, there were no more than 100 people, and later the demonstrations never exceeded 200 or 300 people. So it never went beyond the square.

Afterwards, there were some clashes which moved to Lenin Square. There, supporters of the Maidan clashed with anti-Maidan protesters. The latter were quickly called supporters of Russia, although, in the beginning, they were only counter-revolutionaries. I think it is a bit quick to say that they were pro-Russian. More than anything else, they were there to oppose the Maidan's movement. However the truth is that they also received support from the Russian side. Initially, the two camps were separated by security forces. However after a few days, things got out of control. There were deaths during these demonstrations. It is hard to say exactly how many people died. What is certain is that there were many young people on the Maidan's side. On the other side, they were workers and probably those who were brought from the mines in an organised way. But we will never know the exact details of their coming. These protests did not last long because it became dangerous for the pro-Maidan people to organise them. Some had to flee to Kyiv and the demonstrations gradually stopped.

The anti-Maidan people lived in a post-Soviet world, but they were still mentally very close to what the Soviet era was like. The mines and metallurgical industries were much more than jobs where workers spend most of their day. The workers lived next door and everything in their lives was taken care of: holidays, school, even cultural development. It was like living with an extended family. These industries were defined by a socialist design. All life took place around the factory, people even got married in the factory. That's why the anti-Maidan people did not necessarily come from Donetsk but other parts of Donbas. In contrast, people who supported the Maidan lived in Donetsk, a big city with universities. I think this fact played a role in creating the divide. Our experience from countries such as France, Germany or Belgium teaches us that closing down of mines is an economic

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tragedy and a political earthquake. It is thus necessary to completely reinvent these regions. And it is hard to move from one economy to another. There were a lot of signs that this revolution was coming to Donbas as well. There were a lot of problems with coal prices. The whole region had to be modernised but people were standing up to prevent this from happening. They were making a good living after all. In my view, what happened in Donbas in 2014 is similar to what happened in the USSR during the Gorbachev era. I would even say that some regions of Russia are, in many ways, like Donbas today. This explains Putin's popularity in some regions. It is amazing how the worst revolutionaries become the worst conservatives.

What has had the biggest impact on you after you moved to Donbas?

The miners had a big impact on me. I enjoyed going down into the anthracite mines. In France this is no longer possible, not without guided tours. Here it was like being in Zola's *Germinal*. We were a kilometre deep underground with men with their shirts off to blow up the anthracite deposits. Sometimes we had to crawl into extremely tight corners. For me it was a journey into the past, for them it was their present reality. Again, as I said earlier, Donbas is economically "outdated", and this was one of the factors that made it a breeding-ground for war.

Professionally, you promote French language and culture in Ukraine, but would you say that the French are interested in Ukraine as well?

Ukraine has never been very high on the French agenda and this is the main difference with Russia. In 2006 Ukraine removed visas for Europeans, which Russia did not do. It got easier for EU citizens to come to Ukraine. This is one of the consequences of the Orange Revolution. Since then many more French people could travel to Ukraine whereas it is more complicated to go to Russia. Since that time we (the French) also began to better understand what Ukraine is like. But that still does not mean much to the general public in France. For example, if you ask someone in Paris what Ukraine reminds them of, what you will probably hear is: "not much". Agriculture and women, I would guess. This whole matrimonial market is quite well developed and even got more so since the abolition of visas. It is unfortunate to see that for many French people, women are one of the associations they have with Eastern Europe. The truth is that the reality in the region is very complicated and should not be limited to simplified images centred around Russia only.

Yet international interest in Ukraine has somewhat revived since the outbreak of the war in Donbas and the earlier annexation of Crimea. Was it not the same for France? France, after all, officially takes part in the negotiations of the Normandy format…

With the Maidan we saw hordes of French reporters coming to Ukraine, and that was new. Before, I knew two

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French freelance journalists in Kyiv. You could see them looking for stories. Their freelance life was complicated in Ukraine because it was not an interesting country to western people. Things changed for them in 2013. It's a shame to say that, but the Maidan and the war have been a financial blessing for them. Since then, there has also been a lot more coverage of Ukraine in the western press. Having said that, I want to point to a gap that exists between what is actually written about in press and what people can absorb. When I discuss Ukraine in France, I do not have the impression that knowledge of the region has really evolved, apart from the fact that people know that a conflict is taking place there. This has contributed to an image of Ukraine as a kind of a frontline between the EU and Russia. I am not sure if that has advanced a better understanding of Ukraine rather than the events that are taking place. However, people have also made a step in their image of Ukraine as not being Russia. In parallel, I was amazed at how many people were afraid to go to Ukraine when there was – even during the war – no danger to do so.

Were you able to observe the reaction of the French during the Maidan Revolution? If so, what changes came with these protests?

What has always bothered me was how biased people can be in their reactions. Many people I dealt with were very pro-Ukrainian because they were anti-Russian. This was even true at the French embassy, even before Russia annexed Crimea. They also confused being anti-Putin with being anti-Russian. Right away, they wanted to bring Russia into the conflict. Again, there are many Russian-speaking Ukrainians and many of them chose Ukraine over Russian aid. There were very strong opinions. For example, my boss at the French embassy is supposed to be a diplomat and to stay reserved to current politics. And yet he too was extremely involved in the Maidan, which, in my opinion, was not right. He had a black and white vision of the conflict. And, in my opinion, Ukraine deserves a much better analysis than it currently has. When you look at the results of the regional parliamentary elections, you see that things are not as simple as it seems. Not everyone is exclusively pro-European, pro-Maidan or anti-Russian. There is a mosaic of people that make the overall image much more complex. Many Ukrainians want to avoid being taken over by Europe. It should also be pointed out that something serious has happened in Ukraine, namely the migration of millions of people to Europe. It really is a brain drain and a tragedy for Ukraine. Poland attracts many Ukrainians because its culture is close to them, language is similar and the country is a neighbour. The Poles have a labour problem and a grim demographic outlook. Thus, in my opinion, the pro-European choice of Ukraine has its limits. And, moreover, Ukrainian companies are not ready to face western competition. If Ukraine opens up too much, everyone

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will go to the West. Europe is draining the talent and labour away from Ukraine and I do not know whether Ukrainians are happy about that.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, in France we sometimes have this Manichean-like view of Russian aggression. Would you agree with that?

France has decided to play the negotiation card. The idea is to reconcile Kyiv and Moscow and to try to get them to compromise. Nevertheless I would say we have taken sides by sanctioning (through the EU) Russia and recognising its aggression in Crimea. For Crimea, it was simple: we judged based on the facts. Indeed, the Russians came to Crimea while it was Ukrainian territory; therefore, it was an invasion. As far as Donbas is concerned, I am not sure that France could have a significant influence. In fact, France is totally uninterested in this conflict.

What is France's position today when facing the near impossibility of implementing the Minsk agreements?

I know some of the negotiators in the Minsk group who are fed up because it is not moving forward. They are at the umpteenth meeting between all parties and it is going nowhere. It reminds me of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh until the recent war. During this period, there were unsuccessful negotiations. It was the recent war that decided things for everyone. As far as Ukraine is concerned, the Russians are playing the time card so that others lose interest. The Ukrainians, the only ones who really care about these territories, do not have the means to make things happen. And on the economic front, there is a joke that is told in the corridors during the negotiations: "whoever gets Donbas back has lost". It would take so much economic investment to get this region back on its feet that nobody wants it.

Cédric Gras is a French writer and former director of Alliance Française in Donetsk. He has led long-distance travels and has a passion for the mountains and geography studies. The vastness of Siberia and the Russian Far East, the war in Ukraine and the Antarctic have notably nourished his stories and novels. He regularly contributes to various publications and magazines, translations or documentary films. His last book, *Alpinists of Stalin*, was awarded the Albert Londres 2020 prize.

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1968 in Prague and Bratislava

DIETER SEGERT

The Prague Spring was originally the name of a musical festival that took part in the town every spring. In 1968 it became the description of a political hope. Yet, there was strong resistance against attempted reforms to give socialism a human face.

"1968" happened not only on the streets of the cities in the United States, in Paris and Berlin (West), but also in Prague and Bratislava. Soviet tanks and people on the street protesting against it determine the collective memory of this year. However, the eastern "1968" was more than that. There was a reform movement and a lot of hope. The changes started with the party congress of the Czechoslovak communists at the end of 1962. The Czechoslovak reforms did not begin in the streets as a protest movement against the rulers, but started at a meeting of the ruling party at which the communists criticised their own policies. The central keyword is political rehabilitation.

In the early 1950s, there had been political show trials in Czechoslovakia in which the former party leader, Rudolf Slansky, and ten other leading communists were sentenced to death on false accusations. Their rehabilitation only came in 1962. That broke a taboo, because until then it was perceived that the party could not be wrong. The party is always right. Now it was officially admitted that the "infallible party" had made some serious mistakes. In addition, radical economic reform was in the making. Both decisions – open criticism of earlier political mistakes and economic reform – led to the country's political awakening five years later.

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Change in leadership

Why did the reform process begin within the ruling party? It had to do with the logic of the communist dictatorship: against its steely power, effective change could only start at the top. Otherwise, it would have failed due to the instruments of power that would be deployed against any protest. However, in 1968 – the year of the Prague Spring – the ministry of the interior and the powerful political police (the "State Security") was under the control of a reformer.

In January Alexander Dubček, a Slovak, was elected as head of the party. He grew up with his parents in the Soviet Union. Dubček was an opponent of the former party leader Antonín Novotny, and had some new ideas on how to develop the country. Other leading figures in the party at that time were subject to repression as early as the 1950s, such as Josef Smrkowský and František Kriegel. The change within the leadership was a result of the rehabilitation processes. However, not only reformers were advanced. Gustav Husak, the future leader of the anti-reform forces, was also set free. In the 1950s he was convicted of "bourgeois nationalism".

Academics like economist Ota Šik conceived the economic reform, in which state enterprises should be relieved from bureaucracy. One important aim was to give market forces more space. In April 1968, the leadership of the communist party adopted a political programme promising more democracy and greater opportunities for people with different political convictions. "Socialism with a human face" was to gradually emerge from reforms. This new socio-political order was to serve as a model for societies that were more economically developed and more closely linked to Western European cultural development than Russia had been in 1917. The Czechoslovak reformers regarded the socialism of the Soviet Union as a product of low-level economic, social and cultural development. In the new type of socialism, each citizen would have more opportunities to achieve their individual goals. It was hoped that the new socialist model would be more attractive to people in Western Europe and elsewhere. Some communist parties, including those in Yugoslavia, Italy and Japan, welcomed this effort.

The reform attempts in Czechoslovakia were directed against the outdated model of socialism in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe.

While the generation of 68ers in the West protested against the predominance of out-dated social customs, as well as against the US-war in Vietnam, the reform attempts in Czechoslovakia were directed against the outdated model of socialism in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. It aimed to return to the traditions of Czechoslovakia before February 1948 (a communist coup d'état). The country was a democracy before the Second

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On the night of August 21st 1968, half a million soldiers from the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia with tanks and planes to end the experiment that was called the Prague Spring. About 150 people lost their lives and hundreds were sentenced to prison.

World War and it should become one again. However, the view was it should be based on another societal foundation. Democracy should be connected with public ownership in infrastructure and organisations. It was an attempt to combine the social advantages of state socialism with the freedom of post-war capitalism.

The Prague Spring was originally the name of a music festival that took place in the city in every spring. In the year 1968, it became the symbol of political hope. However there was strong resistance against the reforms from other communist leaders within the Eastern Bloc. The party leaders of the Polish and East German communist parties – Władysław Gomułka and Walter Ulbricht, respectively – were particularly active. Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian party leader, was also an opponent of the reforms. Hungary's leader János Kádár was also part of the group, but less convinced.

Leonid Brezhnev, head of the communist party of the Soviet Union since 1964, was initially hesitant as well. He trusted Dubček. Of course, among other Soviet leading functionaries many were open opponents of the reforms and put pressure on the sceptical Brezhnev. Nevertheless, the Prague Spring was tolerated longer than other reform attempts in the socialist camp – for example the 1956 insurgency in Hungary. In the fall of 1956, reformers had been violently overthrown in less than a month. In 1968, on the other hand, Czechoslovak reformers had more than six months to develop their schedule and to demonstrate their plans.

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Reformers vs hardliners

The reform agenda was long. One of the very first steps was the abolition of media censorship. Starting in March 1968, media and the press became more open and freer. Topics that had been taboo were now openly discussed. The reformists took up leading posts in newspapers and on television. Jiří Pelikán, for example, was appointed TV-director and remained there until the troops marched in.

Notwithstanding the rise of the reformers, many supporters of the old system had remained within the leadership. Due to the ongoing disputes between the two groups, the pace of change slowed down. Additionally, pressure from outside the country also started to take effect. Representatives from the Eastern Bloc were gathering in various places – Dresde (in March), Moscow (in May), Warsaw (in July) and Bratislava (in August).

Since April, however, the reform movement within the communist party became stronger and stronger. It included many Czechoslovak writers and academics from the party's university. From within the group of reform-oriented scholars, some came to the party leadership, including Michal Reiman. He was born into a communist family. His father, Pavel, was part of the communist leadership between the 1930s and the political trials during the early 1950s. He survived the trials, but was also politically degraded. Michal had moved to Moscow together with his mother during the German occupation of the country. He studied in Moscow in the early 1950s. During the Prague Spring, he was working as a historian in the party college and had just published a critical study on the 1917 Russian Revolution. Together with Jan Křen and other colleagues, he supported Dubček and Smrkowský with their expertise.*

When the reforms stalled due to outside pressure and from the conservatives within the party leadership, another group of reform-oriented party members intervened. Ludvík Vaculík, a journalist and writer, himself a long-time member of the party, published an appeal to the party leadership, the famous "Dva tisíce slov" (Two thousand words). He called for the reforms to be continued. Important was his call to the leadership to admit its responsibility for the crimes and detriments of the past and to promote social rejuvenation. This appeal added to the growing pressure on the party not to let up on the reforms.

When the communist party began to move, non-communist groups also had an opportunity to emerge and to express their demands. Former political convicts

* Fore more details see my interviews with Michal Reiman, in Dieter Segert: *Prager Frühling. Gespräche über eine europäische Erfahrung* [*Prague Spring. Conversations on an European experience*], Wien: Braumüller 2008.

