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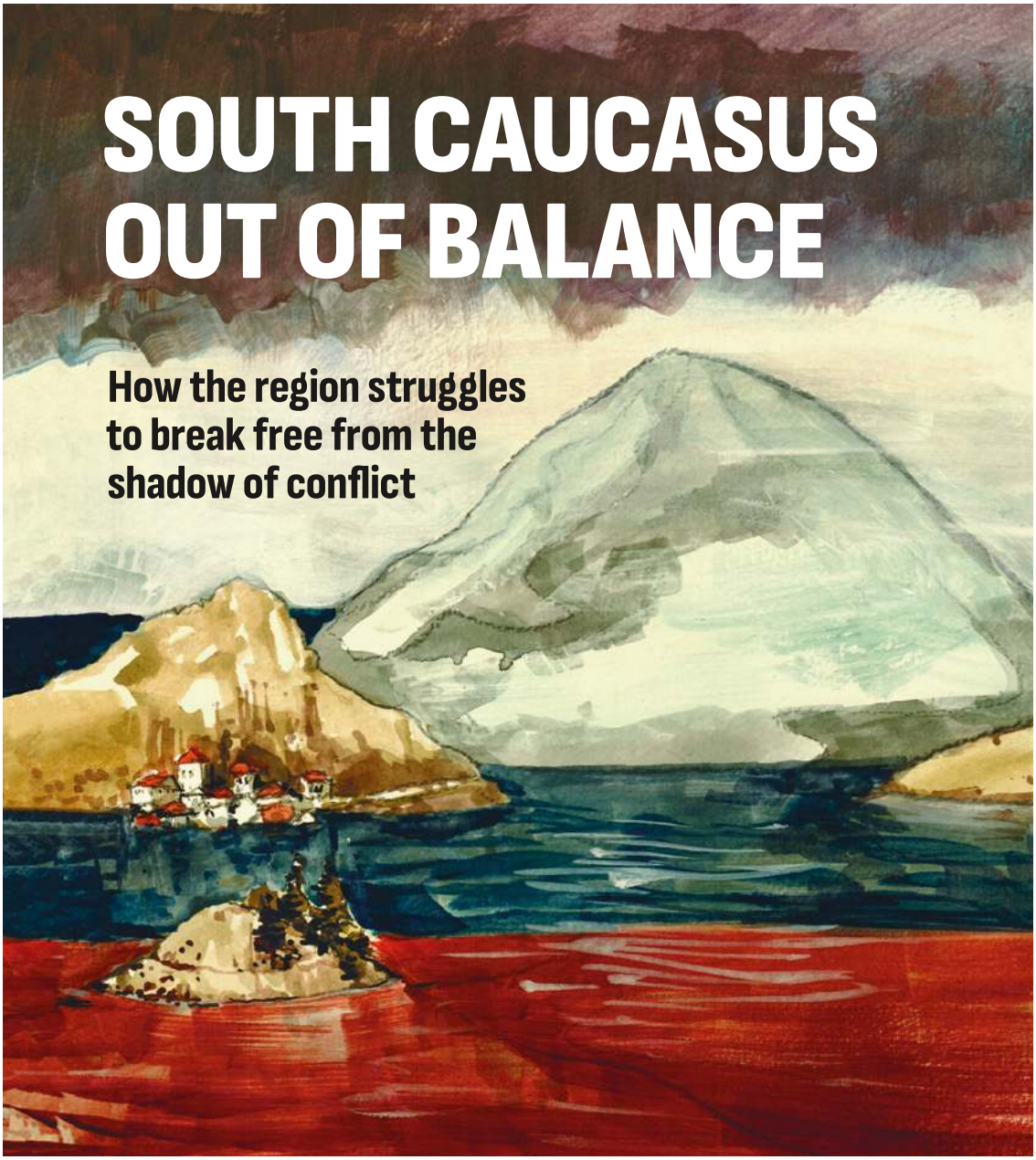

SOUTH CAUCASUS OUT OF BALANCE

How the region struggles to break free from the shadow of conflict

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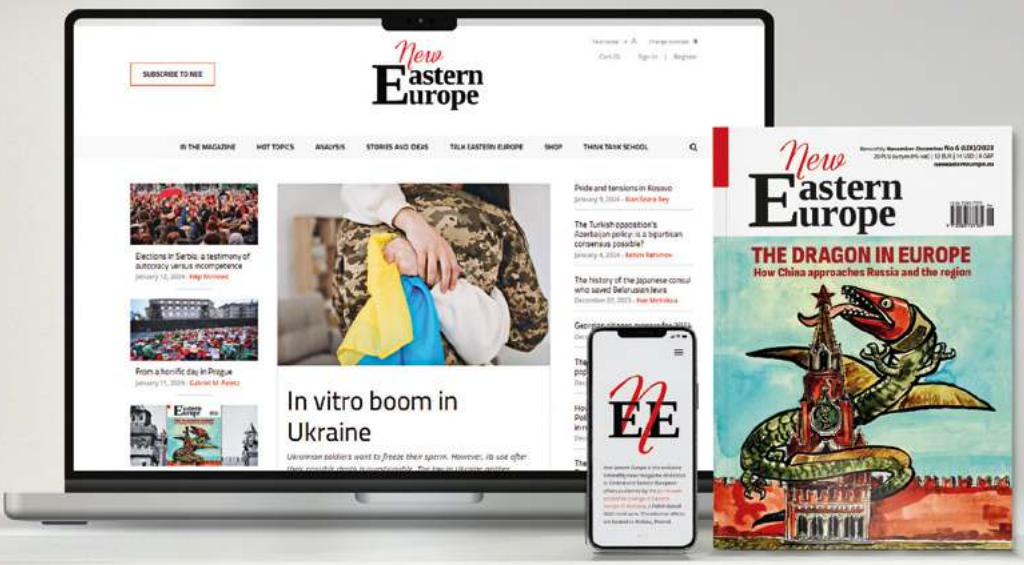

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DEAR READER,

Throughout history the region of the South Caucasus, which is made up of the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, has found itself at the crossroads of geopolitics. This observation is definitely relevant today. The region is surrounded by neighbouring powers such as Russia, Iran, Turkey and the European Union, all of which have a significant impact on the region's present and future trajectory. In this issue, our authors explore how conflict has overshadowed this region and remains the greater barrier to long-term development and a democratic future.

In particular, the role of Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union has negatively affected the balance of the region and continues to do so till this day. Twenty per cent of Georgian territory remains occupied by Russia or pro-Russian forces, which led to huge challenges for the country internally. The arrival of Russians en masse to Georgia following the invasion of Ukraine only further complicates the situation locally. Nevertheless, ahead of this year's elections, the ruling Georgian Dream party feels emboldened to maintain its power, but will it be at the cost of its path towards Euro-Atlantic integration?

Similarly, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has seemingly come to an end as a result of the Septembter 2023 Azerbaijani offensive to take the territory. This was achieved also as a result of Russia not carrying out its promise to maintain the peace as agreed in 2020 following the 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the wake of the 2023 offensive, more than 120,000 ethnic Armenians have fled their homes, without any prospect to return, raising questions about the region's ability to achieve stability and prosperity.

Thus, understanding the dynamics of the South Caucasus is crucial for comprehending the broader geopolitical shifts. The repercussions of Russia's actions in Ukraine underscore the interconnectedness of stability, security and regional dynamics, emphasizing the urgency of addressing other related conflicts such as those in the South Caucasus.

Through the analyses, perspectives and stories presented in this issue, we aim to shed light on the complexities of this region and explore pathways towards a more peaceful and prosperous future.

As always, we appreciate our engaged and growing readership. Please feel free to share your thoughts with us on social media – Facebook, X/Twitter or Instagram – or contact us via email: editors@neweasterneurope.eu.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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

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LAYOUT AND FORMATTING
Małgorzata Chyc | AT Wydawnictwo

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

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The legacy of the displaced in the South Caucasus

From yesterday till today

JENNIFER S. WISTRAND

The South Caucasus is no stranger to the plight of displaced persons. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, refugees and internally displaced persons have numbered in the hundreds of thousands due to conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Recent geopolitical shifts, such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Azerbaijan's 24-hour military offensive, have reignited concerns about this unresolved issue and the ongoing challenges faced by displaced persons in the region.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 was heralded by many western politicians, academics and others as a largely peaceful event. For many Central Asians and South Caucasians, however, it was far from tranquil. Tajikistan experienced a devastating civil war (1992–97). Georgia fought two wars with Russia over the regions of Abkhazia (1992–93) and South Ossetia* (1991–92), while Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a war over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh (1992–94). Both Georgia and Azerbaijan were left with large internally displaced person (IDP) populations, the vast majority of whom are still displaced today.

* Many Georgians prefer to call South Ossetia "Samachablo". I refer to South Ossetia as "South Ossetia" because that is the name by which the UN refers to the region.

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IDPs in Georgia and Azerbaijan

The present-day displaced people in the South Caucasus are largely, though not exclusively, a consequence of conflicts over the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and the region of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. In brief, the conflict over the region of Abkhazia began in the final years of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet period, Abkhazia was one of the 20 regions that was designated an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). In theory, this designation accorded the region some degree of independence. In practice, the Abkhazia ASSR was still subject to Tbilisi's and ultimately Moscow's will. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Abkhazia wanted to maintain its special status, while Georgia wanted the region to be fully incorporated into the newly independent Georgian state. There was a strong nationalist movement in Georgia in the early years of the post-independence period and granting special statuses for parts of Georgia was in opposition to that movement. Between 1992 and 1993, Abkhazia and Georgia fought a war. The Abkhaz received significant support from the Russians and ultimately defeated the Georgians. Today, Russia recognizes Abkhazia as an independent state, while Georgia and the vast majority of the UN's member states consider Abkhazia to be a part of Georgia.

The conflict over the region of South Ossetia also began in the final years of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet period, the Ossetians were divided between the South Ossetia Autonomous Region, which was a part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the North Ossetia Autonomous Region, which was a part of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. The autonomous regions, like the ASSRs, held special positions, at least in theory, in the Soviet hierarchy. In 1990 the South Ossetia Autonomous Region attempted to declare its independence from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Fighting between South Ossetia and Georgia began in 1991 and continued until a ceasefire was brokered in 1992. In August 2008, after several months of provocations between Georgian and South Ossetian military personnel, Russia invaded South Ossetia, and over the course of five days the Russians defeated the Georgians. Today, Russia recognizes South Ossetia as an independent state, just as it recognizes Abkhazia as an independent state, while Georgia and the vast majority of the UN's member states consider South Ossetia to be a part of Georgia.

Nagorno-Karabakh has been a point of contention between Azerbaijanis and Armenians since the early 1920s when the Soviets officially incorporated the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region into the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic rather than the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Both Azerbaijanis and Armenians have inhabited Nagorno-Karabakh. Historically, the region has been

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predominantly Armenian, while certain towns within the region have had a majority Azerbaijani population. In the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union was beginning to falter, relations between Azerbaijanis and Armenians reached their lowest point. When the Soviet Union officially dissolved in December 1991, the two newly independent countries fought a war that continued until May 1994. Armenia won the conflict and took control of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as parts or all of seven adjacent Azerbaijani regions. This remained the status quo until the fall of 2020 when Azerbaijani and Armenian forces fought a six-week war that effectively reversed the outcome of the prior conflict. Armenia was forced to cede to Azerbaijan a good portion of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as most of the adjacent Azerbaijani regions it had earlier captured. The status of Nagorno-Karabakh was put to rest (at least for now) in September 2023 when Azerbaijan launched a 24-hour military offensive which resulted in Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto government surrendering to Azerbaijan.

As of 2022, there were an estimated 308,000 Georgian IDPs, about 8.5 per cent of Georgia's population.

During and following the wars over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both in the early 1990s and in 2008, many Georgians who had been living in these regions became IDPs after fleeing to other parts of Georgia, and many of these individuals remain IDPs today. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, as of the end of 2022, there were an estimated 308,000 Georgian IDPs, representing around 8.5 per cent of Georgia's population. Similarly, during and following the 1992–94 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, most of the Azerbaijanis who had been living in Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent Azerbaijani regions were forced to flee elsewhere in Azerbaijan. These individuals became IDPs, and many of them are still IDPs. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there are upwards of 659,000 IDPs in Azerbaijan, constituting approximately 6.4 per cent of the country's population. In the past six months, Armenian refugees have joined the longstanding IDP populations in the South Caucasus. The region has also witnessed the arrival of Russian migrants over the last two years.

Refugees and migrants in Armenia and Georgia

Following Azerbaijan's 24-hour military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, between 100,000 and 120,000 Armenians left Nagorno-Karabakh for Armenia, according to the Red Cross, UNHCR and other humanitarian or-

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ganizations. The influx of refugees into Armenia represents around 3.3 per cent of the country's population. While the immediate cause of the refugee crisis is Azerbaijan's military offensive, Russia is also to blame.

According to point three of the nine-point November 2020 ceasefire agreement which brought the autumn 2020 six-week war between Azerbaijan and Armenia to an end, "The peacemaking forces of the Russian Federation, namely, 1,960 troops armed with firearms, 90 armoured vehicles and 380 motor vehicles and units of special equipment, shall be deployed along the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin Corridor." The Lachin Corridor is the only road connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. As such, it has been the primary conduit for food, medicine and other supplies for the people living in Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1992–94 war. However, in mid-December 2022, Azerbaijani activists partially blocked it, and as of Azerbaijan's military offensive in September 2023, the Russian peacekeeping troops had not succeeded in removing them. The population of Nagorno-Karabakh was effectively cut off from Armenia for nine months and forced to rely on intermittent humanitarian aid from the Red Cross.

Russia's commitment to Armenia, and more broadly to peace in the region, has largely diminished.

Given that, historically, Russia has had a much stronger relationship with Armenia than with Azerbaijan, it is much more likely to come to the aid of Armenians than Azerbaijanis, including Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the failure of the Russian peacekeeping troops to resolve the situation with the Azerbaijani activists or prevent Azerbaijan's 24-hour military offensive, let alone shepherd the November 2020 ceasefire agreement to a comprehensive peace agreement, suggests that Russia's commitment to Armenia, and more broadly to peace between the two countries, has diminished. There could be several reasons for this. However, the most likely is Russia's war against Ukraine, which has degraded the effectiveness of its troops and otherwise consumed its attention and resources.

Russia's war against Ukraine has also spurred large numbers of Russian nationals to leave Russia for nearby former Soviet states, such as Armenia and Georgia. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, some Russian nationals, overwhelmingly educated and economically well-off, left Russia for the South Caucasus, Turkey and the European Union, among other areas. Seven months later, after Russian President Vladimir Putin's call for a partial military mobilization, a significantly larger number of Russian nationals, primarily male and representing a cross-section of the country's socio-economic strata, fled Russia for Finland, the Baltics, Turkey, the South Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia, among other areas.

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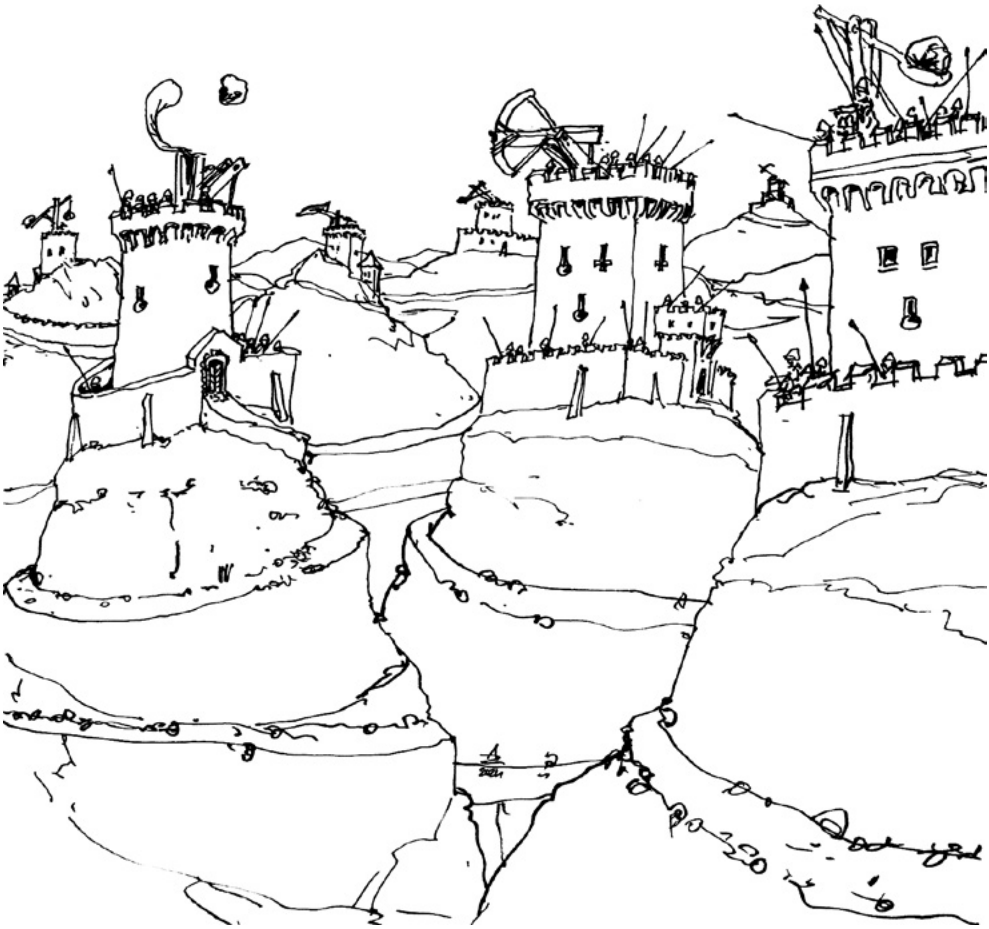

According to data published in *The Economist* on August 23rd 2023, in the first 18 months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, between 817,000 and 922,000 Russian nationals left Russia. The top destination countries were Kazakhstan, Serbia, Armenia, Turkey, the European Union, Israel, Montenegro, Georgia and the United States. According to the same data set, upwards of 110,000 Russian nationals had migrated to Armenia while just over 60,000 had migrated to Georgia.

It has been difficult to ascertain the precise number of Russian nationals who have left Russia, because Moscow is not keen to collect, let alone share, data that suggests that large numbers of its citizens are leaving. At the same time, many of the Russian nationals who have left Russia have transited through several countries and may still be on the move. In other words, the situation is still very much

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in flux. Building on this point, in an interview I conducted with the International Organization for Migration's mission in Georgia last July, they estimated there had been around 140,000 Russian nationals residing in Georgia "at any given time". They stressed the phrase "at any given time" because many of the Russian nationals who have migrated to Georgia view it as a transit country rather than a final destination. Unlike the European Union or the United States, Russians can enter Georgia without a visa, and they can stay for up to one year, visa-free. The situation is similar for Russians in most of the countries in *The Economist*'s list.

Whether it is 60,000 or 140,000 Russian nationals who have entered Georgia in the last two years, the number is significant. The number of Russian nationals who have come to Armenia during that same period is also significant, especially when both flows are viewed against the backdrop of the earlier discussed IDP and refugee situations.

Implications of mass (im)mobility

For 30 years, Azerbaijan supported its IDP population while dealing with the loss of 14 per cent of its territory occupied by Armenia. Since the reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent Azerbaijani regions, Azerbaijan's IDPs face the prospect of "going home". It will take time to de-mine, rebuild and reconnect the greater Nagorno-Karabakh region to Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan has the economic resources – i.e. oil and natural gas – to achieve this goal, especially if the EU follows through on its plans to increase its gas imports from Azerbaijan.

Since the reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions, Azerbaijan's IDPs face the prospect of "going home".

For Azerbaijan, the past two years have been tumultuous. However, Azerbaijan's future looks encouraging, especially if it normalizes relations with Armenia and continues to develop the political alliances and economic partnerships with partners in East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere that is has already begun pursuing. Unfortunately, the past two years have not foreshadowed an equally reassuring future for either Armenia or Georgia.

The forced migration of 100,000 to 120,000 Armenian refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia is going to have profound social, political and economic impacts on the country, just as the forced migration of Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Azerbaijani IDPs from the greater Nagorno-Karabakh region has had profound social, political and economic impacts on Georgia and Azerbaijan, respectively – for 30 years. The UNHCR has been assisting the Arme-

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nian refugees in Armenia since their arrival. The UNHCR has also helped the government of Armenia to develop the "Armenia Emergency Refugee Response Plan". This plan involves 60 partners, including UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national NGOs, and refugee-led organizations. Additionally, more than 50 humanitarian centres have been set up across the country.

However, as both Georgians and Azerbaijanis know, forced displacement situations are rarely resolved quickly. Instead, they more often transform from short-term humanitarian crises into long-term development problems, which generally require significant resources to address. Armenia has never had a strong economy. It is a landlocked country. It is not on good terms with two of its four neighbours (Turkey and Azerbaijan) which has inhibited trade. It has limited natural resources. It has suffered an enormous brain drain. And it has become dependent on remittances and Russian investment, the latter of which took off after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the exodus of a significant number of Russia's professional class to nearby countries, like Armenia, shortly thereafter.

Forced displacement situations often transform from short-term humanitarian crises into long-term development problems.

According to the World Bank, in 2022 and the first half of 2023, Armenia experienced unprecedented economic growth, making it the fastest growing economy in Eastern Europe. Much of that growth came from the influx of Russian nationals and their assets and skills in, for example, the information technology sector. Given the now strained relations between Armenia and Russia, however, the Russian migrants who have taken up residence in Armenia for the past two years may decide to move elsewhere. This could have serious economic consequences for Armenia, including the Armenian refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh.

While Azerbaijan's IDP situation is closer to being resolved now than it has been at any point over the past 30 years, Georgia's IDP situation continues to present challenges for the country. Ever since Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, while the international community did little to condemn Russia's actions, Georgians have feared additional Russian incursions. As of August 2008, Russia occupied 20 per cent of Georgia's territory. Today, that number is higher because of Russia's "creeping occupation", the term Georgians use to describe the Russian military personnel who are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and who literally move fence posts and barbed wire during the night to increase Russia's territorial control over Georgia little by little.

Greatly adding to Georgians' anxiety is the Russian migrant population who have taken up residence in the country since February 2022. Many of the inter-

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views and focus groups I conducted in Tbilisi in summer 2023, especially with young professional Georgians, elicited references to a "parallel society". The anti-Russian graffiti that covers sections of Tbilisi conveys these same feelings though in a more direct manner. It seems unlikely that Russia will invade Georgia anytime soon. However, protecting Russian nationals outside of Russia is one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's stated reasons for invading Ukraine. Of the three South Caucasus states, Russia's war against Ukraine has placed Georgia in the most precarious position.

Russia's war against Ukraine has inflicted immeasurable damage on Ukrainian society. Less often discussed are the war's ripple effects throughout the region. For the South Caucasus, and especially for Georgia and Armenia, the war has meant more migrants, more displaced people, and greater anxiety and instability. EE

Jennifer S. Wistrand is the Deputy Director of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. She holds a BA in Anthropology and French from Northwestern University and an MA and PhD in Anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis. Her areas of expertise are migration and forced displacement in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and humanitarian and development approaches to managing migration and forced displacement.

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Is peace possible between Armenia and Azerbaijan?

AHMAD ALILI

Following the September 2023 campaign by Azerbaijan to re-establish its sovereignty over all Karabakh region, the question now turns to the chance for a stable peace in the South Caucasus. Yet, to answer this question, one needs to examine the many dimensions of the conflict, including internal and geopolitical, to identify the main obstacles to peace. Only then can a strategy for such a process be developed.

In the shadows of the war in Ukraine, another regional development, interconnected to some extent with that conflict, also has the potential to shape the future of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet sphere. This is the Armenia-Azerbaijani peace process and the changing power balance in the South Caucasus. The geopolitical players shaping Ukraine's war and peace landscape also keep the Armenia-Azerbaijani peace process in focus. Nevertheless, there are distinctive features in both cases worth exploring.

With the active German facilitation between Armenia and Azerbaijan since this year's Munich Security Conference, we can state that European (German) mediation is back. Since the July 2023 meeting of Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders, where the sides first discussed the opening of the Aghdam Road, also referred to as the Lachin Corridor, a long time has passed. Following EU President Charles Michel's press remarks on July 15th 2023, about the possibility of the Aghdam Road being used for humanitarian purposes, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's remarks about him not having "neither the mandate nor the need to discuss" the Aghdam Road, the EU mediation mission became stuck. Azerbaijan considered

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any discussion of the issue at the United Nations Security Council in August 2023 as disrespecting the peace negotiations under the auspices of the EU. The peace process was now dead, leading to the September 2023 military campaign allowing Azerbaijan to re-establish full sovereignty over the Karabakh region. In Berlin, Armenian and Azerbaijani delegations met in a very similar manner to the meeting in Washington in May 2023, with a few changes to the delegation members, signalling that EU/German mediation is back. The bilateral negotiations format between Armenia and Azerbaijan can now quickly be adapted for an EU/German facilitation format. Thus, is peace possible in the South Caucasus? What is the future of regional security? Who are the leading players in the new realities in the region?