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organised themselves in the association "K 231". Citizens who did not support the communists founded the Club of Active Non-Party (KAN). Former members of social democrats re-established their party. Václav Havel, known to us as the country's president after the 1989 revolution, was the chair of the Club of Independent Writers during the Prague Spring. He contributed to the democratisation of the country during this time and more so after the occupation in August.

In this way, thanks to the communist reformers, society was now in motion and it led to greater pluralisation. The communists, of course, could only do this because they were leading the state. Among other things, it was important to reduce censorship and police control. Non-communist viewpoints were now widely present, even within parliamentary debates. Various civil society groups had used these beginnings for their own interests. They demanded free elections, for instance. However, it never came to that.

The end of the Prague Spring

In the summer of 1968 it was unknown if things would move towards democratic socialism with a mixed economic system or shift back to state socialism with Soviet characteristics. When the pressure of other communist leaders did not work, the opponents decided to intervene militarily. On the night of August 21st, half a million soldiers invaded Czechoslovakia with tanks and planes. About 150 people lost their lives and hundreds were sentenced to prison.

The Prague Spring lived on for a while. In January 1969, a student named Jan Palach burned himself to death in protest against the withdrawal of the reforms. The communist reformers were expelled from the party. Over 400,000 members were affected. Many also lost their jobs. Some, like Michal Reiman and his wife, Tamara, were forced into exile. A few years later, resistance against the dictatorship became visible because of the civic initiative, Charter 77. Former communist reformers and non-communist opposition activists worked together in the protest movement. Finally, in the fall of 1989, a new phase in the country's history began with the Velvet Revolution. The election of Václav Havel as president of the state and Alexander Dubček as the speaker of the Czechoslovak Parliament marked the beginning of this development. NEE

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Contemporary witnesses of change

IRIS KEMPE

Despite individual points of light from the 1968 Prague Spring, when Michal Reiman was a companion of Alexander Dubček, the path to democracy and freedom was not a straight one, but paved with control and arrests by the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, the contemporary witnesses were important carriers of the cycles of change.

With the coup of the Bolsheviks in October 1917, the communist party seized power in the Russian Empire for the first time. The revolutionary spark of the party in power in the Soviet Union did not, as Lenin and later Stalin intended, spread across Europe to shape societies. Instead, contacts to Moscow via Berlin to Vladivostok were continued as an instrument ranging from equality to state terror. The so-called great terror in 1937/38 was marked by excesses of socialist violence. Key actors became victims of terror, whose fate was concealed and whose existence spread throughout the Soviet Union and through the member states of the Warsaw Pact in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. As part of the Soviet regime, contemporary witnesses were condemned to silence. Positive exceptions were individuals like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who in his Nobel Prize for *The Gulag Archipelago* managed to capture the terror of the regime for the public.

The most lasting turning point in the communist system of party rule was triggered by the death of Stalin in 1953 and the subsequent 20th party congress in 1956 of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev sent a signal of change in a five-hour secret speech about the crimes of Stalin. As a result, the party wanted to prepare for de-Stalinisation and gain room for manoeu-

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vre for a cautious reform policy. This opened up domestic political opportunities for representatives of democracy and freedom to publicly formulate their goals.

Social actors such as Michal Reiman and Tamara Reiman as well as Tomas Venclova witnessed attempts at democratic development and their failure. Günter Hänsel, the pastor of the Johanneskirche Lutheran Church in Berlin Schachtensee, has taken up these ideas for a commemorative event held on August 21st 2021 in a future-oriented manner. During that event, Tamara Reiman's previously unpublished report (which follows this introductory text) was read out to commemorate the Prague Spring of 1968. Tamara Reiman worked as an interpreter during the conference of the Soviet and Czechoslovak Politburo, chaired by Alexander Dubček and Leonid Brezhnev, at the end of July and first days of August in 1968 in Čierna nad Tisou. The Soviet-Czechoslovak summit took place on the railroad. During the day the delegations met to discuss the situation in Czechoslovakia. In the evening, the Soviet delegation would return to Ukraine.

With her contribution in the following text, Tamara Reiman documented like no one else the failure of socialism with a human face and with it the escalation of the Prague Spring on August 21st 1968. Based on these realities, Tomas Venclova formulated the cycles of change every 12 years. He mentioned the 20th party congress in 1956, the Prague Spring 1968, the establishment of the democratic trade union Solidarność in Poland in 1980, followed by the end of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Contemporary witnesses of this change were increasingly able to publicly discuss their experiences with the communist system. Nonetheless, carriers of change repeatedly ran the risk of falling victim to state control against reforms. One of the key moments of change was the Prague Spring. However, the policy of creating socialism with a human face ended with the pressures of the Soviet regime. After the Prague Spring there was renewed state control and repression.

Carriers of change repeatedly ran the risk of falling victim to state control against reforms.

Despite individual points of light from the Prague Spring, when Michal Reiman was a companion of Alexander Dubček, the path to democracy and freedom was not a straight one but paved with control and arrests by the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, the contemporary witnesses were important carriers of the cycles of change. Dubček liberalised society by developing a Czechoslovak Road to socialism based on dialogue and co-operation. In the case of the Reimans, this meant in the medium term the loss of jobs and an escape to West Berlin. There they were able to report on the developments in Prague to the students of the Free University of Berlin. The reformers and Tomas Venclova were pioneering contemporary witnesses of the change. Michael Thumann describes in his contribution the continuation of

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this development through the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the myth of the meeting in the Belovezha Forest on December 8th 1991, which led to the end of the Soviet Union. Wim van Meurs describes the processes of reforms and change in the region of Eastern Europe and Southeastern Europe that can lead to the building of bridges from the Prague Spring to a new European Eastern policy. These reports by eyewitnesses of regional development make clear to the reader how difficult that path to a democratic Europe truly was.

This introduction as well as Tamara Remain's accounts are a part of a wider forthcoming publication titled Europäische Zeitenwende: Prager Frühling (Turning point in Europe: Prague Spring), edited by Iris Kempe and Wim van Meurs and published by Ibidem Verlag.

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Three weeks before the occupation

An interpreter's memories

TAMARA REIMAN

As a result of reforms taking place in 1968 Czechoslovakia, the Soviet leadership initiated a special conference to meet with Czechoslovak officials which took place from the end of July until the beginning of August in Čierna nad Tisou, a small remote town on the Soviet-Czechoslovak border (with the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic). I participated as an interpreter and share, for the first time in print, my memories of this important time.

On July 28th, 1968, when I was working at the department of international relations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, I was called and told that we should report to work with a bag packed and enough supplies for a few days. I was not permitted to discuss this with anyone, as it concerned a simultaneous interpretation at an international conference. When we arrived, nothing was explained, except that we would be travelling to Čierna. The participants were brought to the airfield where everything was ready for the government plane to take off. The entire Czechoslovakian delegation flew to the city of Košiše. For five days a train stood still on the rails, where everyone lived: the members of the Politburo, the service apparatus, experts, advisors, interpreters,

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and everyone else. Opposite the platform was an unsightly cultural centre building. The conference* took place there, in a small hall.

The arrival

Leonid Brezhnev and Ludvík Svoboda (then president of Czechoslovakia – editor's note) greeted one another with a kiss. The Soviet delegation arrived on July 29th. The conference would not begin for another day and already the atmosphere was tense – although at first glance, nothing had happened, and everything appeared calm. Anxieties rose to a new height on the morning of the next day. Everyone got up early, ate breakfast without paying attention and waited to see what would happen. Time passed slowly, and still the whole Soviet delegation had not arrived. Finally, the train appeared in the distance. Heavily armoured, it approached the platform slowly, and from it the passengers of the Soviet Politburo stepped out, with Brezhnev in the lead. They greeted each other very cautiously. No hugs, no kisses. While Brezhnev and Svoboda kissed, the other Soviet leaders simply shook hands, and that was all. Then Brezhnev and Alexander Dubček went into the car of the Soviet train. Everyone else waited on the platform and talked quietly. The conversation revolved around this and that – largely small talk. The delegations were waiting to see what was to come. About an hour and a half later, Brezhnev came outside with Dubček, and after a few minutes both delegations, some of the experts, and the interpreters entered the room.

The meeting hall was a rather large, uncomfortable, long room with a long table in the middle. Members of the Czechoslovak delegation sat on one side of the table, and the members of the Soviet delegation on the other. There were chairs for the consultants and experts along the walls and two booths for the interpreters on one of the walls. First, Brezhnev gave a long, three-hour presentation. The Soviet delegation, for some reason, only had one interpreter to translate the entire presentation. Towards the end of the presentation, she was half dead from exhaustion, but we were not allowed to take a break, not even for a few minutes – not allowed!**

Brezhnev spoke in a calm voice, expressionless, without any particular emotion. But what he said was very harsh: that danger from the right was growing in Czechoslovakia; that there were counter-revolutionary organisations such as KAN (the Club of the Active Non-Party) and K231 (Club of political prisoners convicted

* Even if the official title of the meeting was conference, it was more of a summit meeting between the Politburo of the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.

** With simultaneous interpretations, one generally works for 15–20 minutes without a break.

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in the 1950s and 1960s on the basis of Article 231); that the party had a so-called "second centre"; that the Czechoslovak press, radio, and television had turned into a mouthpiece for right-wing forces and had completely slipped out of control of the party, and so on.* While Brezhnev was listing to all of these allegations, he spoke in an almost fatherly tone, like a teacher to his pupil. The tone of the other Soviet leaders was far rougher and authoritarian.

After Brezhnev, Dubček spoke. He gave a serious, well-reasoned presentation that showed that there was no threat of a counter-revolution in the country. Dubček came to the defence of the media which Brežnev had disparaged so harshly. However, one had the impression that he was talking to a brick wall: the Soviets listened with cool detachment and were not inclined to accept a single argument.

Lack of interest

The Soviets' lack of interest in listening or understanding – or even negotiating – became more and more evident with each presentation by one of their representatives. Today, I can no longer say who exactly said what, but I can still clearly remember that Alexei Kosygin's address seemed particularly aggressive (Kosygin was the Soviet prime minister at that time – editor's note). Literally every sentence he spoke was dripping with sharp malice. He seemed to spew poison and bile with his threats. In response to Dubček's argument that the new course of the Czechoslovak government enjoyed the support of the entire population of the country and that the party's central committee had passed resolutions in support of them *en masse*, Kosygin said, with a malicious grin that I remember very well: "Why do you keep telling us about resolutions?! If the participants call Moscow now, you will receive so many resolutions against the counter-revolution in Czechoslovakia that they will fill this room from the floor to the ceiling!" He absolutely failed to understand that resolutions could be passed on the initiative of ordinary people who are concerned about a matter – that is, without direction from above. And it was also Kosygin who said: "Your border is also our border." He said this in a way that the western border of Czechoslovakia represented the border of the socialist camp, and that the Soviet Union could take any means necessary to secure it.

As I said, it was clear from the beginning of the conference that the Soviets neither wanted to adjust to the situation nor understand anything. The representa-

* The name of my husband, Michal Reiman, was also mentioned among the activists of this "second centre."

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tives of the reform wing of the Czechoslovak leadership spoke as if in front of an empty hall, and a malicious grin was the only reaction from the Soviet side of the table. The Soviet leaders reacted only when one of their protégés took to the floor: Vasiľ Biľak, Drahomir Kolder, Emil Rigo, or Oldrich Švestka. The Soviets listened to them with rapt attention. Bil'ak's speech was accompanied by loud approval, especially when he spoke of anti-Soviet and anti-socialist tendencies that allegedly existed in Czechoslovakia, and when he alleged that the communists were about to be hung from the street lamps. We could not believe our ears: how can you be able to spread outright lies about your own country?! Alexander Schelepin (from the Soviet delegation – editor's note) was the friendliest in form. Mikhail Suslov was an experienced, caustic Jesuit on ideological issues and demonstrated, in a monotone voice, that revisionism was growing rapidly in Czechoslovakia.

Throughout the conference, the Czechoslovak and Soviet representatives appeared confused. There was no programme, no regulations, and no management of the conference. Brezhnev took on the role as unofficial chairman without taking the initiative of asking anyone. This continued for half a day until Petro Shelest took the floor on July 30th. Shelest's speech was the coarsest and sharpest of all. He literally foamed at the mouth as he spoke about the counter-revolution in Czechoslovakia. Antisemitic tones were also heard in his speech. Shelest shouted phrases such as "a certain Kriegel, a Jew from Galicia". And Frantisek Kriegel – the chairman of the National Front of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, a participant in the Spanish civil war and the war in China, a clever and excellent person – was sitting across from Shelest; he simply smiled in understanding.

Deviation from the Soviet path

Shelest got to the heart of the matter. It was clearly stated: "You are deviating from the path, we will not tolerate this, and we will bring you back to the right path in our 'proletarian' way." God knows how everything could have turned out, but during the conference, because of Shelest's speech, there was a break. Shelest spoke particularly scathingly of Dubček, whom he accused of betraying the cause of socialism. Dubček reacted to this, as it seems to me in retrospect, unexpectedly for the Soviet leader, because he reacted like a normal person who had just been grossly and unjustly insulted. He stated that he categorically disagreed with Shelest, that the friendly relations with the Soviet Union were sacred to him, and that it was completely unjustified to accuse him of being anti-Soviet when his family had participated in the socialist construction of the Soviet Union in the 1920s in the Czechoslovak agricultural cooperative "Interhelp" in Kazakhstan.

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Dubček's voice began to tremble, and he did not finish reading his script, but instead got up from his seat and turned to leave the room. One of them – I think it was Josef Smrkovský, the speaker of the Czechoslovak parliament – rushed over and spoke with him. There was confusion in the hall. The Soviet representatives sat there with red faces, although I would not say that they were amazed. In my opinion, they were unable to understand and did not expect a normal, human response from a politician. This went beyond understanding Brezhnev and the others who were with him. Then they began to whisper to each other and one of them, I think Nikolai Podgorny, went to Dubček on the platform.

The conference was interrupted. What would happen next was unclear. The Soviet delegation withdrew to their railcars and one of them came to Dubček that evening. As it turned out, there had been discussions that further work should take place behind closed doors. On the Soviet side, Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny, and Suslov took part in the negotiations, and Dubček, Svoboda, and Smrkovský participated on the Czechoslovak side. The discussions continued during the third day of the conference, on July 31st. They went on without interpreters, without secretaries and without experts. There was only one Soviet interpreter and one stenographer present. Everything that was discussed is unknown. It was certainly discussed that a conference of the leaders of the communist parties of the socialist countries (with the exception of Romania and Yugoslavia) should take place in Bratislava. Obviously censorship was also discussed, as certain steps in this direction were taken on the Czechoslovak side after the Černa conference. When the heavy train transported the Soviet Politburo to safe, native territory for the night (the train with the Soviet delegation drove to Černa in the morning and back in the opposite direction in the evening), the Czechoslovak participants were invited into the saloon car, where a roasted suckling pig was lying in a bowl. A delegation from the Slovak area brought it. I do not know how they managed to get it onto the platform. The platform was literally sealed off from the overgrown land. Not a single journalist, not a single visitor, not a single delegation had been to Černa this whole time. Telephoning was only possible in exceptional cases and upon special permission.

Evening party

Whatever the outcome, the roast pig was on the table, and Prime Minister Oldřich Černík, armed with a knife and fork, began to prepare it, saying that he knew his way around because his father had been a butcher. Still, the mood was anxious, and we did not feel very comfortable. Everyone was there: those who sup-

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ported Dubček and those who a few weeks later were called "the healthy core" of the communist party. The latter generally did not say much, and we did not talk to them in a demonstrative way. The representatives of this "healthy core" were the first to gradually withdraw, and later, after we invited Dubček to our compartment, we also went to sit and drink vodka.

In the evening Dubček, Černík, and Kriegel came into our small compartment (we slept in a compartment for two people). The seven of us somehow found space on a bench, and the experts crouched on their knees on the wall opposite us, and someone stood at the door. We opened a bottle of vodka and poured it into plastic cups. Everyone talked about typical things. Little by little, concrete questions were posed, but Dubček's and Černík's answers were generally optimistic, in the sense that the Czechoslovak side did not give in too much. Fundamental concessions were not made. Kriegel was silent. I thought that the situation was clear to him, but that he preferred to remain silent. Someone later told an anecdote, and Dubček laughed so heartily that everyone began racing to tell other stories just to please him.

It was clear from the beginning of the conference that the Soviets neither wanted to adjust to the situation nor understand anything.

The "evening party" was interrupted by the arrival of someone unpleasant who made it clear to Dubček in a rather impolite polite manner that he must report immediately for some meeting. That evening, a similar person came into the car and gathered all the written materials that were there. The written texts of the presentations given by the Soviet participants, for example, were taken away from the interpreters. We had received it so that translations into Czech could be more precise. It happens quite often, with simultaneous interpretation that such a text is presented as working material, and the interpreters usually take notes directly into the text for themselves. In this case, the text of the Kosygin report contained not only working notes, but comments from the interpreter – in this case, it included comments that were by no means flattering of Kosygin. This text was also removed. Bil'ak would later claim, after the Soviet troops marched into Prague, that the anti-Soviet mood in Czechoslovakia had been so strong that even the interpreters who had been present at the conference in Černa made coarse remarks about "leading Soviet comrades".

The Soviet delegation was due to arrive early the next day, but their train did not appear until two o'clock in the afternoon. The meeting – this time we were there too – was very short. Brezhnev read aloud the draft of a Soviet communication and, without asking if there were any questions (the Czechoslovak delegation also had a draft), he put it to vote. The draft was accepted on the principle of "no one against it – accepted." Finally, a reception was held in the hall of the culture

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house, where only trivialities were discussed in a rather stiff atmosphere. Then a photographer came along and a picture was taken in front of the cultural centre which appeared in the press afterwards: a smiling, good-natured Brezhnev with a bouquet of flowers and Dubček next to him. The Czechoslovak leadership then accompanied the Soviet delegation to the wagons of the Soviet train, and they departed. The platform was then opened and the people of Černa poured in en masse. They talked to Dubček, Černík, Smrkovsky, Svoboda, and Kriegel, hugged them and expressed their sympathy and solidarity with them.

Politics behind closed doors

In Černa, I experienced, for the first time, what takes place behind the scenes of high politics. I was not afraid – and many joked that the participants would be sent to Siberia right away. They categorically denied the possibility that "brotherly" tanks could invade. I was unable to believe the reality of this threat. It seemed to me that intervention was impossible, because it had to be clear to everyone that a new socialism was being built in Czechoslovakia, a true socialism which was humane – socialism with a "human face". How could the Soviet Union, the world's first socialist state, send tanks against an equally socialist country?

After that, I attended the Conference of the Leaders of the Communist Party of Socialist Countries in Bratislava in August of 1968. There, all the work was done behind closed doors, and the interpreters had only the "honourable duty" of announcing that the session was either opening or closing. One of the Czech experts who attended in Bratislava later wrote that he had the feeling that he was attending his own funeral, which was attended by his closest enemies. There is nothing more to add. NEE

Tamara Reiman was born in 1932 and came from the Soviet / Russian city of Yaroslavl. She worked as an interpreter and was at the decisive meeting in July/August 1968 between the Soviet and the Czechoslovak Politburo leaderships.

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Shifting empires

The Treaty of Nystad turns 300

GRZEGORZ SZYMBORSKI

Three hundred years on, the Treaty of Nystad, which ended the Great Northern War between Sweden and Russia, still has a strong legacy today. The new reality, which formed after the signing of the treaty on September 10th 1721, saw Moscow emerge as a significant actor in Europe.

Russia's road to power and significance in the world was long and ambiguous. Moscow's imperial aspirations were sparked by the start of the Great Northern War in 1700 and were confirmed exactly 300 years ago. The famous battle of Poltava on June 28th 1709 paved that way. Yet, in spite of its military significance, it was the diplomatic and legal solutions that announced the rise of a new player, taking Sweden's place, at the table of European powers. But it took 12 more years before Moscow broke the will of Stockholm entirely.

What happened after the battle of Poltava and the fall of Charles XII of Sweden's army is less known than the first phase of the struggle, from 1700 till 1709, and the outcome of the war itself. In fact, the period following is far more pivotal in order to understand coalition shifts throughout these 12 years and how they affected the finale of the conflict.

Unlimited appetite

Almost immediately after the defeat on the Ukrainian plains, Sweden was forced to brace itself against old and new enemies which emerged like vultures seeking its

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prey. Initial foes like Saxony and Denmark joined the war once again, but did not achieve much, still suffering the defeats at the hands of the Swedes. Hannover and Prussia, however, made use of the depletion of Stockholm, and after entering the coalition in 1715, ripped off some Scandinavian possessions in the Holy Roman Empire.

It was Peter the Great of Russia who crushed Sweden's glory once and for all. After the successful campaign in Livonia in 1710, when the whole eastern coast of the Baltic Sea was occupied, his forces invaded the Swedish Grand Duchy of Finland and achieved further victories during the campaign of 1713–1714. The tsarist fleet emerged on the Baltic Sea. For the first time in history, Russian troops entered the territories of the Holy Roman Empire – in Pomerania and Mecklenburg. Muscovites besieged Stettin along with its Saxon and Prussian allies. In April 1716, the Kajaneborg fortress – the last Swedish stronghold in Finland – was seized by the Russians. With Moscow's unlimited appetite and swift advance, the German allies of Peter the Great became suspicious and no longer welcomed his support in Pomerania. But it was too late. The tsar was in a position of power and did not have to rely on his allies.

It was only in May 1718 when Stockholm and Moscow decided to open peace negotiations. The two delegations met in the town of Lövö on the Aland Islands. The Russian committee was headed by Jacob Bruce, Andrey Osterman and Pavel Yaguzhinsky. It is worth mentioning they were all of foreign origin – Scottish, German and Lithuanian, respectively. All of them decided to serve the tsar and became close to Peter the Great. They signified a new era of multiple foreigners in the service. Across the table sat Georg Heinrich von Görtz from Holstein-Gottorp and the former Swedish ambassador to Great Britain, Carl Gyllenborg, appointed by Charles XII.

In case of the Ingermanland and Karelia, the tsar announced that Russia was reclaiming its ancient lands, of which Muscovy was deprived in 1617 in favour of Sweden. But it was not the case for Viborg and its surroundings in particular. That area never belonged to Moscow in the first place. Peter referred to this piece of land as compensation for the war effort. The Viborg stronghold was essential to protect the outskirts of St Petersburg. Despite the ongoing war and formal occupation, in the summer of 1719 the fortresses of Viborg and Kexholm were included into the new administrative order of Russia. The strategic value of the borderland was out of question – in contrast to other oblasts, the newly established one was not under the jurisdiction of the voivode, but the military leader – ober-commader. Colonel Ivan Shuvalov, who was assigned to this position, was requested to sketch out maps of the new territories that, sooner or later, were to become the new frontier of Russia.

Another city which had to remain under Russian control was Revel (present-day Tallinn). Located west of St Petersburg, it constituted a protective zone, just

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like Viborg in the north. In addition, the main city of the Estonian Province was meant to become a navy base for the young Russian fleet.

In search of common ground

The first unofficial conditions agreed between the negotiators referred to the transfer of the Baltic provinces to Russia and the reimbursement of the Grand Duchy of Finland to Sweden. Livonia, in particular, was about to be granted to Russia for 40 years. In return for the territories ceded, Russia was to support Sweden in its attempts to conquer Norway and uphold its provinces in Bremen-Verden and Holstein-Gottorp. This is how the "alliance" between Stockholm and Moscow was discussed for a while. Russia was ready to turn against its distrustful German allies in order to protect its own interest. Yet, in September 1718, when tsarist diplomats drafted the first version of the agreement, Charles XII was unable to accept the loss of the Baltic provinces, and Carl Gyllenborg did not even try to hand the offer over to his lord. The tsar was eventually ready to give up some of his territorial claims (e.g. Kexholm), but only after the destruction of its fortifications. But such an offer never made it to the table.

In 1719, both sides still could not find common ground. No one wished to surrender the Eastern Baltic provinces, for which both Augustus II of Poland-Lithuania and Saxony and Peter the Great formed the league and sparked the war years before. Both sides procrastinated in order to reach their goals, while Stockholm tried to stop Russian naval raids and Moscow tried to discourage its allies from signing separate peace treaties. In the end, the hostilities resumed.

It was in 1719 when tsarist forces were deployed near Stockholm, being repelled in the battle of Stäket on August 13th, not far from the capital itself. The direct danger to the heart of the Kingdom, along with the preceding death of Charles XII on November 30th 1718, appeared to be a turning point, which led to another – and subsequently conclusive – round of negotiations. Despite Stockholm's successful defence, the city's fate was already at stake. Muscovy still occupied all the Baltic provinces. According to data gathered afterwards by the royal officers, due to the raids undertaken by Russians in 1719, Sweden suffered significant monetary loss, 20,000 people were left homeless, with seven cities and ten larger workshops and thousands of farms destroyed. The numbers exceeded the value of the annual Swedish income.

On April 28th 1721 negotiations reopened again, this time in the Finnish town of Nystad. Swedish diplomats were replaced by the advisors of the new Swedish monarch, Frederick I, who married Ulrika Eleonora, sister to the fallen King Charles

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XII. At the very beginning of the peace conference, while debating the fate of Viborg, the Russians suspected that the future treaty would be considered a temporary truce by the Swedes. Scandinavians were shocked to hear the tsar demanded Livonia perpetually. Swedish diplomats could not have accepted that, until the next raid of Russian forces burnt another 500 settlements. At the same time, Stockholm was afraid of losing Finland for good. By September 10th 1721 Swedish negotiators – Johann Paulinus Lilienstedt and Baron Otto Reinhold Strömfelt – managed to accept Russian demands, once again expressed by previously assigned Russian diplomats – Jacob Bruce and Andrey Osterman. They were supported by Ivan Shuvalov who had already made necessary preparations for the transmission of new lands he had been governing for some time. In early September he joined the final negotiations with his maps and plans in order to delimit the new frontier. Although the tsar was still thinking of the shape of the border – and even travelled in person to inspect the area – the treaty was finally signed. Swedish negotiators were terrified once they were informed that the tsarist army, consisting of 115,000 troops, was ready to strike at any moment. The Russian fleet managed to burn the town of Piteå, but they withdrew once word of the treaty spread.

The peace of Nystad

The treaty document was composed of 25 articles and forejudged not only the fate of Sweden. In first place the agreement proclaimed perpetual peace both on land and the seas, as well as the friendship between King Frederick I and Tsar Peter I and their successors. Both parties agreed not to sign any agreement that could harm relations between Stockholm and Moscow. Creating secret protocols was also prohibited. In accordance with Article 3, all hostilities in the Grand Duchy of Finland were supposed to cease within 14 days, and elsewhere within three weeks or earlier. It was settled that if the message of peace would not be conveyed, any cases of hostilities could not affect the treaty already concluded.

Article 4 referred to the essence of the agreement which was a perpetual cession of the territories occupied by Russia. Sweden lost the provinces of Livonia, Estonia, Ingermanland and part of Karelia with Viborg which jointly had been generating almost ¼ of its income. The cities and fortresses yielded were mentioned as follows: Riga, Dünamünde, Parnau, Revel, Derpt, Narva, Viborg, Kexholm, the Isles of Dago, Ösel and Muhu. The question of the frontier in Finland was regulated by Article 8.

In the end, the tsar was pleased with the outcome. The new border was 30 kilometres from Viborg and 150 kilometres from the new capital. The exact delimitation of the frontier among the Finnish lakes was nevertheless much more

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complicated; therefore the commissioners assigned by both sides still had much work to do in the aftermath. Colonel Shuvalov was sent directly from Nystad to oversee the delimitation progress. The final treaty on the frontier was signed on March 30th 1723 in Viborg. It had eight articles and was considered a supplement to Article 8 of the Treaty of Nystad.

In accordance with Article 5, Russia promised to withdraw its forces from Finland within no more than four weeks and hand it over to Sweden. Moreover, Peter the Great was obliged to pay two million silver thalers to King Frederick as compensation for the transfer of Livonia. The Finnish question was also mentioned in Article 13. The tsar promised to evacuate Finland peacefully and with no locals taken captive. Russian troops agreed to leave the fortresses untouched except arms and ammunition taken away. Peter the Great swore to return to the Swedish King the archives related to the Grand Duchy of Finland that were seized during the occupation. In accordance with Article 6, Stockholm was allowed to purchase bread in Riga, Revel and Arensburg (the town of Ösel, present-day Kuressaare) at a maximum of 50,000 roubles per year. The tsar released Sweden from paying any customs or taxes. This privilege could have been suspended when circumstances would force Russia to stop international trade for the sake of its own subjects.