To understand the challenges that the European/German facilitators might face during the peace process, we must first understand the internal challenges the peace process encounters, and then explore the geopolitical conditions which can help or suppress the natural flow of events. We can identify four obstacles concerning peace and security in the South Caucasus that European and other mediation missions are now facing.

Obstacle 1: lack of a power balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, wars were formally concluded through various agreements, declarations, truces and treaties. One of the characteristics of modern conflicts is that "they never end". The conflicts aroused by the Arab Spring in 2011 continue until now: Libya, Syria and Yemen are among the examples. It was thought the ongoing war in Ukraine would last between "three and seven days". Yet in 2024, most political commentators talk about a prolonged conflict. In these cases, the dividing lines between the winner and the loser are blurred and unclear. Consequently, one of the characteristics of modern conflicts is that "they never end".

In this context, the Karabakh military campaign between Armenia and Azerbaijan is an outlier. Over 44 days in 2020 and less than 24 hours in 2023, Azerbaijan was able to achieve a military victory in both cases. Here the winner and loser of the military campaigns were obvious, the lines between them were not blurred and no ambiguity was left. In both cases, the losing side signed a document signalling its acceptance of the defeat. In 2020 this was the tripartite declaration signed by Pashinyan, and in 2023, the leader of the Karabakh Armenians Samvel Shahramanyan declared that a "decision was made for all state institutions and organisations to be dissolved by January 1st 2024".

Henceforward, in the last three years, Azerbaijan has won two conventional military campaigns in a manner reminiscent of the 19th and 20th centuries. This

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A military parade dedicated to the victory in the war over Karabakh was held in the city of Khankendi in November 2023. The city is now under full control of Azerbaijan.

is something unseen in our modern days, making the peace process highly problematic. Usually, peace is reached when the warring parties exhaust their potential and look for a negotiated settlement, which does not seem to be true in the case of Azerbaijan. Given this circumstance, a "dignified peace" – a term frequently used by Armenian diplomats and political commentators and meaning that Armenia regains some of its lost diplomatic and military positions as part of the peace process – becomes highly problematic. Most of the time, discussions between Armenian and Azerbaijani expert community representatives are concluded with the question: "What does Armenia have to gain from signing a peace document?"

The opponents of the peace process in Azerbaijan also tend to voice a very similar question: "What does Azerbaijan have to gain from the peace process?" Among the opponents of a peace agreement in Azerbaijan, there is a strong argument that none of the accomplishments in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict were achieved because of diplomacy but instead by the use of force. The lack of political will by Armenia from 1994 to 2020 to compromise on the surrounding regions from where Azerbaijanis were forced out makes this argument a solid one for the local audience. Hence, the proposed possible solution is always to work on defence and ensure that the current (lack of) balance of power has not changed in favour of others

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in the region. This Azerbaijani approach is also reflected in President Ilham Aliyev's recent speech, where he declares that Azerbaijan does not need to rush the peace process: "There is already de facto peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia." At the same time, Aliyev and high-ranking diplomats would consistently declare that there is no intention to use force against the sovereign territory of Armenia.

Obstacle 2: differing strategic-planning horizons

In short, Azerbaijan is looking to satisfy its long-term strategic goals when it deals with any peace document, whereas the Armenian leadership has many short-term concerns on its hands. The "44+1" day war (meaning the results of the 2020 and 2023 wars combined) ensured solid public sympathy for President Aliyev from all strata of Azerbaijani society. The Azerbaijani leadership does not need to convince the local audience about the effectiveness and righteousness of the actions taken towards Armenia. In his victory speech on November 9th 2020, Aliyev famously declared that "I know what to do and when to do it. Azerbaijani people trust me." This phrase was designed to send signals to even the dissatisfied part of society. Therefore, Aliyev is looking to ensure that there will not be any threats to peace and stability in the region and that no one will challenge the status quo in the long run. As a result, there will be no concerns about short-term threats.

This approach of the Azerbaijani leadership causes demands which the Armenian leadership seems unable to accept under the current political conditions within the country. The first issue is that there would have to be changes to the Armenian constitution and the country's legislative basis concerning a peace deal. The current constitution and other legal documents in Armenia prohibit the leadership from signing any document which considers Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, and does not recognize the independence of Karabakh Armenians or as a part of Armenia. Therefore, a lack of changes might create a platform for revanchist forces in Armenia to attempt a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Of course, this is unacceptable to Baku. Azerbaijan wants to ensure that in the post-Pashinyan period no one will challenge the leader's signed peace deal. The future generation of political decision-makers might claim that the peace deal is legally wrong and challenge the conditions and terms of the agreement.

The second issue relates to border delimitation and demarcation as Azerbaijani access to its enclaves within Armenia is also a subject of Baku's long-term planning. Instead of "accepting the 1975 Soviet Army General Staff map as a basis" for border delimitation and demarcation, which Armenia demands, Baku is looking for more radical steps: a land bridge to its enclaves. At some stage, it might require

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the exchange of territories between Armenia and Azerbaijan, hence some alterations in the borderline. Nevertheless, in the long run, the political establishment of Armenia might create a problem for Azerbaijani access to its enclaves via internationally recognized and controlled territories. Azerbaijan also wants to avoid a clash on this issue in the future.

The third issue relates to access to Nakhchivan – an Azerbaijani exclave bordering Iran, Turkey and Armenia – via the Zangezur corridor, also among Azerbaijan's long-term strategic goals. In addition, Azerbaijan requires a unique security regime for the transport corridor to ensure that none of the political forces within Armenia might sabotage it in the future and create incidents for the normal functioning of the route. Armenia sees it as a threat to its sovereignty, whereas for Azerbaijan, it is a commitment to the earlier signed documents, particularly to the Tripartite Statement from November 10th 2020. Whereas Aliyev, as the leader who brought military victory, has the full sympathy of society and looks for long-term goals, Pashinyan and his team are always in short-term planning and "survival mode".

Another key factor is related to Pashinyan's reputation and image. He came to power because of the 2018 revolution in Armenia but his reputation was seriously damaged by the results of the "44+1" day war. This creates a political environment within Armenia that means that the prime minister always has to explain himself and his decisions. Right after the 2020 Karabakh war and its disastrous results for Armenia, Pashinyan and his team blamed the previous leaders of Armenia, claiming that when in 2018 Pashinyan took power as part of the revolution the Karabakh case was already lost. They also claimed that the two years from 2018 to 2020 were not enough for the new leadership of Armenia to change the power balance in Armenia's favour. Following the 2021 elections, in which Pashinyan won over his internal political opponents, he and his team started blaming Russia for not helping its strategic ally in times of need, thus leaving it alone and unable to win.

Obstacle 3: differing political solidarity levels concerning societies and their leaders

The Karabakh conflict was a "nation-building conflict" for both Azerbaijan and Armenia. In the late 1980s, the transformation of the Azerbaijani mindset from "Homo Sovieticus" into a modern national mindset resulted from the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Karabakh conflict for Armenia and its large diaspora groups was also unifying. Very few topics could unite all Armenians in Russia, the United States, the Middle East and Karabakh Armenians. This param-

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eter also faced a change during and in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war. Even the most adherent opponents of Aliyev announced support for a cease of activity so as not to disturb decision-making during the war and announced their solidarity with the Azerbaijani leadership. With the result of the 2020 war, the centralized stand on the issue among Azerbaijanis would grow even more vital, not questioning even the most sensitive moments concerning the Azerbaijani political elite's approach to the problem.

Nonetheless, the situation evolved in the opposite direction in the Armenian camp, and the process became chaotically decentralized. The positions of the main components of the wider Armenian public differ from each other. Traditionally, the Armenian political narrative was represented by the Armenians of Armenia, Karabakh Armenians, diaspora Armenians in the US and the EU, diaspora Armenians in Russia and diaspora Armenians in the Middle East. In the past, the stand on the Karabakh issue would have been a unifying factor among these actors, whereas now, it is the most dividing factor.

> The presence of foreign military bases on Armenian soil makes Armenian decision-making even less predictable.

The tensions between the Armenian government and the Armenian religious institutions are part of this decentralized approach to the conflict. As a result, at a time when Azerbaijan's position on the issue is centralized and united, Armenia's position is reflected differently on various platforms, making some diaspora members disproportionately active. This would encourage their home countries' leaders to take an active role in the process, making Armenia's position multi-voiced and de-centralized. This challenges the peace process significantly.

In some instances, the presence of foreign military bases on Armenian soil (not only in Gyumri) makes Armenian decision-making even less predictable. This creates unpredictability overall in the peace process. Recently, during the clashes on the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the EU Civilian Monitoring Mission tasked with investigating the case could not access the site because of the presence of Russian troops in particular segments of the border. This created an environment where Azerbaijan used force once more, causing tensions in the peace process.

Obstacle 4: external geopolitical interference

Needless to say, the South Caucasus is one of the geopolitically difficult regions in the world. We can distinguish several geopolitical circles in the region influ-

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encing the peace process. The first circle is the regional one, consisting of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The relations among these neighbouring counties, alongside their possible integration and the obstacles that go along with it, might influence the overall fate of the peace process. The second circle is created by the geopolitical presence of external powers bordering the region or having a presence on the ground. These powers are Russia (peacekeepers in Karabakh), Turkey (monitoring centre together with Russia), and the EU.

The third geopolitical circle is made up of countries with an established regional presence but no publicly declared "boots on the ground". This geopolitical ring consists of the United States and Iran. Iran, the only country bordering mainland Azerbaijan and Armenia, borders the conflict zone, giving it a particular advantage. Still, it did not establish a full-scale presence on the ground. The US is geographically one of the most distant powers but plays a vital role in the process, especially during times of crisis. The US also has no presence on the ground but was accepted by the negotiation parties as a mediator, which led to the Washington meeting. Iran does not enjoy the same level of trust, at least by Azerbaijan. The fourth "other geopolitical powers" circle involves the nuclear Asian powers with rising interest in the region. As newcomers, Pakistan, India and China are renewing their commitments to allies in the region.

Therefore, there is a growing realization regarding the importance of signing a peace deal as soon as possible. The rapidly changing geopolitical conditions in the wider region make Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia natural allies against potential external threats. To face upcoming geopolitical challenges, the South Caucasus countries might need each other more than ever. The war in Ukraine demonstrates that many geopolitical powers are willing to "restore" the historical territorial unity of their countries. All three powers geographically neighbouring the South Caucasus – Russia, Turkey and Iran – were once in control of the South Caucasus. Therefore, Azerbaijan is seeking a broader peace in the region because of its own security concerns. It wants to finalize the peace deal with Armenia as soon as possible. EE

Ahmad Alili is the director of the Caucasus Policy Analysis Centre, an independent think tank based in Baku, Azerbaijan.

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Navigating the new reality

Armenians seeking adjustment after leaving Nagorno-Karabakh

RAZMIK MARTIROSYAN

On September 19th and 20th 2023, Azerbaijan took the Nagorno-Karabakh region by military means and forced the local authorities to dissolve their institutions. As a result, nearly the entire population of local Armenians fled their homes to Armenia. It is still difficult to try to make sense of how this unfolded so swiftly.

After many years of negotiations under the co-chairmanship of the OSCE Minsk Group, in September 2020, Azerbaijan decided to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh (in this article many of the interlocutors refer to the region as "Artsakh", which is its name in the Armenian context – editor's note) conflict via military means and attacked the region. As a guarantor of the security of the Armenians living there, Armenia supported the local population. However, the Armenian side suffered a defeat in the war, which is often referred to as a "chosen defeat" in Armenia. Those who take this view accuse the authorities of not taking advantage of the negotiation process, bringing the war and planning the outcome of that war from the beginning.

On the evening of November 9th, a tripartite statement was signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia which brought an end to the 44-day war. According to the statement, seven regions that were the subject of years-long negotiations were passed over to Azerbaijan alongside Shushi and Hadrut, two parts

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of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's long-standing desire to deploy a peacekeeping mission in the region was also fulfilled. However, Azerbaijan was not satisfied with the outcome of the war and began making territorial claims on Armenia proper. After a short time, the armed forces of Azerbaijan were already on the territory of Armenia and, according to official data presented by the authorities, since May 2021, the Azerbaijanis have occupied more than 150 square kilometres of Armenia's sovereign territory.

What happened on September 19th?

Two years after the 44-day war, in December 2022, Azerbaijan began to block the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, known as the Lachin Corridor. The international reaction was quite strong, however Azerbaijan never re-opened the road, which led to a humanitarian crisis in the region. On September 19th 2023, when, according to various reports, famine had already taken hold in Artsakh, another Azerbaijani aggression and invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh took place. This time, the residents of the region had to face the aggression alone because the Armenian authorities had left Artsakh and the Russian peacekeepers had completely failed in their mission.

What happened in Artsakh in September 2023? What negotiations took place between the authorities of Artsakh and Azerbaijan? Why did president Samvel Shahramanyan, sign the well-known decree on the dissolution of Artsakh institutions? Regarding this last question, not even former officials of Artsakh fully know. Most of the responsible officials are currently in Azeri prisons, while others are mainly silent. It is quite difficult to get a comment these days from the officials who were responsible for Artsakh.

However, I managed to speak with Artak Beglaryan, a former human rights defender and a former state minister of the unrecognized republic. We asked him first to present what happened on September 19th 2023, because in those days the connection with Artsakh was almost completely cut off and it was difficult to get information, and how the situation changed so quickly.

Why did Samvel Shahramanyan sign the well-known decree on the dissolution of Artsakh institutions?

According to Beglaryan, as a result of the aggression on September 19th 2023, Azerbaijan killed around 230 people, including 21 civilians, within 24 hours. "I say 'around' because there is still a need for clarification. There are [still] missing persons and so on. During that time, the Azerbaijanis captured quite a lot of settlements, strategic roads and heights, besieged the rest of

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the Martakert region, mainly the lower part, Martakert city and the surrounding villages and cut it off from Stepanakert. The Martuni region was completely cut off from Stepanakert – including two roads and four villages of the Shushi region were already cut off from Stepanakert," Beglaryan said.

Metakse Hakobyan, a deputy from the Justice faction of the so-called Artsakh parliament, presented the September events in more detail: "On September 19th, we were under a blockade, the food supply was almost finished. However, everyone got up as usual that day; children went to school on foot, some people went to work, and some went to get food. In short, the routine of the blockade began, as it had been for months. At around one o'clock in the afternoon, the first explosion occurred in Stepanakert and the bombardment of the capital began immediately. Before that, or minutes before that, the bombardment of the villages of the regions had started. From that moment on, we were deprived of all means of communication, we all lost our children, we did not know what was happening even in the neighbouring districts, in the villages or regions," the MP said.

According to Hakobyan, there were many victims among the civilian population in the first minutes. "The first victims were children both in Stepanakert and in the villages, after which the bombing did not stop even for a second. People organized themselves as much as possible. Parents tried to find their children and went down to the basements of buildings. People prepared to face another war. But somehow, even in that situation, no one thought of such an outcome, that people would have to flee Artsakh. The shelling continued all night. Several bombs fell on Stepanakert and there were many victims among the civilian population. The shelling did not stop for a second until the ceasefire was agreed at two o'clock in the afternoon on September 20th. Even then, there was no mention of leaving Artsakh. However, the ceasefire lasted only a few hours, shots were fired in the Krkzhan district of Stepanakert, in the neighbourhood where one of the big schools of Stepanakert was located. Hundreds of children, as well as the residents of the adjacent building, used the basement for shelter. We were informed that Azerbaijanis had already entered Stepanakert. In other words, the ceasefire was agreed to such an extent that the soldiers did not shoot at each other, but the Azerbaijani soldiers entered Stepanakert," she concluded.

No other option but to flee

Hakobyan said that being deprived of communication, they received news about the siege of various parts of Artsakh quite late. "[T]he Azerbaijanis quickly planned to encircle and enter all the cities and villages of Artsakh, cut them off and

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take them under their control together with the population. After that, Azerbaijan dictated its conditions, and the so-called negotiations took place which were just a show performed for the international community. Azerbaijan made demands: the dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh and the dissolution of its army, in return for which they would allow [the population] to leave Artsakh, otherwise they were conveying through their internal channels that a massacre would take place," she added. According to Hakobyan, it was after this agreement when the Artsakh republic's president, Samvel Shahramanyan, issued a decree ordering the dissolution of all state institutions.

"That decree was made so the population would be allowed to at least leave Artsakh without being massacred. The Azerbaijani side did not discuss any other option; the only option was that Artsakh Armenians should leave Artsakh. They did not consider that the people of Artsakh should stay or that negotiations should take place, and some agreements should be reached regarding further living arrangements," she emphasized.

According to Artak Beglaryan, the September 2023 aggression, the blockade, and the psychological terror inflicted on the people of Artsakh had a huge impact on the decisions of the people living there: "It was clear to the people that there is no army, the Russian peacekeepers have completely failed, their guarantees do not work, the state system is collapsing … It was clear to the people that Azerbaijani rule is coming with all its dangers and risks. Along with that, there was the Azerbaijani propaganda that they would arrest, kill and persecute all the men who fought against Azerbaijan, which means almost all the men. Also, these informational and psychological attacks had an impact on people's decisions. People realized that they cannot live safely and dignified under Azerbaijani rule."

> "It was clear that the Russian peacekeepers have completely failed, their guarantees did not work," Beglaryan says.

Beglaryan is not aware of how the decision was made to sign the decree on the dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh: "I was not an official at that time; take into account that I left my position on August 31st. I don't even have enough external information, but the information is generally that since September 21st Azerbaijanis have been demanding a document or an act to dissolve state bodies and the parliament and for the president to resign, etc. I am aware of those negotiations. After that, probably, the pressures deepened, and in the end, they came to the opinion that the republic would be dissolved by the president's decree. However, in fact, we all understand and know that this decree is unconstitutional and has no legal value. It is informational and political, nothing more. It is good that during this time the state bodies of Artsakh, the national assembly, and the pres-

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ident publicly expressed their position regarding that decree, that it has no legal force and the state system continues to function in the same way," he emphasized.

Facing humiliation and discrimination

According to our interviewees, Artsakh Armenians left via the Hakari bridge, where they were subjected to the humiliation of Azerbaijanis: "Azerbaijan allowed the Artsakh Armenians to cross the Hakari bridge selectively, depending on their mood, but they mostly mocked them, made insults in Azerbaijani and Russian. In addition to the people who were targeted, some ordinary citizens were stopped, humiliated and bullied. There have been many such cases which we witnessed," noted Hakobyan.

Beglaryan mentioned that in September 2023, more than 110,000 citizens fled the region.

"At the beginning of the blockade, there were about 120,000 people in Artsakh. During that time, several thousand people left by various roads, in the beginning months, by mountain paths, and after the installation of the illegal Azerbaijani checkpoint, only with the Red Cross and accompanied by Russian peacekeepers. A little more than 110,000 would have remained in Artsakh, and the total population of Artsakh in 2020, before the war, was about 150,000. Therefore, all 150,000 should be considered displaced or subjected to genocide, because people do not have the opportunity to return to their homeland, their homes," he said.

> The total population in Nagorno-Karabakh before the 2020 war was about 150,000 ethnic Armenians.

"From the very first day, we encountered human rights violations in Armenia. It was equal to all the humiliations by Azerbaijanis," Hakobyan said. She mentioned that the attitude of the Armenian authorities was not significantly different from the Azerbaijani attitude towards the fleeing Armenians. "The Armenian authorities announced that we are not Armenian citizens, and after that illegal decision came into force, the chaos started. They started forcing us to either accept citizenship, register, or take refugee status. People, who have been registered in Armenia just once, were forced to change their passports. They created such artificial obstacles. Many people were in a very difficult social situation for months and the authorities of Armenia then told them that they will not receive social support forever, and Artsakh Armenians had to work. However, I will say that tens of thousands of people simply cannot work today, because they do not have refugee status or the registration required by the authorities. What is happening to-

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day in the Armenian passport offices is impossible to describe. They set illegal demands but do not ensure their proper fulfillment," Metakse Hakobyan described.

Beglaryan also emphasized that after moving to Armenia, the people of Artsakh faced many problems: housing, unemployment, psychological rehabilitation, integration, etc. "Artsakh Armenians sometimes faced discriminatory treatment. The question of an improper response or the capabilities of the administrative system, the state system, was sharply expressed, due to which thousands of people were illegally deprived of various programmes. The state system either does not want or is unable to respond properly and quickly resolve the issues. However, it should also be noted that many problems that existed at the beginning have been solved little by little. Those, whose rights have been violated, are able to recover little by little in some ways. But in my impression, there are still thousands of similar people, and specifically, there are also rights that people have not been able to protect and realize. The issue of status, is also acutely expressed because they lowered the status of a de facto citizen to the status of a refugee, lowered the level of rights protection. On the one hand, realizing that yes, in fact, we are refugees, that we came because of the conflict, and did not come from the territory of Armenia itself. On the other hand, we had to find such a solution that we would not be deprived of our rights."

After moving to Armenia, the people of Artsakh faced many problems: housing, unemployment, psychological rehabilitation and integration.

During these months, the Armenian authorities have been talking about the social support provided to the Artsakh Armenians from all possible platforms. Metakse Hakobyan noticed the social assistance they gave for two months – 90,000 Armenian drams (nearly 200 euros), 40,000 (almost 100 euros) for rent and 10,000 (almost 20 euros) for utilities. This is simply ridiculous in the current market conditions of Armenia.

"If a family of five manages to rent a house for nearly 450 euros, even in a rural community, then in the best situation they will be able to pay rent and will not be able to live anymore. In addition, one part of most families receives the money, and the other part does not. As I followed the steps taken in hundreds of citizens' problems addressed to me, the answer would be that there is a technical problem, and they have not solved that technical problem for months. These problems are diverse. They don't even explain what that technical problem is or when it will be solved. In other words, today I can give a list of hundreds of families that literally cannot sustain their existence. I talk to people and try to understand why they don't work, and there is only one reason: mostly it is a problem with passports, they can't find a job, or they find a temporary job."

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What are the solutions to the situation?

According to Artak Beglaryan, Armenia should change its official position, conduct political negotiations with Azerbaijan and international partners for the Artsakh Armenians to return, and make this one of the necessary conditions of the peace process or peace agreement.

"But the Armenian authorities are avoiding it," he said. "Without Armenia's official position and actions, it is not realistic that the international community will take sufficient action for us. The rest is a matter of international justice. It is necessary to investigate these crimes through the ICC, whether it will be a genocide or a crime against humanity, hold them accountable, discuss the compatibility of the Genocide Convention with the ICJ, apply clear international sanctions against Azerbaijan and the Aliyev regime, which are provided for by international law. Also, to have monitoring missions in Artsakh and to protect our property, monuments, and graves as much as possible from Azerbaijani destruction or exploitation," he added.

Metakse Hakobyan considers the Committee for the Defence of the Fundamental Rights of the People of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), headed by former Armenian foreign minister, Vardan Oskanyan, a solution. "The commission is trying to bypass the Armenian authorities and have the opportunity to be present on international platforms, so that they see that it is not the Armenian authorities who represent the will and interests of the people of Artsakh on international platforms," stated Hakobyan. EE

Razmik Martirosyan is an Armenian journalist and
a scholar with the Lane Kirkland Fellowship programme.

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“In these difficult times the EU and Armenia stand shoulder to shoulder”

VALENTINA GEVORGYAN

Amidst the consequences of three major crises, Armenia is on the path to confronting past failures and shifting its policy westward to overcome its peripheral status. As it grapples with an unstable situation on its borders and coercion from Russia and Azerbaijan, the country’s pursuit of democratic reforms and EU alignment calls for a reconfiguration of the regional alliance system that would secure peace in the South Caucasus.

Armenia is a country in the process of democratic transition that must face the challenges posed by both its aggressive neighbourhood, which hinders regional integration, as well as external and systemic problems that shape the country’s social environment. Armenia is suffering from the consequences of the 2018 revolution, the pandemic and especially the 2020 war – a trifecta of shocks that have shaken the country to its core. It is dealing with multiple social and political challenges today, along with facing continued threats from Azerbaijan and Russia’s pressure to give up its sovereignty. Nonetheless, having steadily improved its democratic institutions in recent years, Armenia stands as a democracy frontrunner in Eastern Europe, along with Moldova and Ukraine. Armenia has been among the top democratizing countries since 2011, even making a transition from electoral autocracy to electoral democracy in 2021.

Since the Second Karabakh War, waged by Azerbaijan in 2020, Armenia has found itself in an unfathomable security dilemma that has also been amplified by

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Russia, Armenia's so-called strategic partner. It is not an exaggeration to say that among all the states of the former Soviet Union subject to Russia's backward colonial policies, Armenia is in the most vulnerable and dangerous position today. At first, such a statement may seem unreasonable, given Russia's open full-scale war against Ukraine. However, delving deeper into Russia's covert – yet still evident – coercive and deceptive policies towards Armenia, we may want to think again.

The urgent need for a new system of regional alliances

Russia poses threats to Armenia through manipulative tactics and by leveraging Azerbaijan, making the Armenian case a dangerously intricate question that demands the involvement of the international community. Russia, in collusion with Azerbaijan – as strategic partners – seeks to gain continuous concessions from Armenia. Following the 44-day war in 2020, the development of Russian-Azerbaijani relations points precisely to that. For example, the September 2023 invasion and occupation of Armenia's internationally recognized territory that lasts until today was followed by the forced displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and gaining full control over the disputed territory. Baku also continuously rejected the establishment of an actual peace that would go beyond statements, refusing to conduct any border demarcation with Armenia and, unlike Yerevan, recognize the country's territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, Moscow has unilaterally installed its border guards, observation posts and escorts at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, violating interstate agreements and international norms. With numerous incidents in between, the list goes on: provocations and instigated clashes along the border; the killing, injuring and capturing of Armenian servicemen; shelling and instilling fear among the residents of Armenia's border communities. The numerous attempts to drag Armenia into a new war appear to be coordinated and orchestrated by the Russian-Azerbaijani tandem, where both parties seem dissatisfied with Armenia's losses thus far. They are moving forward to extract new concessions from Yerevan. What followed the initial invasion confirms that Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev are hungry for more violence and war, rather than negotiations and peace.

Armenia's so-called post-Soviet period has exacerbated an already critical situation on many levels. The three-decade-long blind and overwhelming reliance on Russia, coupled with the lack of alternative security partnerships, has led the country to its current state, marked by multiplying security, social and political challenges. As a response, Armenians have rejected the former authorities that have been inadvertently steering the country towards increased dependence on Russia

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and an uncertain future. The citizens delegated their mandate to a new administration which continues to struggle with the burden of the Soviet legacy and the multiplying challenges of today.

Currently, Armenia faces unprecedented difficulties which should push the country to work on its past shortcomings and adopt new approaches to changing its "Russia's" peripheral status. Undoubtedly, the structure of the security system in the South Caucasus region has evolved into a chaotic web of colliding interests. It is also clear that, for an extended period now, it is the Russian-Azerbaijani tandem that has been obstructing the prospect of peace and stability in the region by impeding Armenia's development.

Today's Russia has become an advocate of isolation and backwardness, fostering narrow-mindedness and a fearfulness of freedom. As Russia stampedes in its usual imperial-centric mode – and desperately so, considering its murderous cowardice concerning the death of Putin's most formidable opponent – Armenia has to fundamentally reassess its existing partnerships. For an extended time now, Armenia has not been a "good fit" for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It is the only CSTO member state rated as "Partly Free". Since the end of the 2020 war, every incident of misconduct by Baku, to put it mildly, can be traced back to Armenia's refusal to allow Russia's illegitimate encroachment on its sovereign territory.

Today's Russia has become an advocate of isolation and backwardness, fostering narrow-mindedness and a fearfulness of freedom.

Peace and stability in the South Caucasus will not be achieved if Armenia remains alongside Russia, a mediator that has shown no genuine intentions of fostering peace in the first place. Peace and development in the region can only be achieved if Armenia stands shoulder-to-shoulder with powers genuinely interested in regional stability and its benefits. The increased and more profound engagement of EU leaders in this process is crucial.

France should assume the role of Armenia's primary and strategic defence partner, replacing Russia. In a 2023 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute regarding the most crucial political partners for Armenia, the top three responses among Armenian citizens were France (75 per cent), Iran (67 per cent) and the United States (52 per cent). Regarding the countries perceived as posing the greatest political threat to Armenia, the top three responses were Azerbaijan (93 per cent), Turkey (89 per cent) and Russia (24 per cent). The likelihood of France continuing its role as a mediator in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations is diminishing due to its overt support for Armenia. Given France's intentions, including its military support for Armenia, it should become Armenia's strategic partner in

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Photo courtesy of the European Commission

President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, meets with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Armenia has been actively seeking new avenues and opportunities for advancing its relations with the EU.

place of Russia. Instead, Germany is better positioned to take on the role as peacemaker, considering its neutrality and the position in the European Union's overall engagement in facilitating negotiations between Armenian and Azeri leaders. Nevertheless, disinformation and manipulations by Moscow and Baku's propagandists regarding the inability of the EU to be a leader in the peacemaking process will continue because the EU's continued engagement and attention to the region is the key to peace.

Armenia's unique position in the Eastern Partnership

There are several reasons why Armenia's case stands out from the rest of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and thus calls for the enhanced, comprehensive and continuous support of the western community interested in the peace and stability of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Firstly, Armenian society has experienced three shocks in three consecutive years: a revolution in 2018, a pandemic in 2019–2020, and a war in 2020. Secondly, when assessing countries' perfor-

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mances and, thus, their prospects for a European future, Armenia appears to be in a unique position.

The six countries of the EaP currently fall into two categories: those who are performing the best and thus have a European future; and those who are doing worse and are even likely to withdraw from the initiative. Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia belong to the first group, having received the green light for EU accession. On the other hand, Azerbaijan and Belarus lag far behind, with dim hopes of making progress any time soon. Where does Armenia fit in this equation? The case of Armenia is unique as it currently stands "somewhere in between". It has proven its intentions to join the group of frontrunners by remaining committed to reforms and democratization. However, its progress is often hindered by the daily challenges described above.

There are avenues and opportunities for advancing Armenia's relations with the EU, however. In February 2024, Armenia and the EU celebrated the anniversary of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), the EU Common and Security Defence Policy civilian deployment (EU Civilian Mission) set up to monitor developments on the Armenian-Azeri border. The monitoring mission is one of the most successful initiatives aimed at establishing peace and normalizing Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. The mission's staff should gradually increase, and the mission's mandate should be extended. Armenia expects more enhanced cooperation with the EU towards the mutual goal of achieving stability along the contact line with Azerbaijan.

The EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (EU-Armenia CEPA) should also become a basis for Armenia's EU Association agenda with the EU. The EU-Armenia CEPA should be regarded at the highest institutional level within the EU as the foundation of a revised policy on Armenia's European integration. To this end, the EU should continue providing direct support for the implementation of the EU-Armenia CEPA to strengthen Armenia's state institutions and civil society. Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have been able to advance towards the EU Association agenda (and beyond) thanks to the EU's continuing financial and technical assistance. Armenia is to follow suit as it will be able to provide on its part by implementing anti-corruption measures, legal and judicial reforms, upholding the visa liberalization standards, economic cooperation, and other urgent European integration reforms. Although Armenia is in a uniquely dangerous situation today, it does not expect special treatment from the EU. But it does expect treatment similar to that given to the EaP frontrun-

> Armenia should mirror Georgia's experience by establishing a NATO information centre in the heart of Yerevan.

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ners for increased and tangible engagement. Armenia is getting ready and should be offered the EU Association agenda. The EU Parliament's recent Joint Motion for the Resolution demonstrates Armenia's readiness and advocates for closer ties between Armenia and the EU. Also, if Armenia and Azerbaijan are to move their relations towards an actual peace, there is no alternative to EU serving as the arbiter of the peace process.

Armenia is currently contemplating – and it should indeed – enhancing its cooperation with NATO, while also advocating for the inclusion of the Armenia-Azerbaijan agenda within United States-Turkey relations. In fact, Armenia should mirror Tbilisi's experience of establishing a NATO information and exchange centre in the heart of Yerevan, in Republic Square, to showcase an intention to move closer to the Alliance, one step at a time.

The highest-level Armenian authorities have expressed the country's readiness to enhance engagement and eventually pursue EU membership. In turn, the EU should continue providing support to Armenia, including on the security front. The EU's support for Armenia and its willingness to welcome the country into the European family will enhance the consistency and coherence of EU policy. This, in turn, will increase policy effectiveness, particularly in terms of stabilizing the South Caucasus region.

Armenia is ready for a new and transformative phase in the EU-Armenia relations. For Armenia there is no alternative to peace, and therefore to diversifying partnerships, a process that has been long in the making. For the EU, there should be no alternative but to provide the same opportunity for Armenia as it has given to Georgia, a country positioned in a similar context. The EU should unequivocally support Armenia in safeguarding and preserving its statehood, enabling it to withstand the threats and pressures emanating from Azerbaijan and Russia during the most challenging times in the country's modern history. The call for the EU to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Armenia is more urgent now than ever before. EE

Valentina Gevorgyan is an assistant professor at Yerevan State University, Department of Political Science.

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Ivanishvili's third coming

Georgian democracy ahead of elections

NINO CHANADIRI

As Georgia prepares for the 2024 parliamentary elections, it faces challenges that threaten the nation's already fragile democracy and undermine its pro-European stance. Given the problems of a fragmented opposition, overwhelming public distrust in political parties and the return of the pro-Russian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili on the political stage, the upcoming elections are expected to be a defining point for Georgia's democracy and European path.

Georgia, a country whose democratic system has been shaken lately, is now facing a critical test of its democracy as it gears up for the 2024 parliamentary elections. The elections will determine if the Georgian Dream (GD) party stays in power for a fourth term. The upcoming elections have become more important since Georgia received EU candidacy status in 2023. While a significant step towards the country's Europeanization, candidate status does not formally guarantee EU membership. Georgia must still fulfil the 12 priorities as outlined by the European Commission and secure deep democratic reforms, such as strengthening the rule of law, protecting vulnerable groups in society, implementing anti-corruption efforts and, most importantly, "de-oligarchization" measures that would limit the overwhelming influence of vested interests in public and political affairs.

Georgia's democratization will play an important role in its pursuit of EU membership and must be a priority for whoever is to become a decision-maker. Those

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elected must maintain the country's declared pro-western stance, especially in foreign policy. Thus, the key question is whether the current ruling party would firmly commit to both democratization and the pro-western agenda if it remains in power for the next four years.

Guess who's back, again

This year started with the not-so-surprising news that the oligarch and former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose overwhelming influence on Georgian politics is considered a challenge for the country's democracy-building, is returning to politics as the honorary chairman of the Georgian Dream party. Ivanishvili's party, GD, first rose to power in 2012, replacing the government led by the United National Movement party. Initially serving as prime minister, Ivanishvili expressed his intentions to leave politics very early. In 2013 he finally resigned and was replaced by Irakli Garibashvili. In 2018 Ivanishvili made his first political comeback by retaking the leadership of the party. He cited several reasons for his decision, including the failure of anti-poverty measures, the presence of "destructive opposition movements", and internal instability within the party. Moreover, 2018 marked the year of the presidential elections in Georgia during which both GD and Ivanishvili supported the candidacy of Salome Zourabichvili. Despite the recent growing differences between Georgian Dream and Zourabichvili, Ivanishvili's endorsement in the past mobilised many voters, ultimately making her victory possible.

> The demand for "de-oligarchization" in the EU's 12 priorities is likely to limit Ivanishvili's influence over Georgian politics.

In 2021 Ivanishvili left politics again, claiming it was for good. Two years later, on December 30th 2023, he officially announced his "third coming" in politics and formally became the party's main political advisor. He explained his decision by stating his intention to protect the party from "human seductions" and emphasized that "consultations with just two or three leaders will no longer be sufficient."

Opposition parties and western partners never questioned Ivanishvili's role in the Georgian Dream party or his significant influence over the government. Many believe that the demand for "de-oligarchization" was added to the EU's 12 priorities to limit Ivanishvili's influence over Georgian politics, even during periods when he was formally inactive as a politician. Ivanishvili's "consultations" with party figures proved that he never stopped being involved in decision-making. Despite his official return to politics as an advisor, it is unlikely that Ivanishvili's public image as

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Photo: Evannovostro / Shutterstock

Georgian and EU flags flying at Europe Square in Tbilisi. The upcoming parliamentary elections are of critical importance for Georgia's democratic developments, especially since Georgia received EU candidacy status in 2023.

an oligarch will change. His role within the party is often seen less as offering advice and more as giving orders which, given the current dynamics within GD, are unlikely to be challenged.

Why now?

There are generally two contrasting opinions on the reasons for Ivanishvili's comeback. First is that he wants to influence the parliamentary elections in October 2024. According to this view, Ivanishvili wants to show to the decreasing number of GD voters that he remains the party's main figure. Thus, supporting GD means supporting him personally. Strategically, this would mean uniting voters who may have been dissatisfied with other party leaders when Ivanishvili was ruling from the shadows.

The second opinion for Ivanishvili's return is to tighten Russian control over the country. Ivanishvili is widely considered by his opponents as a "man of Moscow". Hence, his comeback is seen as Russia's attempt to maintain control over Georgia

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by ensuring that a friendly government remains in power and sabotaging further steps toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Yet, Ivanishvili's alignment with Russia is not without contradictions. For instance, in 2023 GD tried to pass the "Russian law on foreign agents" which could have significantly weakened civil society. The move sparked widespread protests in the country which forced the government to drop the law, leaving Moscow disappointed and raising doubts over Ivanishvili's unwavering loyalty to Russia.

Ivanishvili's comeback brought about governmental changes in Georgia, which were often linked to his personal preferences concerning party leaders. Irakli Kobakhidze, a former leading figure, replaced former Prime Minister Gharibashvili. Given that Kobakhidze is widely unappreciated by the public, it is not expected for him to take serious steps against societal polarization, which is another issue prioritized by the EU. Finally, very few believe that either Gharibashvili or Kobakhidze have had any autonomy in decision-making in relation to Ivanishvili's influence, so this change in the government is unlikely to be a serious turning point for the country.

> Ivanishvili's comeback may be seen as Russia's attempt to maintain control over Georgia.

As the elections get closer, GD will start campaigning. There is no doubt that Ivanishvili will use all the resources at his disposal to ensure the success of those who were loyal to him. This time, it might not be just GD who receives the oligarch's support. In recent years, various smaller parties with clearly anti-western and often pro-Russian stances such as Power of People have emerged. Members of such parties are usually former GD members. In addition, there are several pro-Russian right-wing movements, believed to be backed by the government as counter-movements to anti-government demonstrations. It is expected that the oligarch and other GD members may try to empower these groups as part of growing their support base before the elections.

The opposition and public opinion

The opposition has met Ivanishvili's return to politics with less surprise. It is widely believed that, overtly or not, he is behind the Georgian Dream – the party they all are competing against. Therefore, the opposition calls for a fight against the oligarch regime. Dismantling the oligarch regime would send a powerful signal that the country is back on the path of Europeanization. In this regard, the major political oppositional pro-western parties, such as the United National Movement, Lelo, Strategy Agmashenebeli, Girchi and Droa, believe that the Georgian

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Dream has been undermining the country's strategic foreign policy course. They argue that EU candidacy status is an achievement of the Georgian people, particularly the youth, who have shown unwavering support and commitment to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path.

It is no secret that the opposition in Georgia faces multiple challenges in terms of resources, internal stability and public trust. It is also clear that no party alone can secure a majority, so creating coalitions would be a more clever move. However, for that to happen, they must share a common aim and rally around the same values. This can be challenging, as is the case with the UNM, which has an implicit association with former Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili. Previous experience shows that not everyone feels comfortable with being associated with him, even indirectly, due to the different perceptions of his political legacy. While some view him as the founder of the modern Georgian state, others see him as another authoritarian leader or are simply unsure. Saakashvili's influence over the party should decrease for cooperation to be successful. However, limiting Saakashvili's authority within the party is yet another challenge, because of the deep-rooted support he still holds among the party electorate. It is also noteworthy that UNM also experienced divisions and now when the elections are close, those who are no longer within the party lines are creating new parties in coalition with those public figures who are clearly against the oligarch regime, like Nika Gvaramia, the public figure associated with the creation of one of the main opposition media channel Mtavari Arkhi. Recently he joined those who distanced themselves from the UNM and announced the creation of new party called Ahali. This means that this election will see a diversity of opposition political powers, but at the same time the need for them to find common aims for cooperation to ensure that the GD does not use the fragmentation of the opposition for its gains.

One of the biggest problems of pre-election Georgia is the mistrust of the public towards political parties.

One of the biggest problems of pre-election Georgia is the mistrust of the public towards political parties. Recent statistics highlight this trend, revealing that 62 per cent of voters said that no party represented their interests, showing a huge gap between societal needs and party offerings, or at least the public's perception of them. It is also noteworthy that more than 40 per cent of the population lacks a clear idea of which party to support. The number of those who are currently hesitating is large. On the one hand, this presents an opportunity for opposition parties to gather more votes. On the other hand, it poses a challenge, as they will need to prove greater reliability than the GD-led government and possibly adopt a more realistic and result-oriented strategy. Given that the GD's agenda has been

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marked by populism and unfulfilled promises on various fronts, the opposition parties must be able to show the public that they can achieve their goals even if the public currently does not see it that way.

Looking ahead

This year is rightfully expected to be a hot year in Georgia due to the parliamentary elections. Parties are still in the early stages of their electoral campaigns, with the active phase likely to begin in the summer. It is already evident that the GD and Ivanishvili will be using all the resources at their disposal to maintain their grip on power. Ivanishvili's "third coming" signals the Georgian Dream's intent to consolidate support around him. His return and potential continuation of the GD's governance are associated with Russia's long-lasting interests in undermining Georgia's European vector. It is expected that the fourth term of a GD government could hijack an already fragile democracy in the country.

At the same time, the opposition parties, far from being strong and united, need to work among themselves to gain public support. This presents a formidable challenge, particularly in light of the prevailing public distrust and hesitation regarding political parties. Therefore, the success of their campaigns hinges not only on how realistic their plans are but also on internal cohesion and the ability to show the public that, in a coalition, they have enough resources to promote democratic reforms and advocate for the country's EU integration. EE

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

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Is Abkhazia being absorbed by Russia?

MAMUKA KOMAKHIA

After the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Moscow recognized the independence of the separatist regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. After the recognition, Moscow pursued relations with both regions, which Georgia considers to be occupied by Russia, as those with equal states. Moscow took into account the sentiments of the local population and the political elite in the occupied regions, especially in Abkhazia, and refrained from intense pressure. However, after the start of Russia's full-scale military aggression in Ukraine in 2022, Moscow's attitude has changed.

Before the August 2008 war, Moscow formally recognized the territorial integrity of Georgia and refrained from relations with the separatist regions at the official level. It was only after the August war when the situation changed. Russia recognized the independence of both regions, after which Moscow's influence over Sokhumi (the capital of occupied Abkhazia) and Tskhinvali (the capital of the occupied Tskhinvali region) increased in all directions. In particular, the fourth and seventh military bases of the Russian defence ministry and Federal Security Service's border service were established to ensure the security of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. The budget and economic life of the occupied regions are also completely dependent on Russia.

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Changing relations

In the case of the Tskhinvali region, the population and the local political elite are in favour of joining Russia and support full integration into the legal and political-economic space of Russia. At the same time, the situation is different in Abkhazia. There, the local elite supports strategic relations with Moscow, but strives to strengthen their own "statehood" and "sovereignty" and are against further integration into the Russian legal and political system. On November 12th 2020, shortly after the end of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, Moscow and Sokhumi signed a "programme for the formation of a single socio-economic space". Yet, some of the requirements of the programme were perceived by Abkhazia as a loss of its "sovereignty" and did not arouse much enthusiasm. In this regard, Moscow took into account local sentiments and avoided excessive pressure. However, the war in Ukraine changed the nature of the relations between Moscow and Sokhumi. Russia's military campaign in Ukraine and the protracted war have presented Moscow with several challenges that have also affected its attitude toward the occupied regions.

An interesting entry appeared in Russia's new foreign policy concept, which was published on March 31st 2023. Whereas in the 2013 and 2016 concepts Russia's priority was to "promote the establishment of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region as modern democratic states", the 2023 concept attaches importance to providing support to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in "implementing of the voluntary choice of the peoples of these states in favour of deepening integration with Russia". The appearance of the word integration in the concept may indicate that it is in Moscow's interests to integrate the occupied regions into Russia's political, economic or legal space, instead of promoting their development into independent states, as was the case in previous concepts. The use of the word integration in bilateral relations has raised some doubts in Abkhazia about Moscow's real intentions. Recently, such issues have come to the fore in bilateral relations, which caused disagreements and internal political protests in Abkhazia. They did not take an openly anti-Russian character. However, they created a negative attitude towards Russia's actions among a part of society.

> The Abkhazian elite supports strategic relations with Moscow, but are against integration into the Russian legal and political system.

The most controversial issue that has divided the Abkhaz society into two parts is related to the so-called law on "foreign agents". The ultimate goal of the law is to reduce the influence of western organizations in Abkhazia and to establish full control over the activities of local non-governmental organizations. No one doubts in Abkhazia that this is at Moscow's request, as the law was also in the programme

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on the formation of a common socio-economic space. The de facto government has subsequently refrained from fulfilling this request.

The local civil sector in Abkhazia became a more or less accountable force, one which has actively participated in important developments that have taken place in Abkhazia over the past three decades, with the support of international organizations. After the appointment of Inal Ardzinba, a former senior official of the Russian presidential administration, as the de facto foreign minister in November 2021, the activities of international organizations and non-governmental organizations in the occupied region were threatened. Ardzinba set a priority to adopt a law similar to the Russian law on "foreign agents".

Due to internal resistance, including the different opinions among the de facto government, the last two years have not been particularly successful, although in recent months several decisions have been made that will limit the activities of international organizations. On November 20th 2023, the de facto president, Aslan Bzhania, signed an order which, according to supporters of the decision, "ensures the transparency of the activities of international organizations, the sovereignty and national security of Abkhazia". Shortly after, in February 2024, a discussion of the law on "foreign agents" was resumed. The de facto government attributes the need for the law to its strategic alliance with Russia. In their opinion, in the spirit of alliance, they should act as allies and not allow, for example, USAID and the European Union to implement projects in Abkhazia that meet the political objectives of Georgia and are directed against the interests of Russia. Given the increased pressure from Russia, there is a high probability that the law will be adopted shortly, which will not only be a heavy blow to local civil society but will also negatively affect the socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Abkhazia, as most of the projects refer to these spheres.

Real estate and fears of losing sovereignty

The first visible example of Russia's pressure was recorded on December 27th 2023, when the so-called "night parliament" (the de facto parliament was convened for an emergency meeting at night) transferred the ownership of the favourite vacation spot of Soviet leaders, the so-called Bichvinta State Country House and its adjacent territory and sea area, to the Russian Federal Security Service on a 49-year lease. The issue has been debated for many years but has recently become particularly acute. The de facto government was under double pressure: Russia demanded the transfer of the country house while part of the society and the local political elite opposed the transfer. They accused the de facto government of losing "sover-

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eignty" and selling "Abkhazian land", while the de facto government blamed its opponents for fomenting anti-Russian sentiments and receiving funding from abroad.

In Abkhazia, they fear that the transfer of the country house is the beginning of a new process which may lead to the transfer of other objects located in Abkhazia to Russia. In this regard, the issue of the transfer of real estate (apartments and apart-hotels) to citizens of foreign countries (mainly Russian citizens) should be singled out. Opponents fear that the de facto government, citing the need to develop tourism and attract investments, is trying to grant people abroad who are wealthier than locals the right to buy property on the territory of Abkhazia. In Abkhazia, they suspect that the de facto parliament will start discussing this issue soon.

According to opponents, the sale of Abkhaz lands and the settlement of foreigners will lead to the assimilation of the locals and a change in the demographic picture. The figures show that the construction of up to 30,000 apartments will lead to the settlement of 100,000 foreign citizens in Abkhazia by 2035 (according to de facto government data for 2020, only 51 per cent of Abkhazia's 245,000 residents are ethnic Abkhaz).