Finally, in Article 9, the tsar agreed to maintain the rights and privileges of the nobility and other peoples. Russia extended religious liberties in order to guarantee freedom for the Orthodox Church. In Article 10, Peter swore not to affect the actions of the Lutheran churches and schools. From now on, the German nobility of the Livonian Province had become the reservoir of talented statesmen and officers working in honour of Russia.

Russia promised to withdraw its forces from Finland within no more than four weeks and hand it over to Sweden.

The Treaty of Nystad humiliated not only the enemy but some tsarist allies, including Saxony (with whom Russia entered the war in 1700) and Poland-Lithuania which joined the war in 1704, under the condition of reclaiming the Livonian Province. The promise was renewed twice in 1709 and 1711, but Peter the Great never planned to fulfil his pledge, and after his achievements in Finland and Pomerania, he could easily disregard his Saxon and Polish allies later on. Representatives of Dresden and Warsaw were not welcomed in Nystad, although for many years delegates of the Polish-Lithuanian Diet had insisted on the transfer of the Livonian province to the Commonwealth, as promised. This is why Article 15 of the final treaty was particularly humiliating for the Polish King Augustus II. It stated that Polish-Lithuanian diplomats were not authorised to attend the conference, nevertheless the tsar ensured to mediate in the future Swedish-Polish negotiations. Peter made the unfavourable Treaty of Nystad binding for Poland-Lithuania.

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Memory and legacy

In September 1721 the victorious tsar appeared in St Petersburg. With Peter's arrival, a huge celebration began. He proclaimed a general amnesty for the majority of criminals, and a huge masquerade was organised to celebrate the triumph. On October 31st 1721, the Senate asked the tsar to accept the title of the Emperor of All Russia. He was the first ruler to be crowned as such.

The anniversary of the treaty was later exploited in tsarist propaganda. A festive celebration took place in 1724, the last one before Peter's death. The Russian authorities decided to relate the anniversary with the arrival of the St Alexander Nevsky's relics into St Petersburg. On September 10th 1724 the sacred remains were placed inside the Holy Trinity Cathedral. Three days later, Peter issued a decree establishing September 10th as a new state and religious holiday.

Two out of three of Muscovy's great rivals were depleted as the result of the Great Northern War and the diplomatic manoeuvres of Peter the Great. Despite the letter of Article 7, Russia interfered in the domestic politics of Sweden. To a certain degree, Stockholm shared the fate of Warsaw, also weakened and destabilised as a consequence of the war. The new reality, finalised on September 10th 1721, brought Russia into the community of key actors in Europe. France and Austria started their rivalry over the tsarist support against one another. The Commonwealth, Denmark and Sweden paid respect to the might of the braced tsardom. Swedes were again taught a lesson in 1741, when they were lured by France into another war against Russia, whose superiority was confirmed as soon as in 1743 with Stockholm losing another piece of Finland.

Great Britain remained a suspicious rival to the rising empire, signing the first mutual treaty ever only in 1734. Despite reservations, the Austrian Habsburgs, as early as 1726, acknowledged the imperial title of the tsars which was a reminder of its victory over Sweden, and Russia's central presence on the European stage. Moscow's window to the West was finally opened in both a direct and figurative way. NEE

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A female voice from Sarajevo

KRZYSZTOF CZYŻEWSKI

In post-war Sarajevo a war is waged to win the future which had been taken away by the living ghosts of the past. The frontlines are nonetheless changing and now different people are pushed underground, stigmatised and treated as if they do not belong to the community. The ethnic and religious war has been replaced by a new culture war.

Some time ago, when the bloody Balkan war was still raging in Sarajevo, poet Izet Sarajlić, editor Čedo Kisić and professor Zdravko Grebo were explaining their world to me. None of them is alive anymore. Neither is Isak Samokovlija, a prominent Bosnian Jewish writer, whose stories took me to the most hidden corners of Sarajevo's historical centre, Baščaršija, as well as the Grbavica and Bentbaša districts. I was listening to the stories of the writers and artists who had left Sarajevo, but who were still under its influence. They included Dževad Karahazan in Graz, Josip Osti in Ljubljana, Miljenko Jergović in Zagreb, and Nino Žalica in Amsterdam…

Three women voices

Today things are different. Today, the story sent to us from Sarajevo comes in a female voice. This is a voice that probably existed before and has no monopoly over other voices. Yet, given the fact that we live at a time of a new culture war with the old harms still present, it is not an accident that it is women who are first on the frontline.

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Marina Trumić is no longer with us. She was a poet and translator. After the war she returned from Warsaw to Sarajevo, a city where she spent most of her life. There she resisted the discontent and misogyny which is so common for those living in post-conflict zones. I wish we could sit again inside a café (I can even hear her complaining that there are fewer places to have a cigarette these days) and wonder who she would invite to join the conversation. My guess would be another poet and writer – Ferida Duraković. That is for sure. Actually these two women were engaged in a poetic dialogue and that is why Duraković is an easy guess. But who else?

I would assume she would like us to be joined by the film director, Jasmila Žbanić, and poet Lejla Kalamujić. In fact, it was thanks to Marina that I first learned their names. Today, I can say, with certainty, that Duraković, Žbanić and Kalamujić are the three women from Sarajevo (out of many others) worth listening to. Duraković's poetry has been translated into other languages and published throughout Europe and the United States, and she has become an important witness of her time. Žbanić's film *Grbavica* was called the best European film of 2006, while last year's production, *Quo vadis, Aida?*, nearly received the Academy Award. Kalamujić's collection of works was nominated for the European Literary Award.

Certainly these three women knew quite a bit about death, which can be overcome so that life can continue. They all stayed in Sarajevo, against all odds. They all travelled into the wider world, but always returned home. Yet, the aim of their patient endurance was not moral superiority or an attempt to judge those who have left. Nor is it to deprive anyone of their right to choose their place of residence. Their aim was very different. It resembles the rhythm of a very long run, not afraid of darkness, harm and suffering, and which can build something and establish its essence.

Their faithfulness is not limited to those like them. It is rather expressed in the overcoming of their limitations. In this way, they spoke the language of old Sarajevo, the city of utopia. Its memory, tragic and full of love, encouraged them in the fight against new groups of fanatics.

"Das ist Walter," Yugoslav kids would say when they were finishing to play war. These were the words of a German dispatch who, in Hajrudin Krvavc's well-known 1972 film *Walter Defends Sarajevo* (*Valter brani Sarajevo*), declared in the last scene that he finally realised who was the legendary leader of the anti-fascist underground with the pseudonym Walter, the person he was trying to catch throughout the years of occupation. In vain. He uttered these words standing near the military barracks at Jajačka Street pointing to the city spreading below.

Kalamujić spent her childhood years, which overlapped with the Balkan war, near these barracks. She called them a "black oozing wound" while Sarajevo was

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Walter. Just like for Duraković, "the war destroyed everything, which was later augmented by hatred". For this reason, she had to stay in her hometown.

"Then I understood that Sarajevo was my place on earth and that it has always been and will be my homeland," she wrote. Thus, she resembles Žbanić, whose film *Grbavica*, a story about a mother and daughter born of rape, mercilessly exposing the dark parts of life in the post-war city, ends with a famous 1976 song, *Sarajevo, ljubavi moja* (*Sarajevo, my love*). Every person who lives in the city knows its lyrics.

Tell us about the war

All three women I write about, and who Marina Trumić knew well, are distant to the nationalistic narrative which discredits both the idea of uniting the Western Balkan nations and the heritage of the multi-ethnic state that was built after the Second World War. Far from idealisation, resistant to the sentiment of Yugonostalgia, they do not want to be deprived of the good memories of Sarajevo's cosmopolitan tissue. For this reason they support initiatives like the 2017 Declaration of the Common Language – an outcome of co-operation between intellectuals and civic organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia – which recognises their language as shared. This manifestation cannot get closed in the framework of pure linguistics; it makes an important step towards the revival of a cultural community which, in their view, has become divided by artificial borders of nation states.

At a certain point in the conversation, Marina (as it was her habit) would disappear. Possibly Duraković and Žbanić wanted to discuss something on their own, or maybe draw my attention to the youngest of them. The one who is shy, but whose quiet voice unexpectedly moved the hearts in all poetic kingdoms of the Balkans. Thus, I am moving to sit closer to Kalamujić, especially as I want to share her collection of short stories beautifully translated into Polish by Magdalena Petryńska with her.

"Now listen about the war," my elementary teacher would say when she wanted to silence us and introduce the veterans of the Wielkopolskie Uprising. I do not remember what they talked about, but I will never forget their grey moustaches and the medals on their uniforms. Just like the ones I knew from *The Nutcracker*. The garden of Kalamujić's grandparents (she lived with them in Sarajevo) was often visited by an old teacher telling them stories about the war as well. The Second World War, of course.

Today, Kalamujić receives invitations from different places across Europe to do the same. "Tell us about the war," she hears from the organisers. Yet her story

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is different from what we hear from others. For her, the war did not end with the Dayton Peace Accords, which put an end to the military conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later, there was still war in Kosovo – one that has turned into a permanent political, cultural and social crisis. The war that brought an end to Yugoslavia entered Kalamujić's home when she was only 12. After that, came peace: "A terrible trickster. Elegant, polished, full of words and smiles. And it doesn't pay the rent. Maybe only tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, in a few days…".

A war is a collapse of a house. Kalamujić's house in Sarajevo was never homogenous. It was inhabited by God, Tito, Islam and socialist guerrillas. Before the war, her family was a typical Yugoslav family. Nobody was surprised by her Serbian mother and Bosnian-Muslim father. The war sharpened the borders and inflicted pain. Thus, in the preface to Kalamujić's collection of short stories, both the author and translator explain the language of division that is necessary to understand the world of the narrator whose many experiences are evidently of the author. We read that "baka" is the mother's mom, while "nana" is the mother of the father. In the same way, there is "deda" and "dedo", grandma's pita and nanina sarma. There are also different parts of the city: a Serbian one and a Bosnian one. During the war they were divided by a frontline that for many became a kind of lifeline.

A Yugoslav and a socialist

When I was listening to Kalamujić, I tried to imagine her childhood. She was raised in Vratnik, the old district in Sarajevo. During the Ottoman period this area served as a gate (*vrata*) to the East, towards Istanbul. After her mother's death, from an unexpected heart attack at the young age of 22, Kalamujić (aged two) moved to her father's place where he lived with his parents. Whenever she heard her mother's name it was accompanied (thanks to her father) with a smell of booze.

Every Saturday Kalamujić would visit her mother's parents who lived in Grbavica, a district on the other side of Miljacka river. They would take her to clean her mother's grave at the Bare cemetery, which was a shared graveyard for all Yugoslavs, regardless of their nationalities or denominations. Atheists are buried there as well. She had to cross the river to return to her father's house. On her way back, she would pass the Ali Pasha mosque, a hilly Roma settlement in Gorica and the 1984 Olympic stadium. However when war broke out, her father decided she was safer at her grandparents' house in Grbavica. Though even there, lives were at risk. Thus they had to escape further – to their family house in Shtime.

After the war broke out, Kalamujić, together with her mother's parents, moved to stay with their family in Vojvodina. They returned to Sarajevo after the armi-

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stice. However, the end of the war turned out to be an illusion. In fact, it took them weeks to get from the Serbian side to the Bosnian side of the city. Each excursion brought farewells and the need to make a choice. This, in turn, brought a sense of betrayal and guilt. The former, which Kalamujić experienced as a young girl, became a life necessity for her. As we continued talking, we started to understand that ceasing military activities was not sufficient to bring an end to this strange war. And this conclusion is only one of the many rings of the drama that make up Kalamujić's story.

Her 2015 book, *Call me Esteban*, is described as a collection of short stories, which is a bit misleading. It would be more accurate to say it is a story of 19 images, where each is an autonomous story. They are linked together by the author's voice (Kalamujić herself). These stories developed their own internal dynamics, related to the whole in such a way as a colour or a piece of glass are related to the whole mosaic. Additionally, this book is an open story. One that Kalamujić completes by adding new parts. For example, the Polish edition had three new stories added compared to the original edition. Kalamujić's 2019 play, which she wrote for the Zenica Theatre, had many elements from the book transferred to the stage; it can be considered a sequel to her book. The only difference is that while one work emphasises an intimate family drama, the other focuses more on society and the country.

The book's structure is not only a formal issue. Its openness, constant exploration of new perspectives and maturity that comes with the subsequent stages of life's journey not only frees this work from the burden of providing ready answers but prepares the reader for a long march that is just at the beginning of the road. This determines the heroines' existence. A Bosnian woman whose fate we follow is faced with emptiness, despair and often extreme pessimism. At the same time, she has the ability not to succumb to them. She achieves this not by discovering truth, but the grace of hope. Nor by returning to the system that ensures stability, but by opening herself to a transgression. Kalamujić's writing triggers the need to overcome borders which exclude us from a community. The military war in Sarajevo came to an end, but the fight over the city that is free from hatred and stigmatisation continues to take place.

When Kalamujić reached 22 she experienced trauma. She had a nervous breakdown and a series of anxiety attacks. As a result, she could not leave her house for an entire year. At that time, she lived in Vratnik with her grandparents. Writing turned out to be her therapy. She had some traumatic experiences in the psychiatric ward. A dramatic testimony of these moments is included in her first essay collection, *The Anatomy of a Smile*, published in 2009. At that time, she fell in love with Naida, her life partner. They are both open about their sexual orientation, even though it is still not easy in Sarajevo. Such things are still hidden there – as much

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as the death and war wounds are. In a conversation with blogger Stephan Wable, she confessed: "People expect you to hide your homosexuality. They are shocked when you do not … I am neither Bosnian, nor Serb, nor Croatian. I am against nationalism. I am still a Yugoslav and a socialist."

A new Walter

The spirit of former Yugoslavia is still an important reference point for *sarajlia*, which is the name for residents who still care about the ethos of a civic, multicultural state. Their life has its underground, hiding places but also frontlines. In post-war Sarajevo a war is waged to win the future of the city, which was taken away by the living ghosts of the past. The frontlines are nonetheless changing and now different people are pushed to the underground, stigmatised and treated as if they do not belong to the community. The ethnic and religious war has been replaced by a new culture war. Its line of division is marked by human rights, women's rights, sexual identity, social exclusion, corruption and plutocracy. On the pages of *Call me Esteban*, you can read how, every now and then, this new phase of the fight is through the ruins and the remains of the previous war.