The possible transfer of energy infrastructure to Russia is also being discussed in the context of the weakening sovereignty of Abkhazia. In recent years, Abkhazia, which consumes almost as much electricity as Tbilisi and is home to more than one million people, has experienced continual electricity shortages. Electricity generated by the Enguri hydro-power plant (the dam is located on territory controlled by the Georgian central government while its control panel is in the occupied region) is consumed jointly by the Georgian and Abkhaz sides and is insufficient to meet Abkhazia's needs. Abkhazia subsequently needs to receive electricity from Russia. The de facto government considers rebuilding the energy sector and attracting investment as the only way out of this predicament, which is believed to be impossible without Russia's involvement. On the other hand, without transferring ownership of the energy infrastructure, Russia is not going to selflessly continue its assistance. The ongoing energy crisis in Abkhazia and delays in electricity supplies from Russia are a signal to Sokhumi that it is necessary to make a timely decision regarding this issue.

Why does Russia need Abkhaz infrastructure?

After 2022 Russia's interest in the transport infrastructure of Abkhazia has significantly increased, which should be viewed in economic and military terms. Although the capacity of Abkhazia's infrastructure is limited, it has still acquired a certain importance under the western sanctions imposed on Russia. Recently, rail-

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way shipments on the territory of Abkhazia have increased significantly, which is probably related to Russia's increased interest in Abkhazia's transit potential. In 2023, up to 14,000 wagons were delivered to Abkhazia by rail while there were only 3,517 wagons in 2020. On March 23rd 2023, the first container train arrived in Abkhazia. The Russian company SMARTLOG carried out the container shipment. Reportedly, the cargo came from the direction of Turkey.

High-ranking Russian officials have openly expressed their interest in the transit potential of occupied Abkhazia. For example, on May 12th 2023, in an interview with the Russian media, the president of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Sergey Katirin, speaking about the prospects of Georgian-Russian relations, said that rail transit should be planned within the framework of the Silk Road route, which covers China, Iran, Azerbaijan and Georgia, including the territory of Abkhazia. At this stage, the prospect of realizing the project seems less realis-

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tic due to the geopolitical challenges. However, the fact that Russia considers the South Caucasus and occupied Abkhazia as an alternative route in the face of its confrontation with the West is important.

A Russian company will also restore Sokhumi Airport, which has not functioned since the end of the Abkhaz war in 1993. The owner of the company is Rashid Nurgaliyev, the son of the deputy secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Rashid Nurgaliyev, who supervises the direction of the occupied regions. Even if the airport is put into operation, international flights from Sokhumi will not be possible since the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) abolished the airport code there in 2006. Flights will only be carried out by those Russian companies which operate only within Russia. The interest in the reconstruction of the airport can be explained by the international sanctions imposed on Russia, restricting flights from Russia in many directions. Abkhazia is one of the most outstanding tourist destinations for Russia where over one million Russian tourists arrive by land every year.

Russia seeks to restore the Sokhumi Airport, which has not functioned since the end of the Abkhaz war in 1993.

The most noteworthy infrastructure issue relates to the opening of a permanent base of the Russian navy in Ochamchire, which Aslan Bzhania announced on October 4th 2023 after a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Sochi. Border patrol vessels of the Russian Federal Security Service stationed in the port of Ochamchire since 2009 ensure the maritime security of occupied Abkhazia. Satellite images published by the BBC reveal that some infrastructural changes have already been made to the port since 2022.

The issue of opening the Russian base in Ochamchire is noteworthy in light of the ongoing military aggression in Ukraine. Reportedly, part of the fleet has been transferred to the ports of Novorossiysk and Feodosia (located in Crimea). Considering that even these ports are vulnerable to Ukrainian long-range weapons, the port of Ochamchire can become a new safe wharf for the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Although it is currently impossible to receive large ships there, the existing infrastructure of the port still allows Russia to conduct relatively small-scale tactical and special military and naval operations. Ukraine also made a statement that they will not refrain from attacking Russian military ships in Ochamchire.

Why did Russia change its approach?

Russia's full-scale military aggression in Ukraine has changed Moscow's attitude towards the occupied regions of Georgia, especially Abkhazia. Against the backdrop

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of sanctions and confrontations with the West, Moscow has to adapt to a new reality, which is also reflected in its policy towards Abkhazia. The change in Russia's approach and increased pressure on Sokhumi can be explained by several factors.

First, Moscow views the Russian-Ukrainian war in the context of confrontation with the West. For Russia's authoritarian ruler, victory in this war is an existential issue in which he is hampered by the West. The degree of conflict between the two is so high that Russia no longer tolerates the activities of western organizations in its sphere of influence, which Moscow believes are engaged in anti-Russian activities. Accordingly, Moscow is demanding that the de facto government of Abkhazia restrict the activities of "hostile" western organizations.

Second, according to Moscow, Russia helped Abkhazia "to its feet" and has done a lot for its "independence", even sacrificing the blood of Russian soldiers. Consequently, the transfer of the Bichvinta State House to Russia should be a sign of appreciation from the Abkhaz side. In addition, if the population of Abkhazia, which also includes a significant percentage of Russian citizens, can buy real estate in Russia, the same right should be granted to Russian citizens in Abkhazia.

Finally, Russia's interest in the transport infrastructure of Abkhazia is driven by the desire to circumvent western sanctions and create an additional secure naval base. Although resources for the expansion of Abkhaz infrastructure are limited, all options are acceptable to Moscow based on the current situation. Therefore, Russia's interest in the infrastructure of Abkhazia should be expected to increase in the short run.

Abkhazia, like the Tskhinvali region, is completely dependent on Russia. However, for Sokhumi, unlike Tskhinvali, it is important to develop a strategic alliance with Russia in such a way that it does not lose its "sovereignty" and retains a certain degree of "independence". While so far, the de facto government of Abkhazia has been more or less capable of failing to meet some of Moscow's requests in light of Russia's ongoing military aggression in Ukraine, Sokhumi has less and less room for manoeuvre. Recent and expected concessions indicate that the further strengthening of Russia's influence in occupied Abkhazia by weakening its "sovereignty" is an ongoing process. EE

Mamuka Komakhia is a senior fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation) and a lecturer at the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. His areas of expertise include the occupied regions of Georgia, politics of post-Soviet states, energy politics, and ethnic minorities.

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Occupiers declare war against Georgian language in Abkhazia

TAMUNA SHONIA

According to data from 2020, about 225,000 people live in the territory of Abkhazia. Of these, 47,000 are ethnic Georgians and most of them, about 45,000, live in the Gali region. Yet, as of today, no Georgian-language school is functioning in occupied Abkhazia.

Since the beginning of the past school year, teaching in Georgian in Georgian-language schools in Gali (in occupied Abkhazia) has been stopped, and education will now be conducted in Russian. Seventeen-year-old Natia K. is an 11th grade student of one of the schools in the low-lying area of Gali. Since September 1st, she has been taught Georgian as a foreign language at school.

"We are all happy to go to school here, because it is the only place where we can gather. However, I don't really enjoy school I feel humiliated. It would have been much better if I had graduated from school. in Georgian last year because now we are no longer allowed to use the Georgian language," Natia says.

According to the decision of the de facto ministry of education of occupied Abkhazia, the teaching of Georgian in the schools of the Gali district has been banned up to the 11th grade. The Abkhazian side made this decision in 2015, and the implementation process has been ongoing until now. The reduction of Georgian language schools started in 1994, after the war in 1992–93. For example, before the war, more than 50 Georgian schools functioned in the Gali region. Since 2015 this number has been decreased to 11. From this period on, according to the

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decision of the de-facto government of Abkhazia, the change started mainly from the primary grades, and teaching in schools gradually moved to the Russian language. The Gali region of occupied Abkhazia is mainly inhabited by a Georgian-speaking population.

Russification process

According to Abkhazian data from 2020, about 225,000 people live on the territory of Abkhazia. Of these, 47,000 are ethnic Georgians and most of them, about 45,000, live in the Gali region. In addition, 41,000 Armenians, up to 3,000 Russians and 89,000 Abkhazians live in the region. As of today, no Georgian-language school is functioning in occupied Abkhazia. According to sources, teaching is conducted in the Abkhaz language in 50 schools, in Abkhaz and Russian in 45 schools, and in 25 schools teaching is done in Armenian.

Paata Zakareishvili, a former minister of Georgia for reconciliation, in a conversation with us, says that it is very painful when the Abkhazian society does not understand the ongoing process of Russification in Gali. "The process of the Russification of Gali will work against the Abkhazians. The de facto governor of Gali region, Konstantine Pilia, clearly says that it is a wrong policy to restrict the rights of the Georgian population in Abkhazia. This is an absolutely wrong and counterproductive attempt to deprive the residents of Gali of the Georgian language, because the rest of Georgia is at the very least next to it. Georgia has its own culture and influence, media, internet, educational system, books, etc. Thus, it is impossible to replace the Georgian language and consciousness with something as distant as the Russian consciousness. In the end, no Russification will happen," Zakareishvili says. According to him, in the worst case that could happen, people will leave Gali and it will remain just as empty as Ochamchire is today.

"The young people will leave the region and the old people will grow old, may God grant them long life, but they will die and Gali will become empty. They will abandon Gali, this beautiful region, which is a boon for the economy and for everything in general," says Zakareishvili. As Zakareishvili states, when he was an official, he used to say loudly, and he still thinks the same, that the salary of Georgian teachers in Abkhazia should be doubled.

We were able to contact some teachers living there by phone. Those left without hope believe that this event has become equivalent to a war against ethnic Georgians: "Of course, all this is dangerous, both for students and for us, teachers. At school, we have to communicate with each other in the Mingrelian language (a minority language) and Russian … children are confused about all the languages. In

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addition to Abkhazian, which is taught, all lessons are in Russian, and additionally English and Georgian as foreign languages," says one of the schoolteachers, Nino. According to her, it is difficult for her child to speak and think in Georgian, even though they only speak Georgian at home.

"All I'm saying is that becoming a Russian apparently doesn't take much effort, unfortunately, this is a bitter reality that we are powerless to deal with … The Georgian authorities were deeply concerned, as they usually are, however, no one reached out to us at all. This process began years ago. We are forgotten by everyone," the teacher adds.

"Our work is intense, the children are also in a very bad condition, it is very difficult to all of a sudden learn all subjects in the Russian language, both for them as well as for the teachers."

Holding on to Georgianness

Tsiala, a history teacher, has been working at the school for 46 years. She taught at a school near the border during the war and soon after the end of the war she returned to her village in the Gali region. According to her, what is happening now in the Gali region, regarding the banning of the Georgian language, is unacceptable and alarming for everyone.

"In 2015, the Russian non-governmental organization 'Rus-cooperation' was founded in Abkhazia, their goal was to strengthen the teaching of the Russian language not only in the Gali region, but also in the entire territory of Abkhazia. The first thing they did was to go to the Georgian-language schools in Gali, retrain the teachers and open the Russian language classrooms, bring in and distribute literature, and from there they purposefully started rooting out the Georgian language," Tsiala says.

Another problem that Georgians living in Abkhazia often talk about is the lack of documents. The so-called residence certificate and Abkhazian passport were forcefully given to ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia. Without these documents their movement was temporarily limited on the border.

In order to learn more about this, we contacted L.K., a resident of one of the villages in the low-lying area of Gali. "According to the latest data, about 27,000 Georgians have received a residence permit, but since the residence permit has a certain term, five years, those whose certificate has expired, have faced problems, because it takes some time to get a new one, and during this period they are unable to move beyond the region. It turns out that we are being forced to take Abkhazian passports en masse. I have information that about 7,000 Abkhazian pass-

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ports have been issued to Georgians. All this is aimed at expelling the Georgian consciousness from Abkhazia," he told us.

"For example, if in 1993 we were expelled by force, then in 1998, this process was repeated again, and the people whose houses were burnt down twice still returned arbitrarily and started their lives from scratch. The Abkhazians and Russians realized that they can't get rid of us by force, and they surrounded us in this way. Yes, now no one will burn down your house, no one will kill you, but they are taking away the most important thing from us, the ability to think in Georgian. This is the most dangerous and insidious way," he said.

"I will give a small example, today 45,000 Armenians live in Abkhazia, and they have 25 schools in the Armenian language, at the same time 45,000 Georgians live in Abkhazia, and we do not have a single Georgian-language school. Our story should be heard by the whole world, that such inhumane conditions were created for us, they took away the right to teach in our native language, and soon they will ban us from speaking Georgian among ourselves."

As a mother of three, 47-year-old Tamila, like other parents, is concerned with this problem. "In whatever language a person studies, they get used to thinking in that language, because we had 11 Georgian schools, children studied all subjects in Georgian, in such a situation whether the Abkhazians and Russians wanted it or not, Georgian thinking and consciousness was formed in children," she said during our conversation. According to her, when you are restricted from studying in your native language and human rights are completely violated in this way, it is impossible to find any kind of excuse to stay in Abkhazia.

Tea Akhvlediani, the Georgian state minister for reconciliation, said that despite the appeals of the Georgian government and the international community, the fundamental rights of the population living in the occupied Gali region, including obtaining education in their native language, continue to be grossly violated. "This contradicts the basic norms and principles of international law. Such illegal actions represent the continuation of the policy of ethnic discrimination and Russification carried out by the Russian occupation regime for many years, which aims to destroy the Georgian traces in the occupied territory and assimilate the population," Akhvlediani says. EE

This text was published as part of the special competition of the Women Reporters Academy – a project which brings together female journalists and media workers from Eastern Europe.

Tamuna Shonia is a Georgian journalist. She has worked for various media outlets and international organizations, including the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), where she focused on social, economic and conflict-related issues.

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Constant escape

How women live in Khurcha, near the occupation line

MANANA KVELIASHVILI

The war in Abkhazia began in August 1992 and lasted for 13 months. By the end of the war, Georgia had 300,000 internally displaced people. Today, Abkhazia is recognized as occupied and the Russian occupation army is stationed there. The people living on both sides of the de facto dividing line are friends and relatives, but now they cannot meet or rarely manage to see each other, as Eliso Shamatava explains through her experiences.

"Eighty-five families live in the village of Khurcha. At least one person from almost each household has emigrated. My son is also gone. He took a gap year at the university and left to work in Poland. We, women living along the dividing line, work. But when we want to sell produce at the Zugdidi market, we are not allowed to take it with us on the municipal bus. We have to hire a taxi. This is how we live here," says 52-year-old Eliso Shamatava from Khurcha in Georgia, who tells us about the specifics of living along the administrative boundary line.

Shamatava is originally from the village of Okumi, Gali District, in occupied Abkhazia. She was 19 years old when she became an internally displaced person. Later she started a family and settled in Khurcha. Here, Eliso tells her life story, which she describes as a story of constant running, fighting and refusing to give up.

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Khurcha

I settled in Khurcha in 1997. I started a family. I had not been there long when the events of May 1998 took place in Gali [a military clash between Abkhazian soldiers and Georgian rebels that lasted for six days]. I was at home when the shooting started. My daughter, Mariam, was seven months old. I was told that the Russians were coming and I had to take my daughter and run away. I quickly picked up the baby, grabbed some diapers and ran towards the Enguri river.

Cars were rushing and cattle were running. A man was walking with his bicycle in front of me. The noise was terrible. Cattle were howling. Suddenly, the man dropped his bicycle, screamed, and ran towards the bushes. It was so noisy I couldn't understand what was happening. I looked back and saw a military truck approaching, full of armed people. I was there with my baby – I pressed her against my belly and hid in a bush. "Even if they shoot me, the child will survive" I thought. The car passed by without shooting. This made me lose all my strength. I could not pick up the baby anymore. I barely got up and saw that my child was bleeding.

I was holding her by her t-shirt. I could feel that she was slipping out of my hands. The baby was gripping me with her bloody hands. I started walking slowly towards the bridge and I could feel myself losing strength. Suddenly I saw a boy. He told me he would take the child to help so I could cross the bridge. I was walking and thinking about who he was, an unknown person holding my daughter. I had heard that a bullet could hit you without you even feeling it. I was thinking that me and the child were probably shot. I barely managed to cross the river. I was looking for my child. Then I found her and I sat down. Soon some old ladies came. They told me that I had to somehow brace up and pick up my baby, because she was crying. I looked at the child and the blood was gone. Apparently, there were thorns in the bushes where I was hiding. It turns out a thorn caught her ear and drew a lot of blood. She also scratched herself. The ladies cleaned her up. I will remember this moment until the day I die, the fear I felt. Fear can erode one's strength to the point they can't stand on their feet.

> "I was told that the Russians were coming and I had to take my daughter and run away."

This experience affected us physically and psychologically. It was very hard. I am trying to forget this, for the sake of my family and my children, but it is very hard when you remember all of this. I have three children and one grandchild. The children are now grown-up and they recall that they were the most scared when their mum turned pale. I used to turn pale whenever I would get angry. I was probably stressed. The simplest things would make me turn pale. We have never received any

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kind of psychological help. Unsurprisingly, the kids raised by the parents of those times were a little aggressive. I could restrain myself but not many people could. They started families, but the simplest things would make them angry. A mother's anger tends to be directed towards the children. We probably needed the help of a psychologist the most. They say men and women are equal in raising children, even in the time of war. They are not. It is a lie. It is now that young mothers and fathers take care of their children equally, but that is not the case everywhere.

"This experience affected us physically and psychologically. It was very hard."

Women and men are not equal, from the very beginning a woman has been responsible for everything. I once heard that if an unwise man marries a brave and intelligent woman, they will surely have smart children. Why? Because everything is passed down from the maternal line. The father is a provider; the mother is everything else. Both in the family and at work. A woman is everything in the family. In my case, I was always with the children. Whatever it was. Their father was providing for the family. That's it. Everything else was up to me. What does it mean to raise a child during a war? I was buying overalls all the time. The reasoning? If we needed to escape, we wouldn't need to take a lot of clothes. Diapers and overalls. These were the main items. If I suddenly found myself on the streets, I would still have my child protected. When my children grew up, I started donating their clothes and overalls that were never-ending. I gave away so many…

The war that took away our youth

I am originally from the village of Okumi in the Gali district. During the war, we lived in the city of Gali. I remember everything. It is truly disheartening that exactly when we should have been choosing our life paths, determining our futures, we found ourselves fighting for our existence. Fighting for existence was the most important thing. And the dream of studying, education, choosing life just remained a dream for young people of our age. When we started families, we went straight to being responsible adults. Our lives were wasted away trying to justify the responsibilities. The family burden should not bring shame, you should raise your children well and so on.

Our childhood ended suddenly. The period of youth has been erased from our lives. We missed out on our youth. It is very disheartening. All the young people of my generation … someone managed to do something, but it was a handful of people who were lucky. For that period, very few were lucky. Most of the people I

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Photo: Manana Kveliashvili

A small bridge over the Enguri river connecting the villages of Koki and Khurcha. There are only 85 households left in Khurcha, and no family is without at least one member who has emigrated.

knew and those who have been around me, without exception, went straight from childhood to adult responsibilities.

The yearning of that period sometimes comes back to us even now – contemplating what could have been. But back then the struggle for survival overshadowed everything. I had parents, siblings and family. When you are left without a roof over your head, without anything, you forget about everything else. You could have the right path in front of you and not notice it. That is what happened to my generation. My generation could have had their path in front of them, they could have done something with their lives, but they were preoccupied with survival and they missed out on their youth.

It is difficult to talk about that period. Even now, euphoria and some kind of heat comes back to me, making it very difficult for me to remember. When the war started, I was in Gali. My mother had a car, she was a proactive woman, a civil servant. She came home and said that the war had begun. We were children, the war was somewhere far away – in Africa or somewhere near Fidel Castro. Now it was here.

The fact that an Abkhazian could shoot you was incomprehensible. We all got into the car and drove to the centre of Gali. It was chaotic. People were sitting in the buses. Someone said Abkhazians had already reached the Ghalidzga river and were exchanging fire. Looking back now, I think how naïve people were. No one expected Abkhazians to shoot. We went to Ghalidzga. Columns of cars moved

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along. When we arrived, there were two buses and a big car in front of us. Suddenly the shooting started. The headlights of the buses lit up the bridge. Suddenly we saw two boys running.

One squinted and suddenly something scattered like dust. He started screaming – they killed him. My mother covered my eyes, pushed me into the car, turned it around and drove three to four kilometres away from that place. Nuri Shamatava and Tutuli Ekhvaia – these were the ones who were killed that day. Their bodies were laid to rest in the centre of Gali. I was a kid, 18 or 19 years old. I cannot describe that night. I remember and that's it. Something terrible began there. I will never forget that night.

Life in Khurcha, along the dividing line

We are farmers. My house is a little far from the dividing line [which de facto runs between Abkhazia and Georgia], but I have relatives who live by the water. Their routine is about safeguarding their surroundings, making sure that few family members are on the other side. Only on this side is protection. The goal is to bring everything here, away from the dividing line. Children should be on the front side, playing there. The bedroom should be on the front side. At the back side, which often borders the dividing line, there could be a pantry or something more practical. The side with the dividing line is now split, blocked and sealed. This is our daily concern. We work very hard harvesting vegetables, raising cattle, poultry … that is how we survive. I think our women are the toughest, because they are mobilized in every way. They do not even show the stress they have inside. It requires a lot of talent to hide this.

> "We work very hard harvesting vegetables, raising cattle, poultry … that is how we survive."

We try to buy as little as possible. We mainly buy products that are not available here, such as detergent or sugar. Almost everything we have can be grown. The worst thing is that if one of our cattle goes beyond the administrative line, that's it, our livelihood is lost. You cannot get it back. [The Russian border guards will arrest you if you try].

Our neighbour lost two cows. She depended upon them, she used to sell cheese. A whole year's work and you lose everything. I'm away from the dividing line and herd my cows on the other side. Those who live right next to the line have to get up early in the morning, drive their cows three or four kilometres away, and follow them around. When they make sure that the cows are safe, they leave. In the

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evening they have to walk four or five kilometres again to get their cattle back and make sure they did not end up on the Abkhazian side. That is also hard work.

Generally speaking, it is difficult to live in the village, and it is doubly difficult to work while at the same time thinking about your own safety. Then spending three to four hours thinking about where your cows are. That's stressful. That's why I say that our women are tough. Despite all the stress. You may come to their family and find them cheerful. They invite you in, they host you. You won't even notice how much work they're doing and how much stress they are under.

We have a new municipal bus, a rural bus for people to go to the city. We usually take something with us to sell there, but it is not allowed to carry extra luggage on the bus. Technically we are not allowed to take anything to the market to sell by municipal bus. We are only allowed to take a small bag that fits under the seat. Drivers turn a blind eye to one or two sacks. They are afraid of being fined, but they don't say anything. If there is a little more, they start pleading – please, don't do this to me! But everyone goes to the market.

We approached the municipality about this many times. Their answer was that this is municipal transport; it is for people. And it drives from the centre of the village. It does not go throughout the village. People have to walk a long way to get to the centre of the village. The bus has a schedule. Only one or two days a week it drives through the village districts. Sometimes it cannot enter some parts because there is no road. The bus often breaks down – apparently.

Little Khurcha in Italy

There are 85 households in Khurcha. There is no family without at least one member who has emigrated. There are probably five or six families who are in internal emigration. The rest have all gone abroad. Our women are in Italy. Sometimes we joke that they have founded a small Khurcha over there. When they have a day off, they get together and send pictures, you can see that the whole village is there. It is such a big picture, there is an entire army of women. They work there and support their families.

The men are in Poland or go to the Czech Republic in three-month intervals. The villagers help each other to get there. First one left, then he took the other one with him and so on. The same happened with the women. All of them are relatives, neighbours and they've helped each other to get there. At first, I was very surprised, how could they do it?! They left their children here with their parents and left. Little by little they made ends meet. Now they have their feet on the ground, but it is still difficult. When they come to visit, they can't manage to do everything

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during their stay. They are like a dog on a leash. They want to go everywhere, visit everyone, see everyone.

My son is in Poland. He is a student. He used to study international relations. When he finished the first year, he took a gap year and left. He is helping us from there. He could not work here. It was very difficult for us. When his father died, my brother-in-law started helping us. He lived in Ukraine, but it became difficult for him as well, and my son had to leave. It is very sad that he is wasting his youth. He should be having fun, but instead he is working and supporting us. It is very hard for me, but I don't show this to him. I might seem selfish, but sometimes I think that I would prefer him to lose a year or two rather than being burdened with something for the rest of his life. He is a young boy and he will cope with that. His father died and I cannot support him financially.

When someone, who is trapped to be killed, escapes, reaches a safe place, calms down and then stops – this is what I imagined when I heard your question. I am quiet now, but all my life I was ready to run away. All my life I was striving for something, going somewhere, trying to start. EE

This text was published as part of the special competition of the Women Reporters Academy – a project which brings together female journalists and media workers from Eastern Europe.

Manana Kveliashvili is a documentary filmmaker and journalist based in Georgia, boasting nearly two decades of experience in her field. Before becoming part of the *Batumeli Netgazeti* team in 2012, she collaborated with various local media organizations. Kveliashvili's work is dedicated to capturing real stories through powerful documentaries and addressing pressing social issues including gender equality, marginalized minority groups, women's labour, environmental concerns, poverty and the enduring legacy of Soviet repression in Georgia.

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It is time to take the improvement of the Ukraine-EU border seriously

LESIA DUBENKO

Since the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the country's border with the EU, particularly that with Poland, has been in the limelight for reasons both good and bad. While in recent months it mainly attracted attention due to the Polish farmers and freight carriers' blockade, the overall problems related to the Ukraine-EU border are far more complex and require a more comprehensive set of solutions.

When Polish President Andrzej Duda travelled to Kyiv at the height of Ukraine-Poland relations in May 2022, he talked mostly about Russia's aggression and the need to enhance cooperation. But he also touched upon another, no less important matter. Namely, that Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine which caused a massive exodus of people during a short period exposed the Ukraine-Poland border's subpar condition, adding that the border must "unite, not divide". This statement was warmly greeted in Ukraine, as by then the border had turned into the country's lifeline, with dozens of hubs created in bordering Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary to quickly process all sorts of critical supplies.

Fast forward to early 2024 and it appears that the Ukraine-EU border, the Polish part especially, is once again dividing, not uniting. Between November 2023 and January 2024, Polish freight carriers and farmers blocked checkpoints at the Ukraine-Poland border. Their Slovak counterparts resorted to similar methods next to bordering Transcarpathia. Though the protests seemed to have ended in Jan-

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uary, with the newly-elected Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski visiting Kyiv to pledge support, it took just several weeks for them to restart. Such a crisis in wartime has naturally caused an uproar – in each country for their own reasons. Yet, it should not be viewed as an isolated incident. Rather, it should be regarded as part of a bigger border narrative.

The tale of the problematic border

After 2007, when the former Central European Soviet satellites, most of which acceded to the EU as part of the "Big Bang" expansion in 2004, joined the Schengen Area, the border situation between Ukraine and its western neighbours changed dramatically. While Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, all of which share a border with Ukraine, have exponentially developed and modernized their infrastructure, Ukraine has not. For almost a decade after, this matter was largely left unattended to, despite Ukraine's hosting of the European Football Championships in 2012 alongside Poland, which saw a considerable influx of foreigners into the country, including via the land border. Many Ukrainians hesitated to travel westward, not least because of the need to obtain Schengen visas.

The Revolution of Dignity in late 2013 and early 2014 turned the tide. After Russia invaded eastern Ukraine and annexed Crimea, the country re-oriented politically towards the West. It quickly resulted in a change in societal dynamics as Russia, the chief destination for Ukrainian workers until 2014, was replaced by the Visegrad countries. With low-cost flights not as readily available at the time, the land border became a busy place. This is even more so given that it has been known for attracting local traders who would hop on a daily shuttle bus to sell goods like tobacco and alcohol at a premium. The introduction of the EU visa waiver for Ukrainian nationals in the summer of 2017 only increased the traffic to an already crowded space.

The Europe without Barriers (EWB) think-tank, headed by Iryna Sushko, who is one of the key persons behind Ukraine's success in the obtainment of the visa waiver, has been documenting these changes for almost a decade now. Together with her colleagues, she published various reports and articles on the subject – often involving Polish and other Visegrad organizations. The content of the reports has slightly varied over the years, reflecting progress with the border crossing experience. For example, after years of hurdles, the Ukrainian authorities managed to use a Polish loan to reconstruct three road parts leading to the border crossing points. In 2019 Ukraine also fleshed out the Integrated Border Management (IBM) Strategy, aligning with the European Union's policy of enhancing security

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and transparency on its external borders. In December 2023 the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers adopted the IBM Strategy's implementation plan for 2023–25. In the same year, Ukraine also secured 250 million euros from EU funds to finance projects aimed at improving the infrastructure of transport communication between Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. In 2024 Ukraine is gearing up to develop a new IBM Strategy and Action Plan that would contain better indicators and targets.

And yet, a series of major challenges remains unsolved. Among the most urgent ones are the insufficient number of checkpoints, even with the rollout of three additional ones after the launch of the full-scale war, as well as poor infrastructure and slow checks. The rail track width saga is a good example of that. Travellers using Ukraine-EU rail border crossings, unless they opt to change trains in Chełm or Przemyśl, should be well-prepared for the lengthy experience of having their train lifted in the air to change between Soviet-standard wheels and European ones. Moreover, the Schengen Border Code and some Ukrainian legislative norms are in some parts incompatible. The latter demands that joint control is carried out in line with the Schengen norms, which undermines Ukrainian law's principle to protect its citizens from being handed over to foreign authorities should such a situation take place. Hence, to alleviate the border crossers' plight, Ukraine and its EU neighbours are yet to implement joint control at all checkpoints except for Zosin, which operates under pre-Schengen era agreements.

In 2019 Ukraine prepared a strategy to align with EU policy on enhancing security and transparency on its external borders.

Pavlo Kravchuk, an expert with EWB who has long worked with this issue, says that despite the problems, some progress has been made over the years. He notes that the Ukrainian authorities announced in 2023 that they were finalizing a deal with Poland to pilot a joint control checkpoint, and that the agreements with Hungary and Slovakia were to be concluded shortly. There have also been changes in expediting and streamlining border crossing procedures and reducing corruption, especially in customs, although with mixed results. Examples include the launch of the e-queue and the New Computerized Transit System (NCTS). According to the recent analytical paper "Ukraine-Poland Border: Cooperation and Challenges" neither of these systems has shown major effectiveness. The e-queue, while helping to avoid congestion at the border crossing points, has been reportedly susceptible to malign practices that allow certain carriers to circumvent the system. Meanwhile, the NCTS's effect on expediting customs formalities at the border has turned out to be lesser than expected. Relevant actors have reported that the mechanism behind customs paperwork is currently underdeveloped.

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Blockade reveals uncomfortable truths

The significance of the Ukraine-EU border as a lifeline for the country at war well translates into numbers. In 2022 Poland became Ukraine's main trade partner, making up 15.1 per cent of Ukrainian exports, equivalent to 6.7 billion US dollars. In terms of imports, Poland ranked second, making up ten per cent of the total import volume, amounting to 5.5 billion dollars. Poland's share in the total volume of Ukraine's merchandise turnover stood at 12.2 per cent. On average, half of the 3.9 million instances of private border crossings also take place via the Polish-Ukrainian border.

With no air or sea travel routes available, the Ukraine-EU border has become the only way for the country to keep its fragile economy afloat, especially after Russia's decision in 2023 to kill the grain deal that previously allowed the secure export of Ukrainian crops via the Black Sea. While some progress has been made in restoring alternative trade routes, according to Taras Kachka, Ukraine's deputy minister of economy and trade, the land border will remain the most important one. This is even more so if Russia continues its advances, potentially cutting off Ukraine from the Black Sea entirely in the worst-case scenario. For these very reasons, the blockade that was sparked by a series of protests in Warsaw and political turmoil after the parliamentary elections in October 2023 turned out to be devastating.

On November 6th 2023 freight carriers decided to block the movement of freight vehicles next to the Dorohusk-Yagodyn, Hrebenne-Rava Ruska, and Korchova-Krakivets checkpoints on the Polish-Ukrainian border. The organizers demanded that the parties suspend the Ukraine-EU Agreement, which aimed to liberalize the transport of freight by road and was introduced in 2022 to facilitate the movement of goods. They claimed that Ukrainian companies forced Polish ones out of the European market, leading to unfair competition.

> Trade via the Ukraine-EU land border has become the only way for the country to keep its fragile economy afloat.

Meanwhile, representatives of the *Oszukana Wieś* ("Deceived Village") farmer organization blocked the fourth freight carrier checkpoint in Shehyni-Medyka. Shortly after, several Slovak organizations also carried out protests, blocking movement at the Uzhhorod-Vyšné Nemecké checkpoint three times over several days. Similarly, their main concern was that the export of goods from Ukraine was putting them out of business.

The blockade expectedly led to an array of negative consequences. This is primarily because war-torn Ukraine incurred a massive daily loss, estimated at 900,000 euros, and a total of over 221 million euros in missing customs fees, with thou-

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sands of trucks queueing at the border. Some of them ended up being transported by rail. It likewise sparked a series of fiery exchanges, with the reputable outlet *European Pravda* publishing an editorial that accused Warsaw of waging a trade war with Ukraine, and Tusk of failing to take action that would put an end to it.

Yet, perhaps the worst development, given the current circumstances, is that it exposed a serious communication gap not just between Ukraine and Poland but also between the European authorities. After all, the Integrated Border Management (IBM) policy and its underlying logic call precisely for such cooperation – and yet, according to the EWB, most of the institutionalized IBM and non-IBM cooperation mechanisms proved ineffective during the blockade. The joint committee, set up by the agreement liberalizing the transport of freight by road to oversee and monitor the implementation of the agreement, failed to fulfil its function. Other bi- and multilateral coordination mechanisms, such as the Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation and the Intergovernmental Coordination Council on Interregional Cooperation, did not do their job either.

Although the dispute was eventually resolved by the Polish and Ukrainian infrastructure ministries, it re-emerged with full force in February 2024. This happened to such an extent that Polish farmers have made a regrettable decision to spill grain out of trucks, much of which was harvested under extremely difficult conditions, with Russia using Iranian drones to destroy grain deposits in Ukraine.

Though an official apology followed, with the Polish authorities initiating a criminal inquiry, the situation once again showed the limitations of IBM mechanisms

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and led to heated exchanges between officials. The mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovyy, accused the protesters of being pro-Russian. In response, the deputy speaker of the Polish parliament, Piotr Zgorzelski, dubbed such statements "Bandera-like talk". Undoubtedly, this has played into the Kremlin's hands as it seeks to financially strain Ukraine and break its partnerships with its neighbours.

Towards a border that unites

As Russia's war against Ukraine continues, there is a good reason to believe that the land border will remain Ukraine's lifeline in the coming months or, quite possibly, years. This requires actors on both sides to find solutions to the longstanding problems that have marred the border over the years, as well as the most recent ones, such as the blockade. It is useful to review them on an individual basis.

The first one relates to the border's infrastructure and general setup. This includes the quality of roads, the efficiency of checkpoints and more. Over the years, it has become clear that the infrastructure is ill-adapted to the needs of private border crossers, businesses and alike. To fix these problems, it is essential to open new checkpoints, even if joint control is eventually introduced.

The notion that this is a superfluous endeavour, especially as Ukraine has now commenced EU accession talks, as proposed by some, is inappropriate, to put it generously. This is not only due to the ongoing war, the outcome of which is uncertain, but also because accession to the EU – which will take no fewer than five years in the best-case scenario – does not automatically lead to accession to the Schengen Zone. Take, for instance, Bulgaria and Romania, who have been EU members since 2007 but are yet to join the free movement zone.

The need for checkpoints, especially better-quality ones that would be equipped with underground shelters, is also crucial for expediting the movement of people and preventing large gatherings of people in one place. While security concerns such as Russia's shelling of Ukraine's border checkpoint – which already happened on the border with Romania – are paramount, other crises such as the coronavirus pandemic also provide valuable lessons. During the pandemic, the lack of adequate infrastructure meant that people struggled to maintain a safe distance from each other, contributing to the spread of the virus.

Accordingly, Ukraine and Poland should accelerate the implementation of additional border crossing points, as proposed in 2023. Their construction need not be overly complicated. To increase the capacity of the already existing border crossing points in the short term, "modular infrastructure" can be introduced. This approach has been used by Ukraine at the "border" with the occupied territories before the

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full-scale war. Additionally, more bilateral initiatives can be launched concerning the border, similar to the already mentioned Polish loan. The swift conclusion of the updated Agreement on Good Neighborhood, Friendly Relations, and Cooperation, wherein both sides would declare their commitment to fulfilling "the border that unites" principle, is also a must.

The second issue focuses on the need to set up a rapid response mechanism that deals with crises such as border blockades. The aforementioned idleness and inefficiency, though partly politically motivated, show that there is no mechanism that would promptly address the problem or prevent it from happening again. Such a mechanism does not have to be a new bureaucratic beast, like the IBM coordination mechanism chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. Although a major step forward, the group turned out to be too high-profile for regular meetings. One potential solution is to create subgroups within this high-profile coordination mechanism that would react more promptly.

Formats like the Intergovernmental Coordination Council on Interregional Cooperation and the Open Border can be further developed, while the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) – although primarily focused on illegal immigration and smuggling – could consider deploying a monitoring mission to the border.

In the long run, however, addressing border issues systematically at a higher political level is both possible and necessary. For example, this could happen through the Lublin Triangle, a political and security regional alliance, created by Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine in July 2020. A greater focus should be placed on cross-border cooperation at the local level. This would be nothing short of crucial as Polish local authorities can both grant and revoke blockade permissions, as exemplified by the Dorohusk commune case.

Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression is key for the security of Poland and other neighbouring states, and the quality of the border plays a major role in Ukraine's potential. Thus, it is high time to ensure that the border is indeed uniting, not dividing. EE

This article has been produced in close cooperation with the EWB think tank and is based on their recent analytical work. To further deep-dive into the issue, visit their site english.europewb.org.ua

Lesia Dubenko is a Ukrainian analyst and journalist who has written for the *Financial Times*, *New Eastern Europe*, *European Pravda*, the Atlantic Council and the *Kyiv Post*.

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Defence diplomacy

Ukraine and the Global South

OMAR ASHOUR

Based on previous experience, strategic communications – including defence diplomacy – are usually built on the principle of the "Five Ms": messages, messengers, media, mediums and mechanisms. The messages should be tailored carefully to the audience, addressing political narratives, shared historical experiences, socio-psychological aspects, instrumental issues and cultural affairs. Ukraine should come out strong in the messaging and other pillars of this strategy when trying to cooperate with the "Global South" and procure military support.

The "Global South" is a fluid term, selectively used to describe developing states in contrast with the developed "Global North" or the "West". The term is controversial and can be misleading. It is not strictly geographical or economic, but often aligned with a mixture of selective historical contexts, self-identification/re-identification, development indicators and political characteristics. These characteristics may include relative instability, corruption and other governance challenges, as well as social inequalities.

The regime types vary, as well. They can range from democratic/free (like Argentina, Brazil, Ghana, Namibia and South Africa), to hybrid/semi-free (like Pakistan, India, Morocco, Kuwait and Indonesia) and authoritarian/not free (the majority – from Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba in the west to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the east, passing through Angola and Ethiopia on both banks of the African continent).

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Three observations

Before delving into the hard and soft power of the Global South and its countries' importance for Ukraine, three brief observations should be made. First, the Global South is not an entity – political, economic, military or otherwise. Despite the fair criticism levelled at the term the "West", it does describe a set of similar political systems (mainly liberal democratic governance) with free market, developed economies (with varying checks). It also includes interstate bodies to coordinate foreign policy, security and defence affairs such as the European Union and the NATO alliance. This is not the case with the G-77, BRICS or the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Second, governance models for Ukraine and its long-term alliances should remain "western". Considering the G-77 as a representative entity of the Global South, there are clear problems with corruption, repression, authoritarianism and bad governance. Both interstate and intrastate armed conflicts have plagued tens of G-77 countries. This is the situation found in these nations many decades after de-colonization – and in some cases – a century afterwards. Examples include three devastating wars between Pakistan and India (1947, 1965 and 1971), an eight-year war between Iraq and Iran (1980–88), multiple invasions of Chad by Libya (1978–1987), an 11-year Cambodian-Vietnamese war (1978–1989), and an Ethiopian-Eritrean war (1998–2000) among tens of other brutal wars in Africa and elsewhere in the G-77. Overall, both interstate and intrastate conflict resolution structures and mechanisms are less effective and remain underdeveloped. Hence, the Global South does not offer a model of relative freedoms, rule of law, prosperity and peace (yet). The West does. Despite major challenges, no wars have occurred between members of the western alliance structures since their establishment after the Second World War.

Third, despite all of the aforementioned, Ukraine needs the Global South countries – not necessarily as models, but as friends and allies. Diplomatically, the countries commonly associated with the Global South, as approximated by G-77 membership, hold 70 per cent of the votes in the UN's General Assembly. A few of these countries are rising soft powers, with credible impacts in mediation, including lobbying for the return of kidnapped Ukrainian children and the exchange of Ukrainian POWs.

Economically, the G-77 countries have critical resources that directly impact Ukraine. These resources hail from the richest of the world, like Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and also from the poorest, like the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan. For example, Qatar and Kuwait have expressed interests (and have a historical record) in post-conflict reconstruc-

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tion, de-mining efforts, peace diplomacy and in supporting Ukrainian education and media institutions. Others, such as the UAE, are critical players – if not the critical player – in the sanctions-busting operations that partly sustain Russia's war on Ukraine. Some of the poorest G-77 countries have provided gold and other resources to sanctioned Russia. These include Mali, Burkina Faso, the CAR and the parts of Sudan controlled by the Rapid Support Forces and their allies from Russia's Africa Corps (remnants of Wagner and other Russian "private military companies").

Militarily, some of the G-77 states have the largest arsenals of Soviet and post-Soviet weapons and ammunitions outside of the Russian Federation, both in terms of the diversity of the weapon systems and the sheer tonnage of ammunitions. These states range from Vietnam in the east to Venezuela in the west. Russia has beaten France, the United States and China in arms exports to Africa between 2005 and 2019. Most of Ukraine's weapon systems – with variations in combat branches – remain Ukrainian, Soviet or post-Soviet. The current status of the European and – to a lesser extent – American defence industries resulted in shortages and delays of western-made arms and ammunition deliveries to Ukraine. Hence, Ukraine will need to procure and acquire some G-77 weapons and ammunitions and/or prevent Russia from procuring and acquiring them.

The arsenals of the Global South

There were several reasons for the limited achievements of Ukraine's counteroffensive in 2023, compared to the 2022 counteroffensive. To reverse the tide in 2024 and afterwards, Ukraine is addressing issues in manpower, air-defence, artillery tubes, ammunitions, mechanized and motorized infantry, electronic warfare and airpower. These were all outlined by the former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine General Valerii Zaluzhnyi in his famous essay for *The Economist*. Some of the G-77 states can address shortages in Soviet and post-Soviet systems in the aforementioned combat arms and domains of operations.

Russia has been a full-spectrum arms exporter to the G-77 states. Between 2010 and 2020, it dominated the arm sales market in Africa in air defence, missiles, fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, armoured vehicles, and – to a lesser extent – artillery shells and unguided rockets. Eleven G-77 countries top the list of importers of Soviet and post-Soviet systems and munitions. India remains the largest importer of these military capabilities by a significant margin, followed by China (a supporter but not a member of the G-77), then Algeria, Vietnam, Egypt, Venezuela, Syria, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Iran and Myanmar. After Algeria and Egypt, Angola, Nigeria, Sudan and Ethiopia top the African list of importers respectively.

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Currently, political hurdles cannot be bypassed in some of the aforementioned states. Others could offer hundreds of thousands of tons of Soviet and post-Soviet systems and munitions from their local stocks. Here are a few samples of the capabilities possessed by some of these states, classified by combat branch.

Air-defence

Ukraine needs more air-defence systems, including launchers, interceptors and radars. Systems such as the long-range S-300 series, the medium-range Buk family, and even the short-range/shoulder-launched Igla variants – among others – have provided a multi-layered, effective defence of Ukraine's skies. Some of these systems, such as the Buk-Ms, have protected western rocket artillery systems, including the famous M142 HIMARS, from Russian airstrikes. Short-range, highly-mobile OSA systems were modified to launch a version of the famous American-made Sidewinder missiles from the ground. It was a Soviet-made 9K38 Igla MANPADS – not an American-made FIM-92 Stinger – that downed Russian helicopters in the battle for Antonov Airport in Hostomel, Kyiv Oblast in February 2022.

Besides the availability and effectiveness of some of the Soviet-made systems, western-made air-defence launchers, interceptors and radars remain expensive, limited and late. In 2024 and onwards, Ukraine needs more air-defence systems as soon as possible to defend against Russia's air attacks on the frontline, as well as against the air terrorism campaign conducted on its cities and towns.

> Western-made air-defence launchers, interceptors and radars remain expensive, limited and late.

The aforementioned G-77 states have Soviet and post-Soviet air-defence systems in relatively large quantities, including launchers, interceptors, transporters, radars and other components. The arsenals of Algeria, Vietnam and Egypt are among the most comprehensive and multi-layered in North Africa and Southeast Asia, given their past experiences. These states invested heavily in acquiring a diverse range of Soviet and post-Soviet systems to include the long-range S-300VM and S-200 Vega/E, medium-range mobile systems such as the BUK-M2 and BUK-M2E, and short-range systems including the Tor-M1 and Pantsir-S1. They also have thousands of both the Igla and Sterla variants of MANPADS. This is in addition to older systems such as the "Kub" (SA-6 Gainful), the S-125 (SA-3 Goa) and S-75 (SA-2 Guideline). In 2019, for example, Angola upgraded SA-6 and SA-3 systems from Lithuania to "enhance the system's overall combat performance". The upgrades were done by Lithuanian and Ukrainian companies.

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Artillery: tubes and shells

Shell shortages in artillery – the "king of the battle" in US military adages and the "god of war" in Soviet ones – have cost Ukraine lives and land. Artillery tubes have a barrel life or an expected number of rounds fired before the tubes become unserviceable. Ukraine's artillery units need western, Soviet, and post-Soviet tubes, both new and refurbished. Shell hunger and barrel lives – among other factors – have recently cost Ukraine Avdiivka, a fortress town in Donetsk Oblast that withstood Russian regulars and Russian-led irregular forces since 2014.

As in air defence, some of the G-77 countries possess and produce large amounts of Soviet and post-Soviet artillery shells of different calibres. Egypt's president, Abdel Fatah El-Sisi, has agreed to provide Russia with up to 40,000 122mm "Sakr-45" rockets, which were to be used in Russian multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) attacks on Ukraine. With US intelligence interception and significant diplomatic pressures, Egypt agreed to supply Ukraine with artillery ammunitions instead. Egypt is in a deep economic crisis and its military is partly financed, equipped and mostly trained by the United States. Being a former Soviet ally – whose best military performance in October 1973 was partly due to equipment, training and advice from Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian Soviet officers and pilots – Egypt's production capabilities include Soviet calibres such the 122mm shells for both howitzers and MLRS, 130mm shells for the (old but still effective) M-46 field gun, and 152mm shells for various Soviet-designed artillery systems.

Given the prevalence of Soviet-era artillery systems in its large inventory, Vietnam produces Soviet-standard calibres including 122mm, 130mm and 152mm. Production covers a range of ammunition types, including high-explosive (HE), illumination, smoke, as well as more specialized munitions like thermobaric and anti-tank rounds.

Angola has historically possessed significant stocks of artillery. This is due to its war of independence and the following civil war that lasted until 2002. During these years, Angola received substantial military support from the Soviet Union and Cuba, but also from both NATO and Warsaw Pact countries at different times. This support included a wide range of military hardware, including artillery pieces.

Due to space limitations, the abovementioned systems are a brief, selected sample. They do not represent the rest of the combat branches and domains of operation. However, armour, for example, features heavily in the Soviet way of warfare. Hence, tanks ranging from T-54/T-55 to T-80 variants are widely available in the G-77. These were formerly supported by the Soviet Union. Given Ukraine's current need for infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) and armoured personal carriers (APCs), old tanks such as the T-55/T-54 can be upgraded and repurposed by Ukraine or

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its allies, turning them into IFVs or APCs. This can follow the Israeli model. Israel successfully turned captured Soviet T-54/T-55 tanks into heavily armoured APCs (the "Achzarit" or "cruel" in Hebrew). It configured T-54/T-55 tank chassis by removing the turret and modifying the hull to accommodate infantry soldiers.

In addition to the land domain, much needed sea and air-domain assets can be procured and acquired from the "Global South". For example, Osa-class missile boats – relatively rapid-attack craft armed with anti-ship missiles – are used by several of the G-77 countries such as Vietnam, Algeria and Egypt. Modified Kiva-class frigates were upgraded and employed by countries like India. In the air domain, Vietnam, Cuba and Egypt are among the largest operators of MiG-21s, though the fleet has been aging and is being complemented or replaced by more modern aircraft. The MiG-29, a fourth-generation fighter, is operated by India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Large fleets of the famous Mi-24/Mi-35 attack helicopters and their munitions remain in Algeria, Ethiopia and Nigeria. Finally, infantry equipment, electronic warfare and other assets in different domains and combat branches are owned and used by the armed forces of the aforementioned states. Many types and quantities are classified and will not be found via OSINT. Still, they are worth digging for, procuring and acquiring.