The twilight descends over the bridges of the Miljacka River. We have said a lot to each other during our conversation at the café. I was planning to say goodbye to the three women, thanking Marina with my thoughts for this meeting. And yet I felt that Kalamujić wanted to tell me something more: "Forgive me. I know I needed too much time. But I want to tell you much more." With her most delicate voice, and almost not touching the subject with her words, she started to tell me the story about a Sarajevo actress named Bella.

Bella was her neighbour who loved another woman. As a small child, Kalamujić could feel her presence next door. She suffered when people laughed at her. "Bella, no matter how silent you were, they knew." Out of the dark corners of heroic Sarajevo, a figure of a forgotten woman, who died from cancer at an early age, started to emerge unexpectedly. Apart from Kalamujić, nobody saw her as a heroine. Yet, it was thanks to Bella, who only Kalamujić knew by sight, that she got the courage to be herself. She engaged with her in silent conversations, which readers of her book will find out. This conversation announced a new Walter fighting for Sarajevo.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Krzysztof Czyżewski is a Polish intellectual and essayist. He is the founder and director of the Borderland of Arts, Cultures, and Nations Centre in Sejny (Poland).

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The living and the dead

A conversation with Grzegorz Kwiatkowski, a Polish poet, and Trupa Trupa, songwriter, vocalist and guitarist. Interviewer: Jacek Hajduk

JACEK HAJDUK: During the 2019 SXSW Music Festival you dedicated the performance of your group, Trupa Trupa, to the memory of the late Gdańsk mayor, Paweł Adamowicz. Let us then start with Gdańsk. How much of this city is with you today? And how was it before? Which faces of this multi-layered urban centre are close to your heart?

GRZEGORZ KWIATKOWSKI: Today, Gdańsk is a big part of me, unlike in the past. Back then I was more interested in self-isolating myself and creating a kind of enclave in one of its districts – Gdańsk Wrzeszcz. This actually is still my ideal, but now I also understand the impact that this city has on me and my poetry. This is mainly because of my family stories. It was here where the Second World War broke out and it was not far away from here where the German concentration camp Stutthof was established. My grandfather and his sister were imprisoned there. This tragic experience broke their lives, which clearly had an impact on my father, but also me.

In other words, it was the dark side of Gdańsk and its history which had the strongest impact on you?

As well as literature. I was born in the Orunia neighbourhood, which is the poorest district in town. I lived there for the first five years of my life. The family of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer had one of their houses here. Then I moved to Wrzeszcz, which is another neighbourhood in Gdańsk. Next to it, in Oliwa, the Schopenhauer family had a summer house. I lived near the cemetery and psychiatric hospital where poet Joseph von Eichendorff resided for years. For me these two gentlemen are inspiring men of letters.

And what about Gdańsk's more recent history – the 1970s, 80s..? Solidarity and the freedom movement?

Here, at Polanki Street, you can still find the house of Lech Wałęsa, whom I call the Don Quixote who destroyed communism. Yet for me these darker and more pessimistic literary trends that

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I pointed out earlier are just as important as the history of the Solidarity freedom movement. I believe that Gdańsk is an ideal place for starting impossible ideas. It has this fable-like tissue which allows you to dream about the impossible and the unreal, and to try to make it happen. But this whole reflection over Gdańsk came to me only after the terrible tragedy which was the murder of Paweł Adamowicz (the mayor who was assassinated on January 13th 2019 in public during a charity event – editor's note). It was then when history, in a way, knocked at the door of our rehearsal studio. Some members of our band knew the mayor. At that time, my own reflection into hatred, violence and past aggressions also started to take a different light. For me this was an awakening. This huge tragedy made me link my thinking about poetry with the thinking about my city. And it drew a kind of ethical line for my literature. Now I know that this ethical line comes from Gdańsk, and nowhere else.

So let me ask you about a different line – a dividing line. Your last collection of poems is titled *Karl Heinz M* and includes 21 miniature poems. It received some very positive reviews, including one that compared it to Adam Mickiewicz's poetic drama *Forefathers' Eve* (*Dziady*) for its similarity in presenting a "community of the dead and the living". But it also received a very negative review from one critic who called it the "psychosis of late capitalism". Why such a storm?

From my perspective this storm was actually a blessing. Thanks to the first critical voice, which indeed called on me to finish writing in such a way, the discussion was joined by other critics who were favourable to me. Among them were the best experts in the topic, including Leszek Szaruga, Małgorzata Melchior (who co-founded the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research) as well as Stanisław Obirek, a prominent ethicist and anthropologist. I also received a statement of support from the most renowned Polish literary expert and Holocaust survivor, professor Michał Głowiński, and from professor Józef Olejniczak, who was from the same university where the initial criticism came from. This positive assessment of my poetry has actually gone beyond Poland's borders; recently my poetry was analysed at John Hopkins University where it was the subject of a discussion, including myself, professor Karen Underhill and Zachary Berger, who is a Yiddish translator and poet. Later this discussion moved to Kraków where Karen, Zachary and myself discussed it during the 30th edition of the Jewish Cultural Festival organised at the Galicia Jewish Museum. Thus, I should actually say thank you to my critic, because thanks to this plethora of perspectives our work gains power.

Could you say more about how this collection of poems came about?

To a large extent I wrote *Karl* when I lived in Vienna where I was the KulturKontakt scholar researching the Aktion T4 (a Nazi programme aimed at the "elimination of worthless life") and

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Photo: Jarosław Orłowski (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

investigating the operations of the Am Steinhof clinic where many children were murdered. This research project was, in a way, linked to my life in Gdańsk – the psychiatric hospital from my neighbourhood had participated in the Aktione T4 programme. Many of its patients were murdered after they had been transported to Saxony. This short collection of poems was my attempt to get close to these tragedies and the scandalous act of inflicting suffering on other human beings. Because my mother is a teacher at a special needs education school in Gdańsk, I have had many very unheroic experiences of being with people who are not accepted by the majority of society and marginalised as a result. For many years I was also a co-ordinator of Amnesty International in Gdańsk. Hence, for me violence, killings, humiliation and depreciating as well as dogmatising the discourse and elimination of viewpoint diversity for the sake of a monolith, are simply dangerous. I think that I am also quite scared of them and that is the driving force for my writing.

To inflict pain?

Yes. The moment which turned out to be of key importance for the writing of this collection was a visit I made with my grandfather to Stutthof. I was still a child when he went there for the first time. For my grandfather this was the first visit to the place since the end of the war and its effect was destructive again. He was talking and crying. He was reconstructing the past and still crying. In a sense, it was also a turning point for me; however I only came to this conclusion years later. Now I believe that poetry can help. We can use it to show some moral and ethical dramas. And as a result, we can help readers experience a moral awakening, or at the very least a certain moral reflection. In a way, the readers themselves can determine on which side they stand. Or at least, try to do so. More precisely, they can try to address, on their own, some unanswerable questions. That is why the tone of these poems also matters.

Wouldn't you say that the reception of your poetry, and the message that you are trying to put forward through it, is more

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vivid, but also more mature abroad than it is in Poland? Why is it so? Is it distance that helps people see better?

I am a huge enemy of complaining so I do not want to complain, but rather talk only about positive things. First, in Poland my poetry is published by one of the best publishing houses, Biuro Literackie. Second, the great majority of these collections are very well received by Polish critics and this whole debate, which you mentioned before, ended, all in all, very well. And even if it hadn't ended this way, I would not complain either. Matter-of-factly, I have never trusted this snobbish and naïve cosmopolitanism, but I know that my art – be it poetry or my band – benefits the most from the international platforms of friendships and discussions. What is more, art can give so much to the reader and listener, that the decision to choose is on their side. This, in turn, is what makes this bridge, this connection, between the creator and the recipient. However, the truth also is that my poetry is better perceived outside of Poland, as is our band Trupa Trupa. I remember in 2015 when a famous New York critic, Sasha Frere-Jones wrote that: "One of the best rock bands doing business now is from Gdańsk, Poland", the reaction of some Polish critics was quite cold. Kind of like: "OK, maybe their albums are good, but their concerts are nothing special". Then we went to Texas and played at SXSW, which is the world's biggest showcase attended by artists from around the world. We were there in 2018 and 2019, and we got into the top 10 rankings by *Rolling Stones* magazine, the *Chicago Tribune*, NPR and many others.

Did the Polish critics change their minds then?

Poland is a strange country, if you ask me. To a large extent it is a result of our terrible geopolitical location, between the East and West. In a way, it is like being in this middle of a firing range, which has made this area a hollow land, a site of trauma and suffering. I can see much envy and jealousy here, and lack of trust among people. Not only is there a lack of tolerance towards the Other, but also hatred towards others and ourselves. Evidently, there is such a thing as genetic memory and traumas can be passed down to next generations. This sad fact results in large psychological damage. It also explains the defence mechanism which is based on the logic that since something bad happened to me (us), it is not me (or us) who is (are) to blame. Thankfully, there is very little of this thinking in Gdańsk, or at least I do not see much of it. The most important thing is not to get this mindset into you and try to stay honest and work hard to prove what is possible.

Which means avoid falling victim to sentiments and focusing on your own work?

Exactly. On November 1st 2021 Rain Taxi will release my first poetry book on the American market. It is titled *Crops* and it is a collection of 19 of my poems, translated by Peter Constantine. This

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publication originated from public readings of these poems during my guest lectures at the University of California in Berkeley, the University of Chicago, John Hopkins University, the Jewish Theological University and the University of Texas in Dallas. What is an amazing coincidence is that these events took place during the pandemic. I am extremely happy that instead of falling victim to the wide-spread COVID-19 depression, we managed to build (together with some academics) a platform of discussion and support. And some of these activities have continued. For example, with Mark Harrison I co-host "Virus of Hate" workshops at the University of Oxford. I have also received invitations to the University of Michigan, the American University in Washington DC, and many other places. Quite soon my books will be published in France, Greece and Slovenia. Hence, like my beloved Beatles used to sing "It's getting better all the time". And when things start to get worse, there will be a reason to make them better. I think that art is the core of everything. As is its quality and our plight for this quality, at all costs. Equally important are conversations, discussions, criticism, pluralism of opinion, and building the space for dialogue.

crops

our real work is farm work
not killing
although I admit:
the massacres in the swamps has the rhythm of our seasonal labor
and when the rains were heavy we did not go out for crops

Translated by: Peter Constantine

Grzegorz Kwiatkowski is an award-winning and internationally recognised Polish poet and musician. He is the vocalist and guitarist for the indie rock band Trupa Trupa.

Jacek Hajduk is a Polish writer and associate professor at the Institute of Classical Philology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

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The strength of being regional as presented at Art Market Budapest

Art from the Visegrad Countries is in the focus of attention at the region's leading international art fair in 2021. Founder and Director of Art Market Budapest Attila Ledényi spoke about the reasons why.

NEW EASTERN EUROPE: How would you briefly describe Art Market Budapest, and how does it contribute to introducing art from the region to international audiences?

ATTILA LEDÉNYI: Art Market Budapest was established in 2011, and is now approaching its 11th edition in October. Over the past years it has entertained an audience of around a quarter million and has welcomed exhibitors from around 50 countries of five continents. Annually, Art Market Budapest presents thousands of artworks of more than 500 artists represented by over 100 exhibitors on an exhibition area of nearly 7,000 square meters, and welcomes over 20,000 international visitors in just 4–5 days. This makes it the largest international contemporary art fair in Central and Eastern Europe.

One of the reasons why we established Art Market Budapest was that we were looking for the best format to make art accessible to a wide audience, and we found no better institutional form than an art fair. We believe in bringing art as close to people as possible, in making it as attractive as possible, and an art fair with its unbeatable complexity and colourful offering provides something attractive to every possible taste.

The art fair is also a global format, something that exists in every corner of the world, and is appreciated by art lovers everywhere. Art fairs attract an amazing number of people every year and make millions travel to places to explore artworks and artists they have not yet known before. But fitting into a calendar full of hundreds of art fairs every year

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is a tough challenge, the competition is huge. So from day one we decided that we want to create something unique, an artistic composition that does not exist in this kind of richness in any other part of the world. And one of the best ways to achieve that is placing art from our region into the focus of attention. Art Market Budapest showcases the deepest and largest selection of contemporary art from Central and Eastern Europe in the world.

Has this model proved successful? Is art from our region not just the subject of admiration for the well-informed few connoisseurs?

Central and Eastern Europe is still considered an "emerging" market for the most developed markets of Western Europe or America. But this is exactly what adds to the sexiness of it. The global art market is an always hungry ecosystem that unstoppably looks for still unexplored content and new inspirations. And this is exactly what we promise to them. If you come to Budapest, you will definitely find something surprising, something other collectors still don't have.

And various trends, independently from each other, have also been very favourable for us. One of them is a growing interest on the global market for art from what used to be behind the Iron Curtain. Predominantly the communist era of the 1960s and 70s when art was a form of resistance against political oppression that has become a new target for institutional and private collectors. Another positive tendency is the increasing popularity and competitiveness of regional fairs versus the big global ones. Growing numbers in the art community and in cultural tourism are a little bored with what is usual and mainstream, interest has been switching to things more particular, local or regional. Regional art fairs certainly provide more elements of surprise than the mainstream artistic selections in the "usual" cultural centres of the world, and the quality is not even a bit worse. We receive an increasing number of visitors, art lovers, private collectors and even museums who come here for a treasure hunt.

And what has been the impact of the pandemic? How have you coped with the new and unexpected circumstances?

If anything, the notion of regionalism has been making even more sense than ever before. If we look at just our own market, almost all of the major global art fairs that depend on content and visitors from all over the world were cancelled. While Art Market Budapest hosted one of its most successful editions in 2020 with exhibitors arriving from over 20 countries, even under the toughest travelling conditions, and sales were amazing, too. So what we see know is that regional events are becoming even more attractive, and this tendency that started years ago is stronger than ever.

An amazing impact of the COVID-era is that we have learnt to appreciate what we have locally and in our region-

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al neighbourhood. We started taking a closer look and explore the cultural treasures of the neighbouring and nearby countries. Which is a wonderful phenomenon. And solidarity has increased together with the growing interest. We realised how well we understand each other which becomes an extremely important factor when the pressure is high and the circumstances are difficult. We have always believed in the strength of building communities. We at Art Market Budapest find joy and satisfaction in bringing our exhibitors, partners, visitors together, we make particular efforts to create an atmosphere where openness and trust towards each other fosters professional collaboration and friendship. And a community of nations with directly connected histories, centuries of interdependence, a mutually shared past is always easier to build and holds together stronger.

What do you expect from your Visegrad Group program at Art Market Budapest 2021?