How to conduct defence diplomacy

Based on previous experiences, strategic communications in security affairs – including defence diplomacy – are usually built on the "Five Ms" or five pillars: message(s), messenger(s), media, medium(s) and (multi-dimensional, interactive-response) mechanism(s). Usually, the message(s) should be tailored carefully to the audience, addressing political narratives, shared historical experiences, socio-psychological aspects, instrumental issues (material benefits and common interests) and cultural affairs. Ukraine should come out strong in the messaging and other pillars of the strategy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a 21st century colonial war, using 18th century tactics. Terms such as "anti-colonial struggle", "war of liberation", "forced deportation", "colonial settlements/settlers", "ethno-linguistic cleansing", "ethnic engineering" and "mass kidnapping of children" describe what has happened and what is happening in Ukraine. The Global South understands these terms well. They reflect legitimacy, self-identification and solidarity with the oppressed. These terms and others should be part of the message.

The messengers can range from Ukraine's skilful public diplomatic efforts to friends of Ukraine in the Global South. The credibility and the identity of the mes-

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sengers matter. Hence, they can include influencers, civil society and media figures, credible academic experts and independent religious figures. As I have witnessed in Kyiv in 2023, there are many qualified friends of Ukraine in the Global South – from Chile and Colombia to the Philippines and Indonesia. The mainstream and social media dissemination of the message(s) by the messenger(s) are critical as well – both in the local languages and international *lingua franca* such as English.

The mediums should not be limited to official channels and institutions, even in defence diplomacy. Mediums should be expanded for the effectiveness, reach and impact of the message (to include narratives or counter-narratives). Although the phrase "the medium is the message" is not absolute, it is a testament to the power of the medium and that it should never be limited to the official channels. Finally, all of the aforementioned pillars need an interactive response mechanism for sustainability. The war on Ukraine is a long one. Messages can be forgotten or undermined. Mediums can be sabotaged. The media and the audience can have a short attention span – as evidenced during the Gaza war. Hence, a multi-dimensional mechanism for interactive responses is needed as a part of a strategic communication policy that ensures sustainability in the Global South.

While some corridors of power in the G-77 countries may overlook the moral compass and the economic allure of championing Ukraine's fight against the shadow of colonialism, others will stand firm. The Czech Initiative has already shown that, during the time of writing this article. Yet, more initiatives will be needed. The myriad possibilities regarding the G-77 responses should not deter Ukraine from attempting to reach the Global South's arsenals, nor from parrying Russia's advances in the same arenas. Successful defence diplomacy and strategic communication efforts within the Global South hold the potential to not just sway operational-level tides on the frontlines but make a strategic mark on Ukraine's noble quest for liberation. EE

Omar Ashour is a professor of security and military studies and the founder of the Security Studies Graduate and Executive Programmes at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (Qatar). He is a non-resident senior fellow at the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (Ukraine) and the University of Exeter (United Kingdom). He is the author of *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt*. His current research agenda focuses on comparative combat effectiveness and the Russian wars against Ukraine.

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Henry Kissinger's legacy and European geopolitics

EREKLE IANTBELIDZE

With its assertiveness, Russia persistently pursues its unjustifiable goals through various means, reminiscent of Henry Kissinger's theories on power politics. However, despite great effort, Russia's track record of significant victories on the battlefield remains lacking. This presents an opportune moment for Europe and the broader western world to assert their dominance.

On November 29th 2023, a brilliant statesman, celebrity diplomat, exponent of power politics and influential scholar passed away at his home in Connecticut. Henry Kissinger, the former US secretary of state, had advised dozens of policymakers during his outstanding long career. His legacy is assessed on a rather bittersweet note due to Kissinger's realpolitik style of understanding global affairs. The notorious Nobel Peace Prize winner remains a controversial figure in rethinking power and strategy in philosophical and even existential terms.

Conceptually, realpolitik is explained as a pragmatic view based on practical political objectives rather than on ideals. Although the term is widely used, Henry Kissinger stated that he has been regularly accused of conducting realpolitik as part of a campaign to simply label his policies. While he was serving as secretary of state in the 1970s, US foreign policy seemed ferocious and uncontested, irreversibly marking the political tensions of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, the dichotomy of political realism

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and idealism is still mainstream in Europe, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The European Union and its member states made their viewpoints the cornerstone of a new "Geopolitical Commission", but some consider that the world hardly witnessed any European geopolitical breakthroughs from 2019 up until 2024.

Kissinger's quest: harmony between power and morality

When discussing realpolitik in the modern era, Henry Kissinger's name inevitably arises. Serving as President Richard Nixon's national security advisor and later as secretary of state for Nixon and Gerald Ford, Kissinger played a pivotal role in popularizing realpolitik within the government and among the public. There was a notable intrigue surrounding Kissinger's approach to foreign policy, drawing parallels to 19th-century European diplomacy. Kissinger's upbringing in Germany during the Second World War and his academic pursuits at Harvard shaped his perspective, which encompassed a broad spectrum of ideas rather than adhering to a single theory of international relations.

Moreover, Kissinger's disagreements with fellow intellectuals like Hans Morgenthau underscored the diversity of thought within American realism. Regardless of criticisms, Kissinger's approach to foreign policy emphasized a balance between power and morality, rooted in a uniquely American perspective of global leadership. Even with advocating for a dose of realism, his outlook reflected an enduring belief in America's role as a beacon of hope in the world. Nevertheless, even with Kissinger's intellectual ambitions and strategic vision, his realpolitik framework clashed with the American public's desire for principled leadership grounded in higher ideals. His failure to grasp this disconnect contributed to a subsequent shift in US foreign policy towards moralism under leaders like Jimmy Carter and ideological confrontation with figures like Ronald Reagan. In essence, Kissinger's worldview, while formidable in its geopolitical calculus, ultimately proved incompatible with the prevailing values of American society.

Kissinger's realpolitik framework clashed with the American public's desire for principled leadership grounded in higher ideals.

Europe and European society are confronting similar challenges as Americans did during the era of Kissinger's contradictory values towards war and morality. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine underscores the urgent need for Europe and the West to demonstrate conviction in upholding democratic values. European

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leaders are gaining momentum in making bold statements, seemingly guided by Kissinger's thoughtful approach. Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron epitomized this sentiment with his declaration that "Europe is at stake," emphasizing his determination to bolster support. He proposed a vigorous approach, advocating for increased military assistance, including potential western deployment, and the formation of a coalition for missile defence. Although Macron's assumptions have been criticized in Paris and Brussels, supporters of his approach demand the translation of rhetoric into effective actions.

At the Davos summit in 2023, Henry Kissinger endorsed Ukraine's NATO aspirations, signalling a notable shift in his perspective.

Furthermore, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen envisioned support for Ukraine not merely as a matter of power or politics but as an unconditional stance based on morality. At her Marienburg residence, the centre-left leader stated during an interview, "Freedom comes with a price." Her vocal support for Ukraine and scrutiny of Russia's broader intentions highlight the collective need for vigilance. The narrative then shifts from individual member states to broader European politics, which needs unity and an unwavering rationalization whereby European power and moral politics stand united. This significant transition in understanding European geopolitics requires a careful examination of the Ukrainian context. In this regard, attention must be directed towards the forthcoming European elections scheduled for June 2024.

On the other hand, during the Davos summit in 2023, Henry Kissinger endorsed Ukraine's NATO aspirations, signalling a notable shift in his perspective regarding the power dynamics in Eastern Europe. Although his pronouncements were deemed audacious and somewhat contentious, they underscored a nuanced attempt to reconcile western moral imperatives with the pragmatic considerations of realpolitik in shaping European geopolitics. While much discourse has centred around the impending US presidential elections in the media, it is imperative to recognize that the stakes are equally high in the European elections. These elections demand a steadfast commitment to bolstering and sustaining support for Ukraine amidst geopolitical complexities.

The "justice camp" versus the "peace camp"

The European perspective regarding Russia's aggression towards Ukraine is multifaceted and subject to debate due to varying interpretations of the situation. While the general populace perceives the war in Ukraine as a European affair, with

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Europe bearing the greatest responsibility for its outcome, political opinions diverge. There exists a division within the political spectrum between those advocating for Ukrainian victory (referred to as the "justice camp") and those prioritizing a swift end to the conflict at any cost (termed the "peace camp"). As for the possible outcome, in the aftermath of the European elections, there is a looming prospect of a rightward shift in the European Parliament, marked by a decline in mainstream party support and a rise in extremist parties. This shift, while not likely to completely upend the parliament's pro-aid stance, poses significant challenges to the continuity and scope of sustainable efforts. However, a more right-leaning parliament, influenced by nationalist sentiments and scepticism towards EU initiatives, could disrupt the delicate balance of aid distribution, particularly concerning military support for Ukraine.

The composition of the political groups in the European Parliament not only affects policy outcomes but it will also influence decisions on security and defence issues. A centrist grand coalition may continue to advocate for financial, logistical and military aid to Ukraine, as seen in western states' previous approvals since 2022. However, with a larger number of MEPs sympathetic towards Russia, particularly within certain political groups, there may be a softening of support for Ukraine without any conditions. Furthermore, changes in coalition patterns could impact security and defence policies, particularly concerning NATO and EU defence cooperation in the context of Russian deterrence. The emergence of right-leaning coalitions may lead to shifts in priorities, potentially favouring policies that prioritize national sovereignty and defence autonomy. This could result in divergent approaches towards collective security arrangements and military interventions, affecting the EU's role in global security affairs.

> In the aftermath of the June European elections, there is a looming prospect of a rightward shift in the European Parliament.

Within the framework of the *Spitzenkandidat* system, wherein lead candidates vie for prominent positions within the European Commission, only Ursula von der Leyen, the incumbent president, has advocated for the establishment of a common defence commissioner. This proposal, articulated during her address at the Munich Security Conference this year, underscores the need for heightened coordination in bolstering EU defence industries and assuming a central role in advancing European security interests, including providing support to Ukraine.

While deliberations continue regarding the nationality of the candidate best suited for this position, von der Leyen stressed the importance of ensuring equitable representation, particularly for candidates hailing from Central and Eastern Europe, in the allocation of influential portfolios within the Commission. This as-

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sertion underscores her commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive leadership framework reflective of the EU's broader geopolitical landscape.

From the perspective of Henry Kissinger, he probably would have emphasized the need for nuanced diplomacy in navigating these shifts, cautioning against overly nationalistic agendas that could alienate key stakeholders. He might have suggested that while sustainable support remains a noble goal, it must be approached with concrete steps in a timely manner, all the while considering the evolving political landscape shifting to the right. Furthermore, Kissinger would have underscored the importance of strategic alliances and diplomatic manoeuvring for reaching as many countries as possible in securing continued support for Ukraine amidst growing dissent. He would have advocated for pragmatic compromises that safeguard essential aid while acknowledging divergent perspectives within the European Parliament. Ultimately, Kissinger's perspective would have prioritized justice with pragmatic cooperation over ideological rigidity, urging policymakers, namely the European Council, to navigate the post-election landscape with strategic foresight.

Kissinger's perspective would prioritize justice with pragmatic cooperation over ideological rigidity.

Leaders of European nations may believe that they have already significantly altered their foreign policy agendas (for example, Germany, France, Poland, Sweden, etc.). However, as emphasized by Henry Kissinger, "Each success only buys an admission ticket to a more difficult problem." Hence, achieving justice within the European continent requires a more flexible decision-making process and the implementation of more advanced programmes that would give Ukraine not only moral superiority but also power supremacy.

Empowerment through justice

Russia, with its assertive manoeuvres, persistently pursues its unjustifiable goals through various means, reminiscent of Kissinger's theories on power politics. However, despite great effort, Russia's track record of significant victories on the battlefield remains lacking. This presents an opportune moment for Europe and the broader western world to assert their dominance, particularly at a time when the prevailing narrative may suggest vulnerability.

Henry Kissinger's maxim, "You do not have the choice to lose with moderation. If you use power, you must prevail," underscores the imperative for decisive action. Europe's initial support for Ukraine must be followed by even more robust

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measures. Any sign of moderation risks not only undermining Ukraine's position but also eroding the western ideals of justice and fairness. By maintaining steadfast support for Ukraine, Europe not only defends a nation under threat but also upholds the principles that underpin western civilization. Failure to do so would not only embolden Russian aggression but also weaken the global perception of justice and the integrity of western values.

In essence, Europe and its allies must heed Kissinger's wisdom and recognize that in the face of aggression, there can be no compromise. Only through unwavering solidarity and decisive action can they ensure the triumph of justice over aggression and uphold the principles upon which their societies are built. When considering Kissinger's concepts from an alternative perspective, one may discern that his doctrine does not advocate for the supremacy of power politics at the expense of justice and humanity, but rather advocates for the pursuit and attainment of justice through the prism of power politics. EE

The views represented herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution the author is associated with.

Erekle Iantbelidze is III Secretary at Georgia's Ministry of foreign affairs working on EU Directorate. He is graduate from the College of Europe in Natolin.

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GDAŃSK

IT HAPPENED IN GDAŃSK

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

The tenth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the second year of the full-scale war in Ukraine make us reflect on Gdansk's involvement in providing assistance to its Ukrainian partners and neighbours. Gdańsk's support for Ukraine has varied in recent years and is the result of the external circumstances and current demand. I am tempted to make a certain summary of what has happened thus far, but also aware, of course, that much effort and action still lies ahead of us.

Up until the very last minute before the invasion, we had hoped that the war could have been prevented. As late as February 2022, expressions of support, concern and solidarity were still being sent from Gdańsk to our local government partners in Ukraine. One of the last such gestures was a letter addressed to the mayor of Kyiv, in which we expressed our hope that preventing the outbreak of the war was realistic. Unfortunately, reality very quickly proved that our hope was in vain.

Immediately after the outbreak of the war, the city of Gdańsk joined an international coalition of local governments in support of Ukraine. In this endeavour we also used platforms of organisations and institutions in which we are members. This included: the European Committee of the Regions; Eurocities (an organisation of major European metropolises); the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine; and the Pact of Free Cities (a club of cities set up by Warsaw and Budapest to counterbalance the dangerous activities aimed at exploiting the idea of illiberal democracy emerging in European discussion). We initiated many of the activities which we also carried out ourselves.

• One of the first steps was to suspend relations with our partner cities in Russia. In Gdańsk's case these were: Kaliningrad,

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Omsk, and St Petersburg. At the same time, we emphasised that Gdansk will always help people, organisations and institutions that stand for freedom and democracy, and support Russian citizens who have the courage to protest against the unjustified aggression and attack on Ukraine.

• We have called for the delivery of military equipment to Ukraine. This call, if only in the context of today's German discussion on the delivery of Taurus missiles and the problems with passing the aid bill for Ukraine by the US Congress, remains relevant.

• Gdańsk advocated for the creation of humanitarian corridors under international supervision.

• We demanded the creation of no-fly zones and an end of attacks on civilian targets.

• We advocated for an introduction of draconian trade sanctions in line with the principle that one does not trade with barbarians. We hoped that Russian goods, including raw materials, would be treated like African "conflict diamonds" with the idea that sanctions should "stop paying for the war".

• From the beginning, we have been keen to make the voice of the international local government community heard about the fate of Ukrainian local leaders kidnapped and held by the Russians. We remain committed to our efforts for their release. To date, there are still several of them in Russian captivity. Here are their names, locality details, and dates of abduction:

- **Mykola Sikalenko** – Tsyrkuniv village mayor. Abducted on 21.03.2022
- **Oleksandr Shmygol** – Vilhivka village mayor. Abducted on 16-23.03.2022
- **Vasyliy Mitko** – Nikolske village mayor. Abducted on 12.03.2022
- **Volodymyr Karaberov** – Mangush village mayor. Abducted on 25.03.2022
- **Iryna Lypka** – Molochansk town mayor. Abducted on 31.03.2022
- **Yevheniy Matveev** – Dniprorudne city mayor. Abducted on 13.03.2022
- **Oleksandr Levechko** – Nova Oleksandrivka village mayor. Abducted on 27.03.2022
- **Oleh Yahnienko** – Mylove village mayor. Abducted on 26.03.2022
- **Mykola Rizak** – Tavriysk town mayor. Abducted on 01.04.2022
- **Oleksandr Babych** – Hola Prystan town mayor. Abducted on 28.03.2022
- **Oleh Pylypenko** – Shevchenkove village mayor. Abducted on 10.03.2022

• Since the beginning of the emergence of reliable information on war crimes committed by Russians in Ukraine, we have been advocating for their documentation, expecting subsequent prosecution, trial and punishment for the perpetrators.

• Together with the city of Warsaw, we have initiated a project titled "Mariupol

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a Phoenix City", which assumes that one day Mariupol will be reborn, like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. The project declares its readiness to engage in its reconstruction. So far, we have managed to attract our German partner, the city of Bremen, to this idea. The Ya Mariupol project is working on the concept of maintaining relations and providing support to the people of Mariupol. Planning for its reconstruction, in turn, is the task of the Mariupol Reborn agency, which was set up specifically for this purpose. There are already 21 support centres for Mariupol residents in 16 Ukrainian cities. There, they receive social, legal, psychological, humanitarian and medical assistance.

• Together with the German city of Bremen, Gdańsk is also working to set up a special course of study in architecture and planning for Ukrainian female refugees who want to acquire specialist knowledge in the field, with the hope that one day they will be able to use it for the future reconstruction of their homeland.

• Gdańsk is a member of the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA). One of the main tasks of this organisation is the creation of Local Democracy Agencies. Upon the initiative put forward by Gdańsk's late President Paweł Adamowicz an LDA in Mariupol was also created. We continue to support this initiative financially until today. The LDA Mariupol continues to operate, now in exile in Kyiv, where the organisation's staff supports the community of former Mariupol residents.

• A Ukraine Working Group was also established by the Committee of the Regions in Brussels. The Mayor of Gdańsk, Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, is the Group's chairperson. She was elected to this position in the autumn of 2021, to ensure the continuation of the mission that was championed by the late Mayor Adamowicz and aimed at supporting the processes of enhancing the work of the civil society in the Eastern Partnership states, with a particular focus on Ukraine. The Group was tasked to assist the preparation of Ukrainian local governments in their accession to the EU, mainly in terms of the fight against corruption and training of local government representatives. With the outbreak of full-scale war, the Group became an important instrument of the Committee of the Regions in terms of responding to the situation in Ukraine, coordinating activities and cooperating with other international players. The Group first met in early March 2022 in Rzeszów. One year after it met in Gdańsk. The most recent meeting took place in Lviv in the autumn of 2023. One of the outcomes of the Group's activities has been the establishment of the Brussled-based Ukrainian representation within the Committee of the Regions. Lviv has also benefited from Committee of the Region's hospitality and located its representatives in Brussels. Gdańsk and the association "Pomerania in the European Union", which represents our region in Brussels, are now assisting our Lviv partners by acting as guides in EU affairs.

• Symbolic gestures showing our solidarity are also important. One example would be naming one of Gdańsk's squares after the heroic Mariupol.

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Irrespective of these political and also to some degree symbolic activities, Gdańsk provides financial and material aid to our local government partners in Ukraine.

• We have entrusted the coordination of all our efforts to the Gdańsk Foundation. In the framework called "Gdańsk Helps Ukraine", it has been involved in running fundraising campaigns, in-kind assistance, organising transport to Ukraine and psychological support to those who need it the most. Thanks to UNICEF's support, Ukrainian children have been integrated into the Polish education system. Overall, the Gdańsk Foundation has become an agency that is providing both emergency and systemic support.
• Gdańsk set up a refugee service centre in Dolna Brama in the first days of the full-scale war in Ukraine.
• In May 2023, a joint Gdańsk-Lviv project called Virtual Administrator was launched in Gdańsk. At the point servicing our "Gdańsk Helps Ukraine" campaign, Ukrainian citizens living in Gdańsk can handle many official matters by connecting online with officials in Lviv. This project is being implemented under an agreement concluded by the Gdańsk Foundation and the Department of Administrative Services of the Lviv City Council. These virtual sessions offer consultation and assistance in completing and submitting online documents for more than 500 different administrative procedures, including issuance of a passport, real estate matters in Ukraine, child allowances, lost documents (diplomas, certificates, legal documents and others).
• By a unanimous decision of the City Council, Gdańsk donated one million zlotys for the expansion of the UNBROKEN Medical and Rehabilitation Centre in Lviv. The UNBROKEN Centre is a unique project. Its motto is to restore hope, joy of life and the possibility of at least a partial return to normality for people crippled by the war. Its services are offered to thousands of war victims from all over Ukraine. Thanks to prostheses, treatment and psychological care, war victims

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regain not only physical fitness, but also independence, self-esteem, dignity, and the will to live and work for a free and independent Ukraine. The centre started its activities in the first month after the beginning of the Russia's aggression against Ukraine. UNBROKEN provides comprehensive assistance to victims of war: from urgent operations for gunshot wounds, burns or amputations, to physical and psychological rehabilitation and prosthetics. The experience of the medical team is already being used by doctors from around the world who come here to gain experience in war medicine. The UNBROKEN Rehabilitation Centre has become the most important place in Ukraine where help is provided to both military and civilian victims of war.

• Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, Mayor of Gdańsk, signed a memorandum of understanding with Andriy Sadovyi, the Mayor of Lviv, to ensure our city's support in the process of preparing Ukrainian local authorities for integration with the European Union. Inter-city and regional cooperation is extremely important in the process of European integration and Ukraine's forthcoming membership in the EU. Just as the city of Bremen supported Gdańsk 20 years ago in setting up its Brussels representation, today Gdańsk and the Pomeranian Voivodeship support Lviv.

• Gdańsk has twice joined the Summer Camp project initiated by the European Committee of the Regions. This involved the organisation of summer holidays for children from areas of heavy armed conflict. We also hosted a group of young people from Odesa at a sports camp in Górki Zachodnie.

© phot. The Lviv City Council

• In Gdańsk, we try to help Ukraine not only by taking in war refugees. Our municipal companies, such as Gdańsk Waters or Gdańsk Water and Sewage Infrastructure, are actively involved in supporting the reconstruction of key infrastructure of Ukrainian cities and providing the aid necessary for crisis management. It is the areas of municipal management that are crucial to people's lives in local communities. This is why it is with such determination and cruelty that the Russian aggressors seek to destroy cricital infrastructure across Ukraine.

• In December 2022, Gdańsk sent 19 power generators and four specialised heating tents to Ukraine. The donations went to Lviv, Kherson and Kharkiv. They were possible thanks to the openness of support from Gdańsk residents and Gdańsk municipal companies. The donation of further equipment for our neighbours at war was made possible thanks to the support of the people who contributed in large numbers to the "Gdańsk Helps Ukraine" campaign, the generosity of

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Gdańsk municipal companies, and the joint campaign of Polish local authorities "Polish Cities for Ukraine".

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 came as a shock to the whole world. The Ukrainian Army and society as a whole has been heroically resisting the invaders for more than two years now. The Kremlin and Russian military commanders have underestimated the heroism of the Ukrainian soldiers and the resilience of the entire Ukrainian society. They have also miscalculated the determination of Europe and the North Atlantic Alliance to rush to Ukraine's aid.

My visits to the war-torn Ukraine will always remain in my memory. Everything I have seen and heard there, despite the tragedy of war and the sacrifice made by the Ukrainian society, bears witness to the great determination of our neighbours to fight for freedom and independence. However, the extent of their optimism and readiness to stand up to Russian imperialism is directly proportional to the help they will receive from us. We must not disappoint them.

Ukraine is defending our ideals too. Thus, a truly important question is whether our response to the war in Ukraine will allow us to say with a clear conscience whether we really, sincerely and genuinely defend, profess and put into practice the values we proclaim. This is an important test that we are being put through. Will we come out of it with a shield or on a shield?

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Maciej Buczkowski is the deputy director of the office of the Mayor of Gdańsk, Poland

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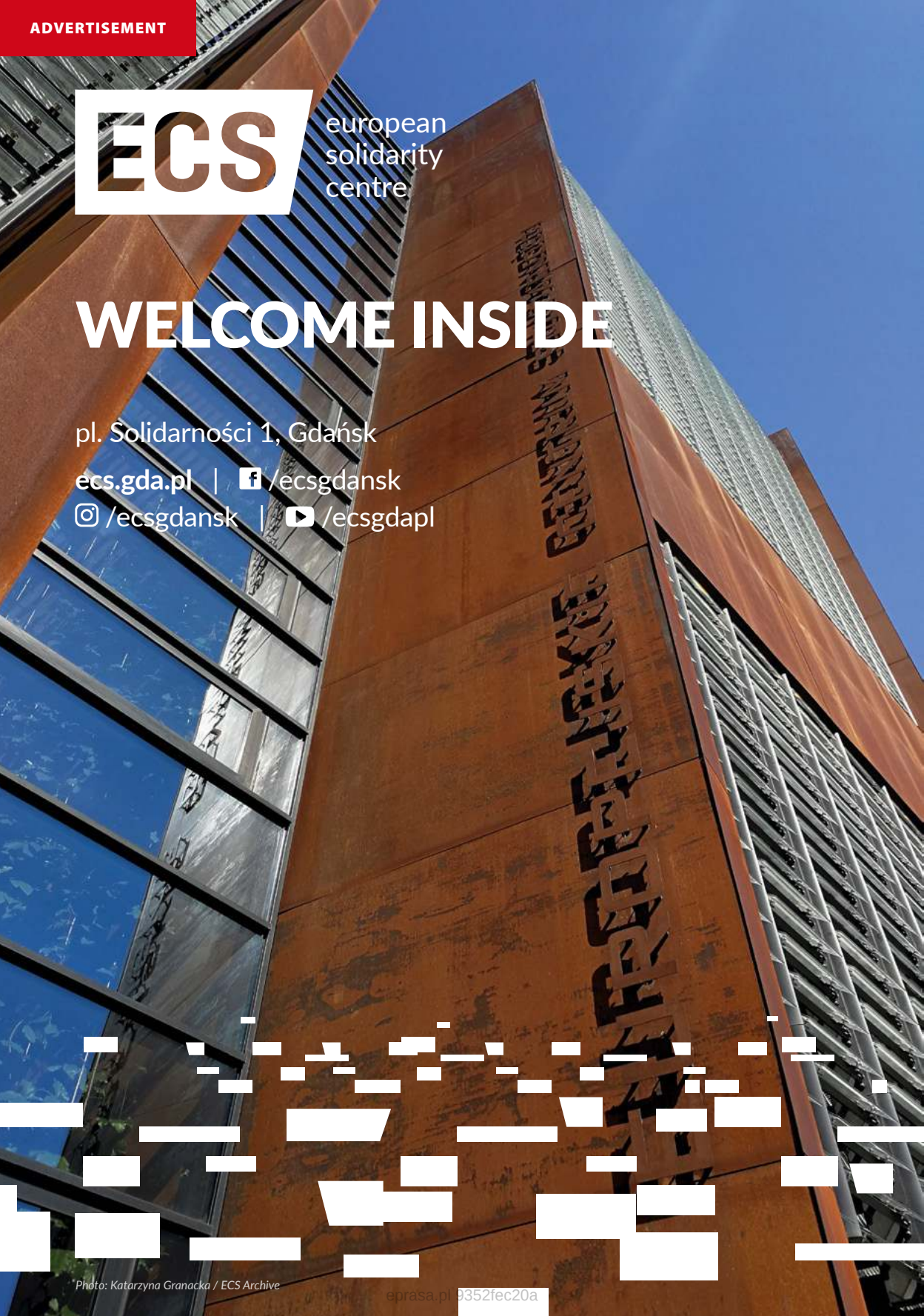

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Another Russia is possible

JESSE SOKOLOV

When Putin is finally gone, a majority of the elite and population will want Russia to return to Europe. Europe should facilitate that. There is a massive generational shift currently underway in Russia. These people are open to the outside world, western culture and are independent of the Russian state and Soviet ideology. That shift is closer than people think and the world needs to be ready. That is where the next battle will take place and it is one the West could lose.

On an alcohol-fuelled Zoom catch up, my friends and I put the world to rights. The usual suspects came up: sports, holidays, our kids, women and politics. Before we knew it, the conversation turned to the elephant in the room: the war. Eyebrows were raised, deep breaths exhaled and shoulders shrugged. A couple of heads were scratched. What more can we say? How much guilt should we feel for something we did not personally choose, support or want? We abruptly moved on, but exactly one week later Russian forces recaptured Avdiivka. They had the wind in their backs.

Two years in, Russia's war against Ukraine has largely faded into the background of most people's everyday lives. A recent Levada poll found that just 54 per cent of Russian citizens are following the war closely. The average person is just waiting for the conflict to end, however. Most avoid talking about it through fear of causing arguments with those close to them, or being overheard by the wrong person. Splits between the apathetic, vocal critic, émigrés and families of the mobilized have appeared everywhere. The border regions are living in a state of war, alienat-

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ed from the rest of Russia. The annexed territories are all but fully integrated. Yet, with so very few ways left to speak out and challenge the status quo, what else can people in Russia say?

Personal experiences

Some friends on that Zoom call received their papers two years ago. One was at his girlfriend's. She answered the door and told the officers he was not home and did not live there anymore. Another is still on the reserve list. His parents' flat got two visits from the authorities, but both times he was not there (he lives with his wife in another city). The second time his parents did not answer the door, but it was enough to make his brother head for Asia – lest they come for him. A third friend on the call actually went down to the recruitment centre with his papers looking for a fight – and got one. Sparing the details, which are fuzzy and might be against the law to repeat anyway, he and several other people that day were told their services were not required at that time. His young wife and son are overjoyed.

> Many people in the occupied territories do not care what colour of passport they end up with.

Conversations between my mother in law and family in Donetsk go a little differently, however. With the exception of Mariupol, Russian forces basically swept Ukraine's south in early 2022. There was little overall resistance. The partition of Ukraine, by all accounts, has already happened. Our relatives from those regions all have Russian passports and cell phone numbers. Russian companies are everywhere, as is the Kremlin propaganda. One relative, now a pensioner, called up recently to ask about how the Russian pension system works and what additional benefits she may apply for. After that hour-long catch up, we learned that their hometown near the Azov Sea, a stone's throw from Mariupol, was barely touched by the fighting. Photos show that it has hardly changed since they last visited in 2013.

When people in the occupied territories are asked how they really feel by western journalists, their answers irk the most pro-Ukrainian supporters. Most do not care what colour of passport they end up with, or where the line is drawn. They just want the fighting to end. Some feel that Kyiv abandoned them. Others are angry that Kyiv resisted, and blame Volodymyr Zelenskyy personally for the destruction. Owen Matthews, hardly a Putin stooge, wrote about this at length. Military experts might differ on whether Ukraine can actually win the war, but all agree that to retake these lost territories would require many times more blood. Fewer Ukrainians are willing to provide that, even if their resolve to win has not waned.

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Back in Moscow, my friends, like many Russians, share that view albeit for different reasons. It is an uncomfortable fact for the authorities that millions of Russian citizens are simply not prepared to die for the Donbas. That is not to say nobody signed up out of patriotic loyalty. There were thousands who did. Yet, it does not quite have the symbolic gravitas of Crimea, or the invasions of Napoleon and Hitler. Although there was an initial surge in patriotism in 1914, Russians fighting in the First World War became sluggish on the Eastern Front. Though more successful than most assume, a big reason was because the Russian soldiers were not fighting on Russian soil to protect "holy Moscow" from imminent danger. They were fighting on Polish, Lithuanian, Austrian or German soil to protect Serbia. Indeed, some soldiers were more interested in Jewish pogroms.

Growing divisions

There is resentment among those whose loved ones were mobilized. For poorer Russians escaping abroad was not an option: they had young families, lacked the financial means to leave, could not obtain a visa, or lacked the skills to find employment abroad. The wives and mothers of the mobilized are beginning to pressure the authorities through various campaign efforts to let them return home. The soldier's families have reported an unsanitized view of the war often not seen in state media – one where training and equipment is insufficient and the rotation of men fighting has stalled. Soviet soldiers were trained for six months before being sent into Afghanistan. For this conflict, pro-war military bloggers claim it is around three months at best before sending them into battle.

Lucrative salaries of up to 300,000 roubles a month to the families are offered, which is well above the average salary even in Moscow. That causes bigger rifts in society. Some argue "well at least you get free money." Yet, the families just want their loved ones back and get little support from society as a whole – which feels borderline hypocritical. It is no wonder why they are bitter, and these divides will likely persist for decades. Those who opposed the war will not want guilt imposed on them from the West; those with loved ones who fought will defend their relatives. Those who stayed in Russia often despise the people who left.

The soldier's families have reported an unsanitized view of the war often not seen in state media.

The other elephant in the room is another partial mobilization. It has long been expected; military recruitment adverts are by far and away the most common in every Russian town. They are in your district, along all of the main roads, at the

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bus stop and in the metro. But mobilization is a contagious word. Nobody wants it to be them or their own next, and the Kremlin fears it could spark bigger protests.

However, if another partial mobilization does occur, leaving Russia will be much harder this time. The borders with Finland and the Baltic States are more heavily monitored and restricted. Turkey is no longer giving out residence permits to Russian citizens. Georgia and Armenia are less welcoming places than they once were. Russian émigrés have driven local prices up and government relations are deteriorating. Appointments for western visas are harder to come by, more expensive, harder to pay for and the requirements have tightened. In Central Asia, the authorities have even sent some Russian citizens back. That leaves very few options for those with the means to get out. For the approximately 40 per cent of Russians who have returned since leaving in 2022, it will be uncomfortable at best. If a young man has papers issued electronically and is flagged in the system, his only way to hide is at the dacha, or a friend's or relative's.

Hypocrisy

Even the most liberally-minded Russians have picked up a large amount of western hypocrisy surrounding the conflict. Critical voices in the West wonder why more Russians do not speak out or volunteer to fight for Ukraine. They ignore how much people have to lose by speaking out and that getting on with living is generally more time consuming in authoritarian states than democracies. These commentators should be advised that many here wonder why the West is not doing more itself. The West clearly could do more, yet it does not.

It was obvious from the start that businesses planned to resume as usual when the fighting stopped. As several studies from prominent universities showed us, most companies suspended operations rather than leaving. Most have "buy back" clauses from the Russian companies who took over the operations. McDonald's has five years, for instance. The fact is the war has been bad for business and the Russian market is massively lucrative.

Moreover, military aid to Ukraine has shown western governments just how bad a state their own militaries are in. See comments by the United Kingdom's armed forces head. That cannot go unanswered at home or in Ukraine. Is that why they were not sending Ukraine the weapons it needed to win in the first place? Is it because they were afraid of a conflict with Russia, and letting Ukrainians do their dirty work was easier? Do Ukrainians not deserve an answer to that?

I would personally like to ask the most critical western commentators: what is stopping you from going to the front, or coming to Russia to protest on the Red

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Square? Are your personal safety and comfortable far away academic gigs worth more to you than your principles you excrete online? Are you just saying these things for the likes and followers? And is that because you think you are more valuable than the hundreds of thousands of innocent lives needlessly lost in this war? Are you really so arrogant to think that the odd media interview, downloads of your journal articles and books are really more important than what is happening on the ground? We both know you will be back to Russia at the first "safe" chance you get. Your readers, students and faculty deans should all see you for who you really are.

Beyond wishful thinking

Today, millions just want their lives back to how they were before February 2022. The quickest way for that to happen, in their minds, is a ceasefire and negotiations. In Russia's current climate, it is all one can hope for. That does not mean that their hearts do not go out to Ukrainians. But cheering for your own country's defeat and collapse, not to mention wallowing in self-pity, is a deeply unpopular and unnatural move for most. We should not ignore or be dismissive of what Russia losing the war could actually mean. If a defeated Russia becomes a nation mired in poverty, unsure of its future and humiliated, that will unleash the most brutal nationalist forces who seek only revenge. In many ways comparisons between Putin's Russia and Nazi Germany are overblown. Putin is not antisemitic. Ukraine's claims of genocide are unfounded, given that Russians and Ukrainians are fighting on both sides and most are of the same religious persuasion. Russia is still a long way from the terror of the 1930s and unlike Ivan IV, Putin does not get pleasure from physically torturing his enemies. One comparison does hold up: Hitler emerged because the Germans were punished and made to feel guilty for a war that was not their fault. It was easy to blame their economic plight and national humiliation on others. The reader should not forget that it was not so long ago that a man named Vladimir Zhirinovsky won massive popular support by repeatedly calling on Russians to rise up against "Kikes, commies, American imperialists and slant eyed Japs." Imagine if someone like that was ever in charge of Russia's nuclear stockpiles.

> When Putin is finally gone, a majority of the elites and population will want Russia to return to Europe.

As things stand, when Putin is finally gone a majority of the elites and population will want Russia to return to Europe. Europe should facilitate that. There is a massive generational shift currently underway in Russia. These people are open to

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the outside world, western culture and are independent of the Russian state and Soviet ideology. That shift is closer than people think and the world needs to be ready. That is where the next battle will take place and it is one the West could lose.

For years, I took great pains to tell my western peers and colleagues that Russia is not the horrible or dangerous place it is so often depicted. Russia, I would tell them, is blessed with a great people who have survived many dark chapters in its history that it did not choose to be put through. Russia has many wonderful things beyond the images of fear we have become accustomed to and has contributed to human advancement in the sciences and culture.

However, after the invasion and Alexei Navalny's death, that Russia became harder to see. But it is still out there. There is still hope that out of the pain, the darkness, the cruelty, the turmoil, but also the passion, sacrifices and dreams, Russia might yet emerge from the war intact, unjumbled and better. Wishful thinking from westerners will not bring that about. It will happen from within. Some doubt this possibility. Others are rooting for its failure. Many more claim it looks too far away. I argue that if humans possess the capability to see the deepest depths of the universe through a telescope, we can squint hard enough and see that another Russia is possible. EE

Editor's note: While we understand the sensitivity of publishing such a text, we feel there is value of sharing the voice from inside Russia to help us understand this perspective and their views on the region and the war. Yet, as editors we did not want to give a platform to anyone who supports the war in Ukraine and that should be obvious from reading the text that our author does not support the invasion.

Jesse Sokolov (pseud.) is a Russia-based writer and academic.

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A super elections year

Romania's 2024 political landscape

EUGEN STANCU

This year Romanians will experience an unprecedented four elections: local, European, presidential and parliamentary. The ruling mainstream parties have already demonstrated their joint strategy to curb the rise of populist and extremist parties. How the society will vote in this marathon of democracy remains unknown.

Romania has never had four rounds of elections in a single year. However, 2024 brings them all: European, local, presidential and parliamentary. Over the past year, there have been discussions about the possibility of merging some of them, especially European and local elections. Yet, until recently, the political calculations within the governing coalition did not favour this option as a means of simplifying the electoral calendar. However, against the backdrop of the ascent of populism and extremist parties in Romanian politics, and in the interest of ensuring political stability amid a challenging geopolitical landscape marked by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, in February the electoral schedule for 2024 was finalized. Consequently, the European parliamentary elections were merged with the local elections in June, while the two rounds of the presidential elections were advanced by three months to September. At the same time, the parliamentary elections were slated for December.

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Rise of extremism

Extremism undeniably poses a significant threat this electoral year. This is reflected in current polls, which indicate nearly 20 per cent support for the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). In the parliamentary elections in 2020, AUR was an absolute surprise, obtaining around ten per cent of the vote, and in the diaspora, it ranked second. It was as if the COVID-19 pandemic had altered the voting behaviour of many Romanians. This is not a baseless speculation, as AUR's rhetoric was deeply immersed in all the conspiracy theories that emerged during the pandemic.

However, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, AUR chose to also disseminate Russian propaganda and vehemently opposed support for Ukraine, advocating for a re-evaluation of Romania's relations with the United States and the European Union. Moreover, at present, a new extremist party seems, according to surveys, poised to surpass the five per cent electoral threshold for entry into parliament. S.O.S. Romania, led by Diana Șoșoacă, a senator elected on the AUR list, espouses a political agenda closely aligned with Russia, and its popularity is on the rise.

The Save Romania Union (USR), a party that in the 2020 elections represented the hope of many Romanians and took about 17 per cent of the votes, seems to have lost its vigour. Its electoral success was then mainly based on a strong anti-corruption message, particularly targeting the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which today forms the governing coalition with the National Liberal Party (PNL). However, back in 2020, after the elections, the PNL became USR's governing partner, promising to jointly govern Romania for four years. Yet, disagreements in 2021 led USR to withdraw from the government.

> AUR vehemently opposes support for Ukraine, advocating for a re-evaluation of Romania's relations with the US and EU.

The political crisis was resolved through a new coalition, this time formed between the PSD and PNL with the support of President Klaus Iohannis. The two parties have governed Romania for the past two years and position themselves as an alliance to continue governing the country in the years ahead. Regarding the Save Romania Union, after several internal struggles, it seems to have gained more strength, especially after the formation of the United Right Alliance, which also involves two other parties that would not have passed the electoral threshold individually.

It is difficult to analyse what lies ahead in the 2024 electoral year. At best, we can discuss the dynamic puzzle of Romanian politics we currently face. Nonetheless,

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there are clear aspects, but also potential "black swan" events that could change the course of the game at any moment.

Merged elections, joint lists and consequences

The European parliamentary and local elections are scheduled for June 9th. The main parties PSD and PNL, making up the governing coalition in Romania, have chosen to run joint lists for the European elections while maintaining separate lists for the local ones. The decision to merge the two rounds of elections aims to curb the success of extremist parties, although other factors also contributed to the choice of joint lists. Combining the local and European parliamentary elections would offer a significant advantage for both PSD and PNL. It allows them to better mobilize their voter base, particularly for the European elections, where citizen engagement tends to be low. The two parties have an extensive network of branches throughout the country, as well as local elected officials who can mobilize people to vote. Yet, in numerous localities, PSD and PNL are expected to have strong candidates vying for mayoral positions or seats in the local councils. Amidst this local rivalry, they face, nevertheless, the challenge of persuading their constituents to endorse joint lists for the European elections.

According to opinion polls, the option of joint lists would secure a top position in the European elections for the two parties, but the individual contribution of each party to the result would remain unclear. However, following a victory in the European elections, the leaders of both parties would solidify their leadership positions within their respective parties. It would not be unusual at all if the two parties did not have opposing ideologies. In essence, the common lists of the PSD and the PNL would suggest the formation of a supra-ideological party in Romania that will send parliamentarians to the European Parliament, both in the PES and EPP groups.

Thus, the situation is indeed complex, and a definitive result is difficult to anticipate. The creation of joint lists could be perceived by the public as a merging of liberals and socialists and could potentially create an ideological void, one that the United Right Alliance might exploit. However, it could also incite an anti-system reaction from those who, confronted with the emergence of a unified establishment party, might shift their vote towards the populism endorsed by AUR.

One key local election will be the race for mayor in Bucharest, which remains a big unknown. With the local elections set to unfold in a single round, the prospect of a joint candidate proposed by both PSD and PNL emerges as the sole solution that could potentially unseat the current mayor, Nicușor Dan, backed by the

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Photo: LCV / Shutterstock

A protest organized by members of the USR party against Romanian President Klaus Iohannis. Extreme parties appear to be gaining in the polls ahead of Romania's super election year.

United Right Alliance. However, the road to presenting a unified candidate for the capital city is fraught with challenges. Neither PNL nor PSD seems inclined to relinquish their individual options. Currently, both parties are conducting surveys to identify a potential common candidate, one who not only represents a feasible solution but also avoids antagonising the supporters of both parties. Although names remain undisclosed, the prospect of someone emerging, three months before the elections, as a *deux ex machina* solution to win Bucharest seems improbable.

Beyond all political intricacies, Bucharest stands as a pivotal electoral battleground. Following the president of Romania, who garners the highest number of votes, the mayor of Bucharest holds the second position in terms of electoral significance. The outcome of the mayoral race will thus undoubtedly influence the results of the forthcoming autumn and winter elections, underscoring the city's strategic importance in shaping the country's political landscape.

Presidential and parliamentary

Romania's presidential election has been advanced by three months. Both rounds are now slated for September, whereas the incumbent president's term concludes

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in December. This shift places the electoral campaign squarely during the summer vacation period when political interest typically wanes – a scenario never before witnessed in Romania. Therefore, President Klaus Iohannis is set to conclude his second mandate earlier than anticipated, sparking speculation that he may be eyeing a post within the European Commission or even the presidency of NATO.

As of now, the field of presidential candidates remains shrouded in uncertainty. No one has definitively announced their candidacy, although numerous contenders are fighting for attention. Foremost among them is Mircea Geoană, the current NATO Deputy Secretary General, who leads all opinion polls by a significant margin. He is followed by Marcel Ciolacu, the current prime minister, and Diana Șoșoacă, the president of S.O.S. Romania. PSD and PNL, the parties with joint lists for the European elections, have not ruled out the possibility of a common presidential candidate. However, such a decision is fraught with difficulty, as supporting a presidential candidate from outside one's own party could be perceived as an act of renouncing one's political identity.

Regarding the parliamentary elections, scheduled for December 8th, there is speculation about the proposal for joint lists by both the socialists and liberals, but this depends heavily on the outcome of previous elections. Joint lists could prove to be an electoral winner, but they could just as easily falter. Romania's electorate exhibits a high degree of unpredictability, especially given the ideological opposition between the two main parties.

Voter turnout may continue the downward trend observed in previous elections, potentially reaching a historical low.

Voter turnout in the 2024 elections may continue the downward trend observed in previous elections, potentially reaching a historical low. The role of both traditional media and social media will be crucial for voter mobilization and in the articulation of their choices. While parties in the governing coalition dominate mainstream media, the other parties are far more active on social media platforms: mostly Facebook and TikTok. As more and more Romanians turn to social media, the widespread use of disinformation involving fake news and deep fake productions could significantly impact this year's election results.

Concluding snapshot for the 2024 electoral year

At the European People's Party (EPP) congress held on March 6th and 7th 2024 in Bucharest, the leaders of the National Liberal Party (PNL), who hosted the event, found themselves needing to explain the rationale behind the creation

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of joint lists with the socialists for the European parliamentary elections. While this decision was motivated by the necessity to establish a robust alliance to counter the electoral progress of extremist parties, an AUR protest erupted within the congress premises, featuring such slogans as "Down with Ursula", "Sovereignty", and "Thieves". Simultaneously, the USR party, a member of Renew Europe, also staged a protest to highlight the alliance between Romanian liberals and socialists, cautioning that those voting with the PNL in the European elections would essentially be sending socialists to the European Parliament.

This snapshot from the EPP congress perfectly reflects the current tensions and debates regarding the political alliances and directions of the parties in Romania in the context of this busy election year. The electoral messaging battle is just beginning, and yet the themes and discussions are not entirely consistent so far. The PSD-PNL coalition, which will demand voting on common lists at the European Parliament in June, has supposedly been created in the name of the country's stability. As Nicolae Ciucă, the president of the senate and president of the PNL, emphasized, "We cannot afford to undermine the stability of the country for small political egos." He was referring to a stability that has been difficult to maintain amidst the multiple crises of recent years (health, energy and geopolitics, represented by the war in Ukraine) and should not be taken for granted.

The other parties are also beginning to articulate their electoral messages. Extremist parties such as AUR and S.O.S. Romania rely on strong populist messages that are essentially simple slogans. While these slogans quickly go viral on social media, it remains to be seen how effectively they translate from virtual popularity into real votes. The United Right Alliance, centred around USR, has announced its message for the June elections: "Don't let them steal your future."

Indeed, the future could be a crucial theme in any election. Unfortunately, at the moment, there is a lack of serious discussion about how the future could look at the level of public debate in Romania. EE

Eugen Stancu is a Romanian historian, editor of the cultural magazine *LaPunkt* and a visiting fellow with the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna.

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The double murder that traumatized North Macedonia

JOVAN GJORGOVSKI

Two recent disappeared person cases in North Macedonia could not have looked more different at first glance. However, further investigations have brought to light connections to an obscure pro-Russian network in the country. Such a shocking turn of events only further shows Moscow's influence during a time of heightened uncertainty across the region.

North Macedonia, a nation with a rich history and vibrant culture, has, unfortunately, experienced its fair share of distressing incidents, including public shootings, criminal clashes, and cases of femicide over the years. But rarely has Macedonian society been so shaken to its very core as after the double murder of Vanja Gjorchevska, a 14-year-old teenager from Skopje, and Pance Zhezhovski, a 74-year-old retired barber from the town of Veles. What makes this crime particularly horrifying is the unprecedented cruelty inflicted upon a minor and an elderly citizen. The brutal nature of this heinous act has sent shockwaves throughout the country, prompting reflection on the state of safety and security in the community. Most importantly, it uncovered a pro-Russian and conspiracy-loving layer of the society that most Macedonians never believed existed.