We certainly expect this regional community to grow stronger, and I'm sure that growing internal solidarity and a stronger will to cooperate is going to strengthen the position and amplify the voice of Central Europe in the global art community. While the presence of Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovakian artists and art institutions will be in the focus of attention within the exhibition halls of Art Market Budapest, additionally, a cultural festival titled Visegrad Contemporary will also be built around the central event with satellite exhibitions, professional discussions, social events and other elements to create more opportunities to meet and connect; and to help realise how contemporary, in other words, how living and relevant this regional community is.

Art Market Budapest, Central and Eastern Europe's leading international art fair, will take place October 7–10 2021. For more information visit: https://artmarketbudapest.hu/

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Radiophobia

Why the fallout of unscientific myths from Chernobyl still prevail

MICHAEL MARTIN RICHTER

Despite the fact that the scientific evidence that emerged early after the Chernobyl disaster points out that the direct health effects from radiation is greatly exaggerated, the media continues to promote an unscientific and harmful narrative. The fallout of these myths from the Chernobyl accident fell on the fertile soil of radiophobia, and (post)Soviet secrecy has led to a capitalisation on this inherent fear by the entertainment industry and news media.

One recent scientific study shows once again what had been known to most insiders for years: in the prestigious journal *Science*, a team of western researchers examined the genetic health of children close to the Chernobyl liquidators (the people who were sent to remove substantial parts of radioactive fallout from the explosion and whose heroism is undisputed). What the researchers found might come as a surprise to the broader public: the genetic health of these children was in no way worse than in the general population. In other words, no statistically significant increase in mutations was found in the offspring of those most heavily affected by the accident.

This contradicts the general perception of many as well as common media narratives that have given rise to countless myths surrounding Chernobyl and radia-

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tion in general. Yet it is important to note that this study is just another one in a long list of studies on the health effects of the Chernobyl explosion. Since fear sells, this exaggeration is used by the media and the entertainment industry to catch our attention. The specific context under which this disaster happened contributes to the propagation of myths and fear. Indeed, knowing and spreading the facts and debunking the myths are an important task for the sake of scientific truth.

How the media portrayed the effects of the tragedy

The assessment of Chernobyl echoes an earlier nuclear tragedy: the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombings. As a result of these calamities, the human body has been thoroughly examined from the survivors of these events. They have been studied in a long-term project very tellingly called the "Life Span Study". From what we know there is a marginal increase (less the one per cent) in the mortality rate of those exposed to radioactivity when compared with the general population. Mirroring the findings of the recent Chernobyl study in *Science*, the children of Hibakusha, those affected by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, turned out to be genetically no different than the offspring of unaffected Japanese. Nevertheless, these children often faced life-long discrimination due to misconceived assumptions which, not surprisingly, caused notable psychological harm to them.

The assessment of Chernobyl echoes an earlier nuclear tragedy: the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombings.

These important insights could have helped prevent the same thing happening after Chernobyl, yet the media, knowingly or unknowingly, failed to take heed. It is often pointed out that the volume of radioactivity released was 200 times more than the bombs in Japan. Yet, this account fails to mention that the radiation covered large, often uninhabited land strips, rather than a concentrated, urban space. Tellingly, a decade after the Chernobyl disaster the *Irish Times* wrote that "the human tragedy touches on the borders of incomprehension: whole families condemned to the slow, inevitable death of the members from cancers and other diseases, their lives overshadowed by their nuclear induced destiny". Unfortunately, this type of narrative persists to this day.

In 2016 the BBC, which understands itself as a bastion of unbiased reporting and fact-reliance, issued a report on "Chernobyl's legacy 30 years on". A British charity conducting work in Belarus was interviewed and individual stories of strange birth abnormalities and genetic disorders were presented, thus implying

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that the Chernobyl accident was responsible. Similarly, the *Daily Mirror*, a British national tabloid, also portrayed stories of disabled children "decreed by Chernobyl's toxic cloud", which represents again a narrative which does not need additional elaboration. Similarly, the most acclaimed presentation of Chernobyl, in the form of the recent HBO TV series, is specifically inaccurate in its portrayal of radiation-related issues. As such, scientists have criticised the inaccurate portrayal of radiation effects – such that it is contagious like an infection. This example illustrates that no meaningful change to the narrative around Chernobyl has happened in culture. Portrayals like this on TV and from organisations like Greenpeace have helped maintain the alarmist, unsubstantiated message that 100,000 people have died due to radiation from Chernobyl.

Science debunked these myths a long time ago

One could argue that this misunderstanding has been done unknowingly, but as mentioned above, the scientific evidence that emerged soon after Chernobyl mirrors the findings in the 2021 *Science* study as well as the extensive research on the Hibakushas. Already in 1996 there were peer-reviewed papers arguing that there is no evidence of doses that could lead to the deterministic effects of radiation exposure. In 1999 a publication in the journal *Teratology* by FP. Castronovo Jr. collected and summarised the scientific evidence in that respect. The bottom line was that "there is no substantive proof regarding radiation-induced teratogenic effects from the Chernobyl accident". One year later the United Nations stated that "the only substantiated public health impact attributable to radiation exposure has been a sharp increase in childhood thyroid cancer", which turned out to have a 99 per cent survival rate and resulted in around ten (!) additional deaths. Subsequently, a large consortium of over 100 top scientists under the umbrella of the UN estimated in 2004 that the radiation from the Chernobyl accident might lead to around 4,000 premature deaths in total. In Poland alone there are around 50,000 premature deaths due to pollution annually that, incidentally, can lead to genetic mutations in children. Yet there is no HBO series on these effects.

> Making a direct link between Chernobyl and mutations and other health problems is violating the basic principles of scientific evidence.

Putting forward a direct link between Chernobyl and mutations and other health problems is violating the basic principles of scientific evidence – namely, confusing correlation with causation. It is not only wrong but harmful; In 2005, another UN report on Cherno-

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byl stated that "mental health issues pose a far greater threat to local communities than does radiation exposure". Already in 1995, comparative research on the physiological and psychological health between communities in Chernobyl-affected areas and other communities in the post-Soviet space were conducted. Their result was that physiological health was no different between those two communities, but that psychological health differed significantly. It is no secret that the Chernobyl accident and the displacement led to mental health issues in forms of depression, suicides, alcoholism and other problems that were also potentiated by the post-Soviet transformation. These studies and reports should have been a red flag for the media, as the repetition of their false narrative only increased the negative psychological health effects of those in affected communities. For the record, it must be acknowledged that several outlets reported on the recent findings of the *Science* study. However, it is worrying that it took so long despite previous, overwhelming evidence supporting these claims.

How do we explain the gap between media narratives and science?

The obvious gap between science on the one hand and media reporting and public perception on the other has two major reasons. First, it must be acknowledged that there is an inherent fear of the unknown in the human psyche. This gives rise to "radiophobia" due to the lack of understanding of radiation, as well as the lack of proper ways to directly sense it and its effects. This fear was alleviated by the Cold War and the corresponding risk of nuclear disaster. Fear can effectively be materialised and monetised with disaster horror movies to advantage our primordial instincts. As there is an inherent fear of radiation, radiophobia clearly sells. The success of the *Chernobyl* series is partly a result of our human nature.

The success of the *Chernobyl* series is partly a result of our human nature.

With Chernobyl, of course, this effect was made worse by the secrecy of the Soviet system and those of its successor states, most notably Belarus. The contradicting statements of the Soviet leadership following the explosion led many people to believe that the actual fallout from events to be much bigger than officially stated. As a result, around a million excess abortions were conducted because of radiophobia triggered by Chernobyl. This shows that misguided fear can have real life consequences.

In the subsequent years, the perception of secrecy persisted, at least in the public domain. Although western researchers had relatively free access to conducting research on radiation in Ukraine and even in Belarus, mistaken beliefs in these

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societies never went away. Throughout much of its post-Soviet history, Belarus remains the least touristy country in Europe, and Ukraine has just started to attract western tourists. This lack of exchange and the absence of good communicators to challenge these common myths has contributed to the sharp imbalance between the scientific and popular narratives on Chernobyl.

It is mostly scientists themselves who are critical of the way they handled the accident – one saying "we didn't explain scientific findings properly to the public both immediately after the accident and in the years since". However, is it the job of researchers to communicate their findings to the broader public, or is it the responsibility of the media to use current and accurate information? At least in the case of Chernobyl, the media has for many years now promoted a false and harmful narrative which has caused a lot more harm than the actual nuclear accident in April 1986.

Michael Martin Richter is a research fellow at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen within the EU ITN MARKETS (MSCA grant) programme.

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EASTERN CAFÉ

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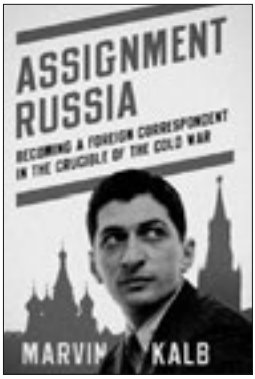
Life as a Moscow correspondent

LUKE HARDING

Assignment Russia. By: Marvin Kalb. Publisher: Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC, 2021.

In May 1960 Marvin Kalb, the new Moscow correspondent for CBS News, flew to Paris for a Cold War summit. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was meeting US president Dwight Eisenhower. The encounter was overshadowed by the dramatic events of five days earlier, when an American U2 spy plane was shot down over Soviet territory. A furious Khrushchev arrived in France demanding an apology.



How to interview him? Kalb had an idea: at six am he turned up outside the Soviet residence on Rue de Grenelle. Khrushchev was known to go for early walks. At seven am the iron doors clanked open and Khrushchev appeared. The Soviet premier spotted Kalb, who had spent a year in Moscow as a translator with the US embassy. "Well, it's Peter the Great!" Khrushchev said. He told his suspicious bodyguards: "He's a friend. He's good".

American rarity

The American reporter – 190 cm tall – and Khrushchev – a mere 167 cm – went for a stroll. They popped into a boulangerie, where Kalb emerged with croissants. "Vkusno, ochen vkusno, [Tasty, very tasty]", Khrushchev declared.

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With a CBS crew filming, Khrushchev accused Washington of humiliating his country and rudely violating its borders. He shook the reporter's hand and walked back into the residence. Kalb had his first Moscow scoop.

Assignment Russia is Kalb's spry and hugely enjoyable account of his time in post-Stalin Moscow. The book is the second of three volumes and ends tantalisingly mid-assignment, before the trial of the U2 pilot Gary Powers, the building of the Berlin wall and the Cuban Missile crisis. It is a Russia memoir and an affectionate portrait of Kalb's CBS colleagues. They included the legendary broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, who gave Kalb his professional break.

Khrushchev's unorthodox style and fondness for mingling with the foreign press made for good copy. But getting the story out could be fraught.

Kalb, now 91, was a relative rarity among American correspondents in Moscow. He arrived speaking fluent Russian following a PhD in Russian history at Harvard University. He joined CBS in 1957. He began by writing overnight radio reports but soon became a sought after commentator on Soviet affairs. In 1960 he got his dream job after a more senior colleague failed to get a Moscow visa, for unexplained reasons.

Much of what Kalb experienced is familiar to any correspondent who has spent time in Russia. He immediately ran into the implacable Soviet bureaucracy in the shape of the manager at the Metropol hotel, where Kalb and his wife Mady were assigned two tiny rooms. Their bed was too small. The manager told them to "adjust". A solution took months, with CBS eventually shipping his bed from home in New Jersey.

A different challenge came from the Soviet foreign ministry's press department. Its prevailing assumption was that all American correspondents were CIA spies. The KGB, of course, did place its officers abroad under journalistic cover and assumed other nations did the same. Kalb insisted he was a reporter. He was never quite believed. The same enduring suspicion is alive and well in Putin's Russia.

Khrushchev's unorthodox style and fondness for mingling with the foreign press made for good copy. But getting the story out could be fraught. Kalb had to give his scripts to a censor at the central telegraph office. This was painless if the story accorded with what Khrushchev wanted published – on his first day Kalb went to see the wreckage of the U2 spy plane in Gorky Park. Often there were frustrating delays.

Another theme was Boris Pasternak and his refusal under intense official

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pressure of the Nobel Prize for literature, awarded after the publication abroad of *Doctor Zhivago*. When Pasternak died in May 1960 Kalb attended the funeral. He shot unique footage of crowds around Pasternak's coffin, mourners with flowers and a Chopin nocturne. Kalb entrusted the film to a "pigeon": An American tourist about to fly to Paris. She never delivered it, and the images were lost.

Best show in town

The book includes marvellous pen portraits of historical figures. In 1959 Kalb interviewed Soviet exchange students studying in New York. One, the leader of the group, was an "intensely serious" 33-year-old expert in Marxist theory. He had a "receding hairline" and "glasses slipping playfully to the bottom of his nose". This was Alexander Yakovlev, Mikhail Gorbachev's future Politburo colleague and the architect of glasnost. Another was Oleg Kalugin, then 27, and a star student at Columbia university's school of journalism. Kalugin was popular with Americans, candid, and intelligent. He had a "sunny disposition". He was also KGB. Kalugin would go on to a spectacular career in espionage, as deputy *rezident* in Washington and a general by 40, before he broke with his service and settled in the US.

Kalb writes colourfully about Khrushchev. He was "the best show in town", and a charismatic tsar who "rewrote the script for a Soviet leader". "His politics, policies and personality fascinated me. He was raucous and unpredictable, pushy and aggressive, tough as his peasant background, but when the occasion arose he could also be charming, flashing a smile as wide as the Siberian plain," Kalb observes.

During his Moscow stint he frequently wondered where Khrushchev's desire for "peaceful co-operation" with the West might lead. What was going on inside the Kremlin? At a diplomatic reception Kalb spotted Leonid Brezhnev standing next to Khrushchev and laughing at his boss's jokes. Brezhnev and other hardliners would oust Khrushchev in 1964, ending the USSR's modest thaw and ushering in an era of repression and stagnation.

Other veteran reporters have also written well about this period. They include Kalb's late contemporary Whitman Bassow, who worked for the agency UPI. Bassow's book *The Moscow Correspondents* chronicles the tribulations: interminable hours, a meagre diet, the lack of toilet paper and the gruelling physical environment of post-war communist Moscow – a drab, grey and depressing city. Plus the ever present threat of expulsion, a fate that befell Bassow in 1962.

Kalb and Bassow also capture the joys: the camaraderie between journalists working under adverse conditions, the privilege of reporting from the su-

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perpower frontline, and the art of reading between the lines – sifting for clues in *Pravda*. Moscow, in short, can be challenging and intensely exhilarating, a springboard for book-writing and for further adventures.

Subsequently Kalb had a distinguished career at CBS and NBC. He became a professor at Harvard University and a fellow at Brookings Institution. He makes clear his youthful job as Moscow bureau chief was the absolute highlight. This is a delightful and readable memoir of one reporter's formative years, the first draft of history vividly revisited in old age. I look forward to the Cuban Missile crisis in the next volume.

Luke Harding is a British journalist with the *Guardian* and served as the *Guardian's* Moscow correspondent between 2007 and 2011. His most recent books include *Shadow State. Murder, Mayhem and Russia's Remaking of the West* (2020), and *Collusion: Secret Meetings, Dirty Money and How Russia Helped Donald Trump Win* (2017).

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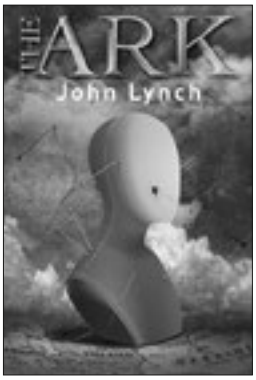
A gripping tale of business and politics

ADAM REICHARDT

The Ark. By: John Lynch. Publisher: Ringier Axel Springer Polska (Polish edition), 2021.



The transformation of the Central and Eastern Europe nations from a planned economy to a free market one was a complicated process that unfolded over the last 30 years. For those pioneers with a vision and a willingness to take a risk, it provided exciting opportunities. Others found the transformation challenging to manage and the new reality much harder to deal with. For those with skewed moral compasses and dark intentions, this period also delivered prospects of gaining massive wealth relatively quickly, but often at the costly expense of others. These scenarios can be found in the upcoming novel titled *The Ark* by Kraków-based entrepreneur John Lynch. The fictional tale brings the reader on a whirlwind of action, on both sides of the Atlantic, and with much of the story taking place in Poland, Ukraine and Romania. It shows both the bright side of business and the darker side of finance in an ever-globalising world – with this region at its centre.

Invaluable insight

Before getting into the story of *The Ark*, it is first worth getting to know its author. John Lynch is no average Cracovian businessman. John was born and

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raised in New Jersey, and after getting a Bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering he pursued his MBA at the prestigious Wharton School. After a few years' experience in management consulting in New York, John decided to postpone his business career to pursue a unique opportunity which accidently came his way. This was 30 years ago, in 1991, shortly after the fall of communism and a time when Eastern Europe was just starting to emerge from the dreariness of communism. It was also a time when the United States was deeply involved in these countries – especially the Central European states, and its largest one, Poland.

In the early 1990s, Poland received a significant amount of aid and technical assistance from the United States in a variety of fields, but especially in private sector development. The US Congress supplied hundreds of millions of dollars via the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act in 1989. Included in this was a specially created MBA Enterprise Corps, administered by the USAID, to provide technical and business assistance to Poland's private sector. John was one of the first MBA volunteers in this program, which is how he first found his way to Poland. After completing his one-year stint as a volunteer, John stayed in Kraków. It was during this time that his keen eye for business recognised an opportunity. There were literally no suppliers of imprinted apparel or promotional goods for companies on the Polish market at that time. John decided to fill this gap and set up his own company – Lynka. The company first started out of John's apartment, where he was creating screen printed T-shirts and sweatshirts for his first clients.

Today, Lynka is a juggernaut European company, producing corporate apparel (including at times for the Polish national football team), casual fashion, sportswear and promotional goods to its clients based in Poland and across Europe. Founded in 1992, the company today employs over 250 people and boasts a warehouse and production facility of over 10,000 square metres.

This author's biography gives readers invaluable insight into how Lynch's ground-floor perspective might have factored into his novel. One cannot help but wonder how much of Lynch's personal experiences found their way into *The Ark*.

The novel is a tale of Truman Chase, a young, idealistic designer from The Bronx, who launches a fashion business TruCo in Kraków. As Chase builds his business, he gets tied up with "The Ark" a global investment firm that becomes desperate to collect on its loans as quickly as possible. The Ark's owner is a self-entitled cutthroat Puerto Rican fund manager – Fernando Tomasi – a Gucci-wearing Wall Street flunky with a hair spray addiction and a penchant for hostile takeovers.

The book opens after the global economic crisis of 2008 – when the US-based Lehman Brothers investment bank declared bankruptcy, setting off the biggest economic downturn the world has

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seen since the 1929 Great Depression. Tomasi is a ferocious risk taker, determined to make himself rich at any cost, despite the economic realities. Not only had he invested his funds in South American companies – which were bleeding fast during the crisis – but he also found new opportunities in Eastern Europe – first in Romania, and later the Baltics, Poland and Ukraine. We also learn that Tomasi's ferocity does not always play to his advantage. He cuts corners in his dealings and is overly brazen. He often fails to understand the firms and markets he finds himself actually investing in.

Politics and business

A significant part of the plot takes place in Ukraine. Here the Puerto Rican banker gets mixed up in Eastern European oligarchy and finds himself on the short end of the stick – the opposite position he usually is in. As readers of *New Eastern Europe* are well aware, politics and business are often intertwined and on a completely different level in Ukraine than other Central European countries. Corruption is rampant and the legal framework so complicated that anyone with connections can bend the rules to their advantage. While willing to engage in shady activities, Tomasi finds himself too deep in Ukraine, ultimately faltering as he attempts to manage the mess he has created for himself.

Along the way, as Tomasi attempts to build his Central European dream fund, he invests in TruCo – the Kraków-based fashion company. TruCo's founder, Truman Chase, a native New Yorker with Polish roots, relocated to Kraków after his studies to help a distant relative with his failing clothing business. After falling in love with the city (as well as his Polish translator) he decides to set up his own fashion business. In ten "short" years, Chase and TruCo became leaders in the European fashion industry. He managed to survive the prior recession and has a vision for future growth of his brand and his company. There was just one problem – the 10 million US dollar loan that traces back to Tomasi's fund, the Ark. Tomasi, who is nearly broke at this point, decides it is time to cash in on the investment, and begins to strong arm Chase with brutal tactics.

> One cannot help but wonder how much of Lynch's personal experiences found their way into *The Ark*.

The story thus follows the elaborate interaction between the protagonist and the antagonist. Lynch's mastery of char-

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acter development, plot twists (which misdirects and at times frustrates the reader) and the depictions of the scenes make for a gripping story which keeps the reader engaged. *The Ark* is a quick read that is hard to put down. It is difficult to believe that this is a debut novel for the author.

Central and Eastern European flavour

One thing is for certain, the author knows business and knows this region well, with all its positive and negative sides. As a Kraków resident myself, I could easily picture the scenes, where the action takes place. Yet, the scenes in San Juan, Kyiv and elsewhere are described in equally vivid detail. For those who may be less adept at business, the author does not get too far into the weeds with technical jargon or legal specifics which could lose the reader. The story is easy to follow despite some of the more complicated situations in which Tomasi and Chase find themselves. The tribulations that Truman Chase is faced with are hard to imagine, and although the author insists the novel is pure fiction, there is little doubt that some intensely personal emotions went into the story of the main character.

One thing is for certain, the author knows business and knows this region well, with all its positive and negative sides.

The Ark is available in both English and Polish. The Polish edition will be published by Ringier Axel Springer, while the English version publisher is yet to be announced. For those looking for an action-filled story with a strong Central and Eastern European flavour to it and one that is fun to read, I highly recommend *The Ark*. Not only is it a chance to escape from our pandemic-dominated world of today, but you also get a sense of the challenges and demands of doing business in a region that has undergone – and in some places still undergoing – the pains of the economic transformation. The reader walks away with a greater appreciation for those like John Lynch, who took a risk and never gave up. NEE

Adam Reichardt is the editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe* and co-host of the *Talk Eastern Europe* podcast.

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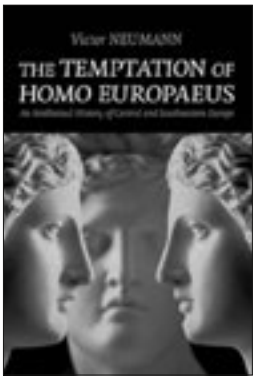
Establishing a continental balance

JACEK HAJDUK

The Temptation of Homo Europaeus: An Intellectual History of Central and Southeastern Europe. By: Victor Neumann. Publisher: Scala Arts Publishers, London, 2021.

When we think of Europe, it is often through its contradictions upon which it is built. Consequently, we can have a (Latin) Western Europe which is a continuous follower of ancient Rome and a (Greek) Eastern Europe, rooted in the post-Byzantine period, which was enriched by Middle Eastern influences. There is also a Southern Europe which is traditionally Catholic (Italy and Spain) or under the influence of Eastern Orthodox (in the Western Balkans or Greece); and there is Northern Europe, home to the 16th- and 17th-century Protestant Reformation.



We can also make a distinction between Europe's centre which belongs to the most affluent states (Germany, the Benelux countries and France) and its periphery which can be found in those regions where developmental dynamics are less visible (Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary). The distinction between continental and non-continental Europe became relevant again when the United Kingdom left the European Union. However, historically and culturally speaking, the UK has always kept close ties with North America.

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Universal and European

The history of the continent (even before it became known as Europe) has always been authored by those from a privileged background. Initially these were few literate men who had exclusive access to sources. In fact it was not until the world became more globalised and digitalised that voices from outside the privileged (namely, Western European) circles were taken seriously. For a long time the following mind-set prevailed: what could those living in Paris or Rome learn about Europe (!) from somebody from Poland or Romania? Perhaps the only exceptions to this were the Latin-language writings of the baroque poet Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski and the Renaissance political essayist Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, also known as the "father of Polish democracy". Their texts, which were universal in their content, were once widely read across Europe. Sadly, they later went into oblivion – probably because they were written in Latin. In my view, we – Eastern Europeans – should feel ashamed about this.

The mere fact that Neumann is not French, German, Italian or Greek, but Romanian seems important to me.

Given the above, it is remarkable that this year, 2021, an English-language version of a book devoted to Europe's history, by an author from Central and Southeastern Europe, has recently been released. The work in question is Victor Neumann's *The Temptation of Homo Europaeus: An Intellectual History of Central and Southeastern Europe*. Even though Neumann adopts the perspective of a "claimant-region", the book is very all-inclusive in its message. After first being published in Romania, it now has a chance of reaching a wider audience with its English edition.

The mere fact that Neumann is not French, German, Italian or Greek, but Romanian seems important to me. To explain why let us move back 2,000 years when the territory of today's Romania – an area whose natural borders are marked by the Carpathian Mountains (in the north), the Prut river (in the east), the Danube (in the south), and the Danube and Tisza (in the west). Historians called this territory Dacia after it had been conquered by the Romans, at the turn of the second century AD. During the invasion, first led by Emperor Domitian and then Emperor Trajan, the Roman legions brought the territory to ashes, massacred its people and turned the survivors into slaves. From today's perspective, we can say the Roman soldiers were undertaking geno-

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cide. As a result, the area, earlier known as the Kingdom of Dacia, became a Roman province called Dacia Traiana. Indicatively, it took months for the caravans with valuable treasures to arrive in Rome. For the Roman Empire, which at that time was entering its Golden Period, Dacia's gold mines were what oil and natural gas extraction sites are for some states today.

The question that emerges is what does being Romanian mean today? Which tradition is at the root of this identity? Are "true Romanians" descendants of the ancient Dacians? Their ancient roots could of course justify this, but it can also be denied by their later almost disappearance from Europe's map. Therefore maybe it is more correct to say that ancestors of today's Romanians were the Romans? Indeed, they were conquerors of this territory but they also brought it triumph and economic benefit.

Today's Romanians need to address these questions to grasp what constitutes their identity. They need to reflect on not only what happened in ancient history but to analyse the impact of the later periods when the territory of Dacia/Romania was conquered by other peoples, including the Huns, the Pannonian Avars and the Bulgarians. In more recent times, Romania's territory fell under foreign rule, first by the Mongols, then the Ottomans, followed by the Habsburgs. The national revolution that erupted here, just like in other parts of Europe, was a part of the 1848 Spring of Nations. However it did not take long for the so-called Greater Romania (România Mare) to become established in the interwar period and become a rivalry field between Hitler and Stalin.

The word "Romania" derives from "Roma" which is a reference to ancient Rome. This makes this Eastern European (!) country one of its kind. Not only does its name derive from the most influential empire in the history of our continent, but so does its language, which is the only Romance language used today by a large number of people outside of the former Western Roman Empire. With all this in mind, it has clearly left a mark on Neumann and is reflected in his study of Homo Europaeus.

Grand dialogue

What Neumann describes as the "starting point" of his analysis is actually the issue of communication. More specifically, it is the assumption that the grand dialogue between West and the East has always been at Europe's core. This, however, as Neumann wittingly and correctly notes, has not been adequately recognised by western scholars. For them, Europe still tends to end in Vienna. Beyond it is a blurry belt of Europe's borderland shared with Asia (that is Russia) and the Middle East. It is thus necessary to put aside this geographic

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and cultural preconception and start looking at Europe as a whole. The path to this change, according to Neumann, comes from communication.

Neumann uses theoretical concepts which are indicatively western. Thus, the book was clearly written under the influence of the French style of historiography known as the Annales School. There are notable references to Lucien Fabvre and Fernand Braudel, for example. I have no doubt he is also influenced by the German literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius, specifically his 1948 breakthrough study *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*. In this work – translated into English as *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* – Curtius argued that the "Classic-Medieval-Renaissance-Modern" division in the West (!) was counterproductive given the continuity between these periods. *The Temptation of Homo Europaeus* can be treated as a continuation of Curtius's writing – one that is enriching with its Eastern European perspective. What characterises this work, and how it can inspire others, is that Neumann openly presents the geographic location and intellectual traditions (primarily Romanian) with which he himself associates.

Europe is undoubtedly more than a collection of national states. It is more than the European Union. Europe is more than a continent.

Homo Europaeus – or, more precisely, European man (or woman) – without any other adjectives (such as western or eastern) is a term that is both understandable and enigmatic, yet at the same time, ambiguous. It refers to an identity that is mature but still in the process of becoming. Following Neumann's line of thought, we can agree that, from the perspective of establishing a European identity, the most important period was between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The "human metamorphosis" together with the permanent dialogue between the West and East has led to the emergence of what we can call the "continental balance" and which can be observed, at least on an intellectual level.

This sounds very promising as it opens up new ways of thinking. Even when we talk about such an unfinished (or actually unfinishable) process, we need to realise that the transformation of a human soul is permanent as is the changing nature of cultural dialogue. Hence, the aspiration to reach a balance between West and East (as well as South-North, Centre-Peripheries, Continent-Islands) is an unstable aspiration, one that gets permanently tested. And nonetheless it remains an aspiration. NEE

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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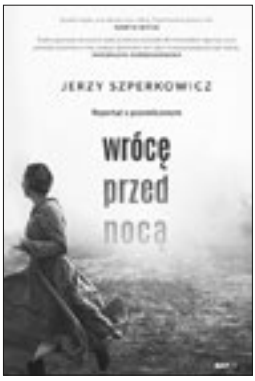
A post-mortem monument

PAULINA MAŁOCHLEB

Wrócę przed nocą. Reportaż o przemilczanym (*I will come back before dusk. A reportage on the unspoken*) By: Jerzy Szperkowicz. Publisher: Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków, Poland, 2021.

Jerzy Szperkowicz is a famous Polish reporter from the communist period and a Russia specialist who spent 18 years, from 1956 to 1974, as a correspondent for the Polish daily *Życie Warszawy* in Moscow. After many years of silence, he has now made a comeback in the Polish publishing scene. He has returned with a story, written in his old age and faced with terminal illness. It is his final, extremely personal, narrative of his childhood and the murder of his parents.



Haunted by guilt

I will come back before dusk (*Wrócę przed nocą*) – the title of Szperkowicz's book comes from the words his mother uttered before she had left their home in today's Belarus one early morning in 1943. She headed to a nearby village where she had left some of their belongings at an acquaintance's place. This scene of departure bears many warnings, which are easy to read today but were not so clear at the time when the events were unfolding. Thus, Jerzy, who as a ten-year-old, could only see the silhouette of his mother as she was disappearing on the horizon, continues to be haunted with guilt for the rest of his life. He did not wake up his father to turn his mother back. As a result, only three months after childbirth, she set on a journey to fetch some baby clothes and some money to

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pay relatives who had offered them shelter after they escaped from their estate.

Today, we know that any journey in this area in 1943 was doomed to end tragically. Just as much as any attempt to fetch one's belongings from the people who had promised to protect them. Thus, the death of Jerzy's mother was followed, one month later, by his father's murder. He was dragged out of the house by guerrilla fighters and shot to death soon after, without any trace. This left the three young Szperkowiczes (Jerzy and his two siblings) homeless and wandering, which came to an end only after the war when they relocated to Poland together with thousands of other resettlers from the Soviet Union.

Szperkowicz's story is not a simple, emotional confession. Just the opposite. The events are spread out, dramatised and put into order. Through language, or by silencing some parts out, he builds symmetry, or omits it. Consequently, the reader learns about the author's childhood, the early stages of the war and the changes that took place on the frontline. The story about the army marches is completed with a description of the departure of his mother.

Language and silence

Later on the story moves to the time when Szperkowicz is no longer an orphan. He returns to his childhood land as an old man. There he seeks the truth about his mother's death. And again applies the dialectic of language and silence to depict the investigation into his father's death. As part of it, he meets with many witnesses. However, their testimonies only allow him to reconstruct his mother's last days. And the silence remains when it comes to his father's last moments. Clearly, nobody has any knowledge about it. Sadly, the tragic fate of his parents was quite representative and typical for what took place during the war in the "Bloodlands", to use Timothy Snyder's phrase.

His mother died after having been tormented by neighbours who were led by a local self-proclaimed guerrilla fighter. He was an ordinary criminal who managed to spread fear among the community to the point that nobody had the courage to offer a cup of water to their friend and neighbour who had given birth just weeks beforehand. Beaten and raped, shaved and tortured and accused of spying (which ostensibly justified the violence and the interrogation) she was agonising for several days in a village located just under 20 kilometres away from where the family was based at the time.

Szperkowicz's father disappeared overnight. Nobody knew who had taken him or why. The only thing certain was that it was not the work of the German army. With them Szperkowicz's father had more success; he managed to hide

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Jews at his estate where he also provided refuge to Polish and Belarusian guerrilla fighters. He provided hospitality, even at his life's risk. The last time Szperkowicz applies the contrast between language and silence is when he analyses his own investigation, which also undergoes a transformation throughout the book. While he first focuses on the past, or the mystery of his father's sudden yet ordinary death, he later refuses to follow every trace.

Some lines cannot be crossed

Szperkowicz spent many years visiting the area of his family's estate, penetrating the Belarusian-Lithuanian borderland. He visited houses, met with former servants and neighbours, as well as their children and grandchildren. He talked to local priests, visited parish churches (Catholic and Orthodox) in search for documents. And yet he stepped back from his search when one of his interlocutors suggested he should check the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) archives. Anything can be found there. Despite years spent searching and maintaining a fragile balance between nostalgia and personal grief and a desire to find the truth, Szperkowicz refuses to take this path. He is convinced that some lines cannot be crossed, even for the sake of truth.

Yet his report and a very personal story can be uncomfortable reading. Not only is the reader faced with a story about violence, but various political issues also play a role in the book. First there is the class issue. The Szperkowicz family belonged to the group of Polish Catholic landowners. In the interwar period this meant being part of a privileged group; and even though they were affected by the outclassing, their financial position was still much better than Belarusian peasants who lived in neighbouring villages. Thus, the murder of his parents was, to a great extent, an act of class revenge and religious hatred, which was easier to perform at the time of war when nobody would undertake an investigation.

Politics, ethnicity and memory

Szperkowicz does not dwell on this issue in a sentimental way, unlike the Polish narrative on the "lost Borderlands". His book offers no idealisation of the past, it includes no affectionate memories of the lost estate and has no nostalgia for the apparent harmony between various ethnic and religious groups. Conversely, Szperkowicz is well-aware of what Polish politicians did in these areas during

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the interwar period. His own family (both grandparents and parents) drew conclusions from the subsequent protests and the anti-feudal rebellions of the Haydamaks. In order not to lose the estate in arson, they put many efforts into establishing good relations with their neighbours. They showed them that they cared about them and were interested in their lives, instead of displaying their wealth. Second, there were ethnic issues. The Szperkowiczes were victims of their Belarusian neighbours. Clearly, the family's efforts to maintain good neighbourly relations did not bear fruit at a time when both Soviet guerrillas and local Belarusian forces were easily instigating others against Poles. Both symbolic and collective responsibilities were in place.

Not only is the reader faced with a story about violence, but various political issues also play a role in the book.

The events intensified as the sense of threat increased. The Szperkowicz family, warned by a neighbour, knew that they had to leave their collapsing estate behind as Belarusian nationalists were only waiting to take over the mansion. This kind of looting was tolerated by the Germans. Evidently, it was getting riskier and they could feel the end drawing near. The family escaped from the mansion – just a few months before his parents were murdered.

Third, was the issue of memory. This is probably the most fragile topic discussed in the book. Undoubtedly, Szperkowicz's work is revolutionary in this regard. It goes against the rhetoric of the Great Patriotic War and the legend of the Belarusian guerrilla fight. It is a legend that was cherished when Belarus was part of the Soviet Union and continues to this day. The myth of the heroic fight with the Nazis fuelled Belarusian patriotism many years ago, while now it is becoming a foundation for the new Belarusian opposition. It remains unquestioned and its unifying energy is often exploited. It is needed when references are made to wartime efforts, the victims and their sacrifices, and when women's role in the fight is emphasised. The myth of this war is both creative and modern.

Safeguarded memory

Szperkowicz, however, offers us a story that is both personal and bloody. He shows that under the guise of guerrilla warfare, local looters and bandits committed crimes not only against those whom they considered class or ethnic

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enemies, but against those who were like them. Thus, they used guerrilla tactics as a pretext to blackmail already robbed peasants, raped women and orphaned children. By demanding that they are held accountable and that individual crimes are included in local memory, Szperkowicz suggests that no country can carry on properly as long as it tolerates the destruction and silencing of individual experiences. When searching for traces of his mother, he came across a wall of silence – one built out of fear of the new system and the sealed lips of ordinary people.

This book is not a revolutionary or political piece of writing. Nor it is a work based on sentiments. Szperkowicz wrote it to defend his individual truth with full awareness that his story can be manipulated and used as a demand for punishment for inflicted harms. This, however, was not his goal. For this reason, he was very precise in building his story. As a result, *I will come back before dusk* can be seen as a kind of tomb – a monument that Szperkowicz has built to commemorate the memory of his parents whose burial site is still unknown. Thereby, he has safeguarded their memory in the only way he could. And he did it beautifully.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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Where is Eastern Europe heading?

MARYANA PROKOP

Eastern Europe since 1989. Between Loosened Authoritarianism and unconsolidated democracy.
By: Mykola Riabchuk. Publisher, Studium Europy Wschodniej, Warsaw University, Warsaw, 2020.

The political map of Europe changed substantially in late 1980s and early 90s. This change was followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new, independent states. These changes resulted in a notable diversification between these states. It may seem that each of the former Soviet republics had a similar starting point and opportunity for shaping its own statehood. Yet the fate of these states took very different courses. First, the transformation processes in many of these states led to the liberalisation and democratisation of authoritarian regimes. However, it soon turned out that not all these states could be clearly defined as democratic or authoritarian. This contributed to the emergence of some kind of dualism, as some states often showed features of both democracy and authoritarianism. This phenomenon has been described in many different ways, including the category of hybrid regimes.

The new book by Mykola Riabchuk, a Ukrainian public intellectual and member of *New Eastern Europe's* editorial board, titled *Eastern Europe since 1989. Between Loosened Authoritarianism and Unconsolidated Democracy*, is an attempt to answer where Eastern Europe is heading. Naturally, there is no clear answer to this question despite its popularity among researchers. One rea-

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son is the heterogeneity of the various states and the social, economic, historic, geopolitical factors that have a strong impact on the processes taking place within them. Therefore, the book, which emphasises the diversity and uniqueness of the region, seems to be the most honest response to this query.

Fuzzy ambivalent zone

Interestingly, Riabchuk's book does not offer a chronological account the developments on the post-Soviet space. The author concentrates on the most important elements of some key phenomena. As a result, the different chapters guide readers through the history, the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research, and presents case studies. The first chapter "What's in a Name? Eastern Europe as Historical Phenomenon and Discursive Construction" puts forward an excellent background of the historical events that determine the current shape of Europe. It presents the specific national characteristics of the eastern parts of Europe from the perspective of "philosophic geography".

Riabchuk also stresses the multifaceted diversity of the region which also implies its division. He describes it as a "fuzzy ambivalent zone that contributed to the general ambiguity of all divides". He mentions the division between Catholic and Orthodox Europe and highlights the political division that has become a relevant issue in interstate relations and the legitimacy of East and West. He considers the "economic differentiation – that cuts Europe roughly from Danzig / Gdańsk in the north to Trieste in the south" to be no less an important element of Europe's diversity. This is explained by significant differences in the intensity of economic and demographic developments which took place in Western Europe but not in its Eastern parts. Based on these assumptions, the author comes to a straightforward conclusion that the specific characteristics of Eastern Europe have been determined by a long and complicated process of the post-communist transformation and Russia's influence in the region.

Riabchuk presents the specific national characteristics of the eastern parts of Europe from the perspective of "philosophic geography".

The second chapter includes an analysis of the short- and long-term consequences of the collapse of the com-

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munist system and the Soviet Union. Here Riabchuk describes the mechanisms that led to change of the political system in the late 1980s. Yet, in his view "captive nations were not ready to adopt the 'gift' received from Mikhail Gorbachev, who in his public speeches indicated that 'each socialistic state has a right to follow its own trajectory without external interference'". The author then argues it was rather this "renouncement of the 'Brezhnev doctrine' that established the limit of sovereignty for Soviet bloc nations". Therefore, despite the opportunity they received in the late 1980s and early 1990s, not all countries of the communist bloc succeeded in building stable democracies. To think of those that did not we should consider Belarus, Russia and Azerbaijan – which are often described as consolidated autocracies – while Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are unconsolidated authoritarian regimes. Meanwhile Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Albania still function as hybrid regimes.

Hybrid regime and aborted transition

The third chapter contains theoretical and methodological reflections on the democratisation process. Riabchuk refers to Samuel Huntington's theory of three waves of democratisation, ways of measuring degree of democracy and the importance of transition paradigms in the context of research on hybrid regimes. Of interest is his analysis of hybrid regimes and the transition into a "grey zone" taking place in Eastern Europe. This part of the book also offers an interesting take on the perception of political regimes that try to combine democracy and authoritarianism. These systems have been assigned numerous names in political commentary: "feckless democracy", "grey zones," "feckless pluralism" and "imitative democracy".

The next two chapters offer the analysis of the systemic transition processes that took place in Ukraine and Russia. The choice of case studies is important in the context of the region. Ukraine is a country that has exhibited both democratic and non-democratic practices in its transformation years. The most recent history of the political system resembles a sinusoid, which we can see when it tries to combine the preservation of electoral authoritarianism and striving for genuine democracy. Despite its revolutionary path towards democracy (i.e. the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014), Ukraine is still considered as a hybrid regime. Russia, on the other hand, is an example of a state characterised by regression towards authoritarian consolidation. By using the term "aborted transition", Riabchuk emphasises that "Russia's failed democratic transition looks like a belch of communism and imperialism in a world lukewarm to both".

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The most interesting chapter is the one titled "The Future of Europe, Future of Democracy". It presents Eastern Europe in *statu nascendi* and analyses the challenges faced by its surroundings, including the European Union. Three decades of systemic transition have clearly led to radical political, social and economic changes. Moreover, as Riabchuk notes, it is important for societies to have "a deep understanding that neither 'Europe' nor 'democracy' are millenarian objects but, rather, projects-in-the-making that require daily commitment and diligent work". This awareness could help us understand the direction Eastern Europe is headed towards – as a whole or in particular states.

No doubt, the quality of this book comes from the author's comprehensive approach to the specific characteristics of different states in Eastern Europe. Riabchuk presents an excellent theoretical background and thorough account of the origins of the phenomena. It is worth mentioning that each of the seven chapters includes a recommended reading list which will be useful for those who want to explore some of the discussed areas in more detail. While this is an academic book, each of the chapters is still very accessible reading. This makes Riabchuk's book not only a text for researchers and scholars, but also an enjoyable and interesting read for anyone interested in Eastern European affairs.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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