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Shockwaves

The harrowing tale began in Skopje on November 27th 2023, when Vanja's mother reported the unsettling disappearance of her daughter who had left for school but never made it. Based on available information, she was kidnapped from her home in the centre of Skopje, a bustling place where people are sure to take notice if someone is forcibly taken. Her mother instantly shared an appeal on social media, claiming her daughter was kidnapped and this went viral. Yet, no ransom demand was made, and it appeared as though the girl vanished without a trace. The Macedonian police embarked on an exhaustive week-long search, scouring abandoned buildings, monasteries and even the bed of the Vardar river. Hundreds of hours of surveillance footage were meticulously reviewed, and the unfolding events were closely monitored with bated breath not only in North Macedonia but also across the entire region.

> It was a complete shock when it was reported that Vanja's body was found in the vicinity of Skopje.

At the same time, conspiracy theories were spreading like wildfire on social media. They ranged from assumptions that Vanja was taken to Kosovo to have all of her organs harvested, or by a child prostitution ring, or that her disappearance was linked to family debt. The one about Kosovo was the most dangerous, firstly because it could have only encouraged ethnic tensions in North Macedonia given the publicity of the case. A lot of fake profiles on social media claimed to have seen her in Pristina or local towns and villages in Kosovo, near the Macedonian border. What is more, one famous news website even claimed to have had evidence of her being taken across the border. The claim, however, was later withdrawn after a reaction from the police, but the damage was already done.

Meanwhile, an elderly man was also reported missing. The family of 74-year-old retired barber Pance Zhezhovski found the house where he lived empty with all the heating and electricity still on, yet there was no trace of him. The disappearance of Zhezhovski from the small town of Veles some 50 kilometres from Skopje was not at first connected with the case of Vanja. And why would it be? The two lived in different cities, were of different ages and totally different backgrounds. However, three weeks later, the car owned by the former barber was found abandoned, so the police quickly connected the dots. Several days later, the minister of interior announced that four people had been apprehended and would be questioned about Vanja but failed to mention the other case. At that time, everybody was expecting the young girl to be found alive and well, so it was a complete shock when on the night of December 3rd last year, it was reported that a body was found in the vicinity of the capital. According to the public prosecution, Vanja was found

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with her hands tied behind her back, brutally beaten with her jaw and one of her hands broken. She had been executed with a single bullet in the back of her head. This information sent shockwaves across the country. Soon afterwards it was reported that the body of Pance Zhezhovski was also found in a small mining pit in the middle of nowhere, near the city of Veles where he lived. The police stated the next day that the two cases were connected, and that the main organizer and apparent murderer had fled from the country.

Russian "values"

Four individuals were arrested for the murders, including the father of the teenage girl. His exact role remains unclear, although there are accusations suggesting he may have collaborated with the perpetrators to extort money from his ex-wife, Vanja's mother. On the other hand, the 74-year-old barber was murdered, allegedly, because he owed the perpetrators 500 euros, and they needed his car to kidnap Vanja. Even after the arrest of the perpetrators, numerous questions lingered unanswered, adding an air of mystery and deep concern to an already profoundly disturbing incident. All of them, apart from the father, admitted their culpability and led the police to the bodies.

According to the public prosecutor's office, they pointed the finger at Ljupco Palevski-Palco, a public figure and known associate of the perpetrators, as the fugitive responsible for the double murder. The revelation that an entrepreneur, former newspaper owner and leader of an extreme right-wing political party was implicated in the murders reverberated across the nation. Not because people necessarily liked Palevski, but because he was very well-known in the public. He was often invited and took part in political talk shows and debates, and even had his own YouTube channel which he used to spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and Macedonian membership in NATO and the EU. He even organized several protests against both organizations. The movements in which he orbited ideologically and politically had, among other things, the mantra of protecting children. It was not only declarative but organized and embodied in official associations, having their own podcasts and live chats on which Palevski was a dear guest. He was almost a regular guest on a right-wing news site called "Infomaks" and, more importantly, on the pro-Russian podcast "Rodina", which lists brotherly cooperation with Russia and China as one of

> Even after the arrests, many questions remained unanswered, adding an air of mystery to an already profoundly disturbing incident.

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its main goals. It was on Rodina that Palevski had the platform to push forward conspiracy theories condemning neoliberals, promoting QAnon narratives and hardline anti-western views.

Macedonian Prime Minister Kovacevski even connected these movements and podcasts with foreign agencies and networks seeking to destabilize the country on its European path. And Palevski fits this mould. This is a man who for the past few years advocated for North Macedonia to join BRICS. His political party "Desna" was controversial from the outset, not only for its ideology but also because its symbol featured a neo-Nazi black sun. He preached family values and brotherhood with all Orthodox countries and would at times do the symbol of the cross in a three-finger Orthodox manner, which, as he claimed, represented not only the holy trinity but also the three occupied parts of Macedonia. All of this, apparently, has helped him to get a small but cult-like following of people who believed his statements and beliefs. His co-conspirators in the murders at first looked like ordinary family people, deeply religious and highly patriotic. All of them were social media advocates for family values and against LGBT rights. They posted irredentist maps, spread fake news about Ukraine and hoped for a Russian victory so that Putin would "save" the country. As strong supporters and members of Palevski's political party, they were all fiercely pro-Russian, spreading their leader's conspiracy theories about laboratories in Ukraine, and as they claimed on social media, the genocide of Russians in Donbas.

As strong supporters and members of Palevski's political party, they were all fiercely pro-Russian.

All of this exposed a layer of Macedonian society that is still deeply alarming. However, the leader whom they blindly followed, and for whom they participated in the murders, has abandoned them. In a familiar fashion, he escaped to Turkey with an apparent desire to continue his journey towards Belarus or Russia, where he might have asked for asylum and denied his culpability. He was, however, luckily apprehended in Turkey.

A need for change

Palevski's potential escape underscored the principles he and his supporters upheld. The prospect of him fleeing to Russia served as a stark reminder of Russian values, raising concerns that someone like him might seek refuge there to evade accountability. All of this was happening while the war entered a new bloody year, and North Macedonia has been a significant contributor to Ukraine's struggle for freedom and democratic values.

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The real motive for the double murder is still unclear, and a lot of people are waiting for the court proceedings to start so that the public might get a clearer picture. However, the tragic murders of Vanja and Pance, and the connection with a fringe pro-Russian element have abruptly brought reality back into focus, reigniting a sense of urgency within Macedonian society. Although a direct link to the Kremlin remains unproven, the crime is a stark reminder of Russia's principles. Consequently, the case has sparked renewed discussions about the role of media in Macedonian society and showed the necessity for change and the introduction of stricter regulations. EE

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

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The rise of the pro-Putin Revival party in Bulgaria

RADOSVETA VASSILEVA

The Bulgarian far-right Revival presents themselves as "the only patriotic party" in Bulgaria. However, a review of their public discourse uncovers a rather disturbing fabric of their patriotism – a strange mix of anti-NATO rhetoric, unrefined populism, xenophobia, and profanity. Their sudden electoral success raises many suspicions.

From an underdog with merely 37,896 votes in the 2017 parliamentary election, Bulgaria's Revival party (*Vazrazhdane*) has managed to gain 358,174 votes in the 2023 election and to secure itself 37 seats in the country's 240-seat parliament. Its meteoritic rise is often used as an argument justifying the shameful union between the reformists (PPDB) and the establishment (GERB; DPS) in Bulgaria which, in turn, resulted in the election of Nikolay Denkov's government in 2023. The marriage of convenience between PPDB, GERB, and DPS, which emerged in 2023, is presented as a Euro-Atlantic micro alliance protecting Bulgaria from the malicious influence of Vladimir Putin's circles allegedly channelled by Revival – an account that feeds into the current dominant geopolitical narrative.

Nevertheless, the theatrical smoke on Bulgaria's political stage makes appearances deceptive. How a party labels itself or how other parties label it may neither coincide with its core values, nor with its opportunistic behaviour behind the scenes. Scratching beneath the surface of public discourse reveals not only how the alleged Euro-Atlanticists defy Euro-Atlantic values in Bulgaria, but also how the Revival party may be perceived as a project of the establishment designed to be used as a scarecrow or a political partner of last resort, depending on conveni-

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ence. In other words, the rise of Revival can be regarded as the sad byproduct of Bulgaria's rule of law decay.

Dishonest Euro-Atlantic rebranding

Before explaining the role which has been carved out for the Revival party in the political landscape in more detail, it is worth shining light on the parties that are most committed to falsely portraying themselves as professing Euro-Atlantic values in Bulgaria. While there is little doubt about the Euro-Atlantic affiliation of PPDB, those acquainted with Bulgarian politics are certainly amused by the current tremendous efforts by GERB and DPS to rebrand their geopolitical allegiance in the aftermath of the sanctions by the US government under the Global Magnitsky Act on high-level officials.

In 2021, the US government sanctioned Delyan Peevski from DPS, who is regarded as a close ally of Boyko Borissov, for "corruption, including the misappropriation of state assets, the expropriation of private assets for personal gain, [and] corruption related to government contracts…". In 2023, the US government went a step further by sanctioning Vladislav Goranov, who had served as deputy minister of finance in Borissov's first government and as minister of finance in Borissov's second and third government. The US press release states that Goranov "used his position as minister of finance to facilitate bribery of Bulgarian officials", leaving little doubt regarding who these officials might be. These decisions by the US government against high-level public figures in an EU member state demonstrate a powerful stance against the assaults on the rule of law characterizing GERB's governance with its behind-the-scenes partner DPS.

In this light, Borissov's words that "Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic parties are stronger together", defending the current synergy between his party, PPDB, and DPS, surely sound ironic as corruption is a serious threat to Euro-Atlantic values and to NATO. Furthermore, a brief overview of the policies of Borissov's three governments (2009–2013; 2014–2016; 2017–2021) reveals how dedicated Borissov has been to pleasing Putin and serving his interests for more than a decade. From benign, yet symbolic gifts, such as the famous puppy named Buffy which Borissov gave to Putin, through the controversial Turkish Stream project, to allowing critical infrastructure of the country's national security, such as the largest telecom in Bulgaria, Vivacom, to pass into the hands of Russia's VTB Capital after a sham auction, Bulgaria under Borissov became one of Putin's strategic partners in the EU.

In turn, Peevski, who was elected as co-president of DPS this year, is also trying to wear a Euro-Atlantic hat in public. Nevertheless, this can hardly make up

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for his alleged implication in grand corruption, nor can it hide his own Russian affiliation dating back more than a decade ago. Even in late 2023, after his Euro-Atlantic rebranding, investigative journalists alleged that companies from Peevski's circle were actively trading with Putin's Russia. Thus, Borissov's sudden burning Euro-Atlanticism can be regarded as a preemptive move to avert sanctions on him under the Global Magnitsky Act while Peevski's rebranding is a desperate attempt to get him off the sanctions list – in both cases, the Euro-Atlantic façade is entirely self-serving.

Putin-infused populism meets profanity

Against the backdrop of non-Euro-Atlantic Euro-Atlanticists, one can better evaluate the degree of Putinisation of the Revival party. On their website, Revival presents themselves as "the only patriotic party" in Bulgaria. However, a review of their public discourse uncovers a rather disturbing fabric of their patriotism – it is a strange concoction of anti-NATO rhetoric, unrefined populism, xenophobia, and profanity.

To take a few examples, Revival believes that Bulgaria's membership in NATO is a "threat to Bulgaria's national security". In view of migrant policies, Revival's leader Kostadin Kostadinov has argued that "Europe's criminal elite is settling in Bulgaria". In 2018, he had referred to those who protested against a Christmas tree donated to Bulgaria by Russia as "imbecile morons". In 2023, he called the governing majority "Euro-Atlantic trash" and a "Euro-Atlantic criminal gang". His fellow party members are as averse to gracious behaviour in parliament as him, seeking provocation and media attention. Members of the Revival party have accused other parliamentarians proposing the implementation of measures envisaged in the Istanbul Convention of acting like "contemporary janissaries", referring to the violent wing of the Ottoman army. Members of the Revival party have also been implicated in physical altercations in parliament on several occasions.

All this extravaganza is garnished with deliberately sought opportunities to pay homage to Putin. In February this year, members of the Revival party attended an event against "neo-colonialism" hosted by Putin's United Russia party. Kostadinov did not miss the chance to make an inappropriate joke following the death of Alexei Navalny, either. The party seems to maintain cordial ties with Russia's embassy to Bulgaria, too, even after the onset of the war in Ukraine.

On the surface, the Revival party indeed looks like a pro-Putin monster flavoured for the local taste. The main logic underpinning Revival's bluntness in public seems to be the quest to appeal to far-right voters who are angry and disillusioned with

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the socio-economic reality in the country, which has to be conveniently blamed on an outside enemy. It also helps that many Bulgarians are Russophiles due to historic relations between Bulgaria and Russia – amidst disillusioned Russophile circles it is even easier to vilify the designated enemy if they have expressed criticism of Russia. Parties like Revival offer easy solutions too – patriotism and standing up for oneself in the face of the same enemy.

An in-depth look at the party's practices, however, may reveal a different picture. Could this machist patriotism in public be an act maintained to attract far-right voters only to betray them behind the scenes to suit the needs of the establishment? Revival was indeed used as a scarecrow justifying the coalition between the establishment and the reformists – after all, two controversial politicians, such as Borissov and Peevski, look better to a critical public when compared to those overtly endorsing far-right rhetoric and Putinism.

Yet, one cannot help but notice the synergy between Revival and the establishment when needed on critical occasions. In the summer of 2022, Revival joined forces with GERB, DPS, and ITN to overthrow Kiril Petkov's government, thus sabotaging anti-corruption reforms and paving the way for GERB and DPS to become part of the executive again. In the current parliament, Revival seems happy to lend votes to DPS and GERB to help them impose controversial officers in public regulators. GERB and DPS also saved parliamentarians from Revival from disciplinary actions following their attendance of the event hosted by Putin's party in Moscow this February.

The recent testimonies of members of Revival who left the party following disagreements with its leadership add even more nuances. Elena Guncheva, one of the most popular former faces of the party, who admits to being a passionate Russophile, as well as other former party members have accused Kostadinov of mismanagement of the party's finances, including using party funding for personal needs, and authoritarian intra-party practices. Guncheva also contended that Kostadinov had told her that he benefitted from the umbrella of former General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev – the same controversial magistrate was promoted by the Borissov-Peevski circle. She has also alleged that Kostadinov's rhetoric is entirely self-serving and unrelated to Russophilia – anyone criticising him can be accused of being a "fascist".

How did "Revival" become so popular?

Revival's sudden electoral success raises further suspicions. In my article titled "Bulgaria's election spiral: the anatomy of disappointment" (published on the *New*

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Eastern Europe website) discussing the parliamentary election of 2023, I argued that Revival "may simply be a controlled experiment by Bulgaria's status quo designed to help Borissov". The most obvious sign was the surprisingly positive coverage they received in pro-Borissov media.

Yet, there were other red flags, too. It seems that Revival magically inherited the votes from Borissov's far-right coalition partners in his third government – VMRO, Ataka and NFSB. The latter have vanished from Bulgaria's political stage equally magically. While they gained 318,513 votes in the 2017 parliamentary election, they subsequently lost most of their support and stopped participating in elections altogether. To this end, it is interesting that Revival's leader Kostadinov was part of VMRO in the period 1997–2013. In other words, the umbilical cord tying Revival to VMRO is quite discernible.

To this end, election results in the past decade imply that approximately ten per cent of citizens who traditionally vote in Bulgaria support far-right parties. However, even those voters are not impressed by dishonesty. The scandals surrounding Borissov's third government, including its far-right partners, must have created the necessity for a clean slate – a far-right partner who is less tarnished and who can lure these voters. Also, historically, far-right parties in Bulgaria have served as power brokers in parliament providing support for the establishment covertly or overtly depending on necessity. Revival's meteoritic rise, coupled with its favours to the corrupt status quo, only prove that little has changed apart from the brand.

Overall, if PPDB have been used as a fig leaf for GERB's and DPS's corruption, Revival are its walking stick when the road gets muddy at home. From a macro perspective, this far-right party is the by-product of the rule of law decay in Bulgaria. It is designed to take advantage of the votes of the angry and marginalized from the system and to benefit the establishment which is responsible for conditioning the grim socio-economic reality in Bulgaria which is the source of their rage to begin with. It is the ultimate illustration of the extent to which the establishment does not want to let go of power because, alternatively, its prominent faces will have to face consequences in law for their corruption and other alleged crimes.

Revival's rhetoric may be disturbing, but there is something much more sinister in the picture of Bulgaria's political landscape that emerges – the ability of the establishment to reinvent itself and to trick voters into its next socio-political experiment. Thirty-five years after the fall of communism, the same chicanery continues to bear fruit. EE

Radosveta Vassileva is a Bulgarian legal scholar whose research interests encompass EU law and comparative public and private law. She maintains a personal blog dedicated to the rule of law in Bulgaria. She is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at Middlesex University.

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Empire or democracy

TOMASZ KAMUSELLA

Democracy and imperialism are mutually exclusive. No empire was, is or can be democratic. The British Empire was not, the imperial People's Republic of China is not, nor will imperial Russia become a democracy, even when a self-professed democrat is installed at its helm. The necessary precondition of democratization in an empire is decolonization.

In February 2024, the death (or rather, extrajudicial killing) of the leading Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny sent shock waves across the democratic world. It could have been a subdued affair, as in the case of the Chinese 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo. Beijing arrested him on trumped up charges in 2008 and withheld medical care, leading to the dissident's premature death in 2017. The Chinese authorities did not want to turn Liu Xiaobo into a martyr for democracy. Hence, he was cremated and his ashes scattered at sea. No grave means no pilgrimage site. The studious absence imposed by the authorities rapidly translates into a steep decline in the remembrance and recognisability of the late activist. In 2008, Liu Xiaobo dared to co-author Charter 08, in emulation of Czechoslovak dissidents' Charter 77 (announced in 1977). Charter 08 was unveiled on the 60th anniversary of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Chinese totalitarianism loathes democracy, liberal values and human rights.

Why did then the Kremlin not follow the now typical silencing procedure, applied in totalitarian regimes after the untimely demise of another popular oppositionist with political aspirations? First, the expected preoccupation of the West with Navalny's suffering, death and funeral helped in averting the gaze of the world's public opinion from the second anniversary of Russia's unprovoked war on Ukraine. To Moscow's glee, the same purpose had been served by the terrorist organization Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023, followed by the Israeli in-

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tervention in Gaza. The Kremlin immediately unrolled the red carpet for Hamas leaders in Moscow. On top of that, the West failed to meet its pledges of weapon supplies to Ukraine. Kyiv had no choice but to withdraw from Avdiivka that after the months-long battle regrettably fell into the Russian hands. Moscow's propaganda hails the victory as a proof that Russia is winning the war. This official conclusion helped legitimize the March 2024 "election" of Vladimir Putin as the country's life "president". In reality it was nothing else but a ritualized reappointment to the Kremlin's throne.

Democracy and empire are mutually exclusive

Many in the West have fallen for the Kremlin's ruse and see Navalny's death as a "lost chance" for a democratic Russia of the future. In his relentless struggle against corruption and the ruling kleptocracy in his country, Navalny remained an unrepentant Russian nationalist and imperialist. The oppositionist's views were in essence anti-Ukrainian. In his political programme, Navalny never stated or alluded that the Russian Federation is an empire. That decolonization constitutes the indispensable initial step toward democracy in Russia.

What can we learn, if anything, from history about democracy and empires? In Europe Great Britain, or the metropolis of the British Empire, was an early adopter of democracy as the country's system of governance. Depending on varying definitions of democracy, Britain became democratic somewhere between 1688 and 1928. The first date marks the introduction of constitutional monarchy, while in the latter year female suffrage was finally equated with men's voting rights in Britain.

What authors praising the long tradition of established British democracy tend to forget is the fact that the whole time the British Empire stayed undemocratic. Taxation without representation remained the imperial norm. Back in the 18th century, this slogan triggered the American Revolution, leading to the proclamation of the independence of the United States in 1776. Britain lost most of its colonial possessions in North America, or its "first empire". Having built another empire, with the point of gravity shifted half a world away to South Asia, London was wary of history repeating itself. To discourage discontent, between 1867 and 1922, Britain granted self-government to the settler ("white") colonies in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, but also to the restive and ethnically non-British Ireland. This so-called "dominion status" came complete with the democratic (Westminster) system of governance. Otherwise, this solution also assisted in keeping the aforementioned countries within the empire, even if they were unwilling, as in the case of Ireland and South Africa. In the Anglo-Boer war (1899–1902), for the first

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time in history, late imperial Britain introduced concentration camps on a mass scale with an eye to suppressing the restive Afrikaners (Boers). It was not a very democratic way of solving international disagreements.

London offered the status of a dominion exclusively to white colonies, be it Ireland in Europe or such far-flung territories like Canada or Australia. In the latter British and European settlers first decimated the indigenous inhabitants and then swamped them with millions of new arrivals from Europe. Only in New Zealand was a form of co-option in the governance gradually extended for the country's indigenous Māori nation. Meanwhile, under the dominion arrangement, South Africa remained a deeply undemocratic country with all the power concentrated in the hands of the white minority, composed of Brits and Afrikaners. The vast majority of the population – that is, the indigenous non-white ethnic groups – remained disenfranchised until 1994.

After the Second World War, London admitted the impossibility of a democratic Britain which could maintain its own undemocratic empire.

Finally, after the Second World War, London admitted the political and economic impossibility of a democratic Britain that could maintain its own undemocratic empire. In 1947 British India was partitioned, yielding the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan. The following year, at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) gained independence, as did Burma (Myanmar) in the east. In 1949, autonomous Ireland finally parted ways with London. By the turn of the 1950s, in its bulk, the British Empire had been gone. On the other hand, where London stuck to its guns, things got ugly, like the network of Nazi-style concentration camps for suppressing the Mau Mau uprising (1952–1960) in Kenya. These bloody events simultaneously led to and cast a cloud over the country's independence in 1963. In most cases though, London and a given colony basically agreed upon a suitable timetable and procedure of granting the latter independence. For those who remained somewhat nostalgic about the former empire, a de facto international organization of the British Commonwealth of Nations was unrolled in 1949. Its activities rarely extend beyond cultural exchanges and the organization of glitzy visits for British royals, as a bonus for the tabloid press.

French decolonization experience

Unlike Britain during the Second World, the French metropolis had found itself under German occupation. Afterward, most French colonies wanted consen-

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sual independence as that on the offer to their British counterparts. But Paris had other ideas, encapsulated in the term grandeur for reasserting the status of France as a great power in the postwar world. At first, in the programme's framework, the French ruling elite wanted to re-establish the French Empire (*Empire français*). In 1946, it came back under the guise of a less threateningly named French Union (*Union française*). The colonized did not appreciate this return of French colonial masters. In reaction, a long series of colonial wars followed. In their course France either sought to suppress the proliferating anti-colonial movements or to re-assert Paris's dominion over the colonies that had gone (almost) independent during the war. France's biggest imperialist war unfolded in Indochina. This bloody conflict raged until 1954, when Paris finally acquiesced to the rise of independent Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

Subsequently, France limited its imperial ambition to Africa and the country's mostly insular colonial possessions overseas. Yet, the war in Algeria (1954–1962) immediately followed into the footsteps of the Indochina debacle. It indicated that the metropolis of France itself was in the dire need of decolonization. After all, since 1848 Algeria had been an integral part of France's territory, not just a colony. Algeria featured – as an obligatory inset, alongside Corsica – on wall maps of France hanging in schools and state offices. After 1956, this colonial-style "regular" administrative region of the Republic of France found its way onto the early maps of the European Communities, or the forerunner of the European Union.

In the constitutional sense French Algeria was a part of France. But, paradoxically, the vast majority of French Algeria's indigenous inhabitants did not enjoy French citizenship. Inequality in legal status between the metropolis's empowered citizens and subaltern colonials is one of the hallmarks of empire and imperialism. Hardly more than a tenth of the inhabitants of this North African region of France enjoyed French citizenship. On top of that, in their overwhelming majority the empowered colonials were ethnically French (or white) and practised either Catholicism or Judaism. This ethno-confessional divide deepened the existing legal cleavage between the so-called *pieds-noirs* and the excluded Arabic-speaking Muslim majority.

> The war in Algeria indicated that the metropolis of France itself was in the dire need of decolonization.

This screaming inequity further fuelled the brutal war in Algeria. The conflict even ruined French democracy that had to be reinvented anew. In 1958, a Fifth French Republic was proclaimed, together with a new constitution. Four years later, in 1962, Paris also resigned itself to recognizing Algerian independence. French patriots (read: unrepentant imperialists) decried the loss of an integral part of France. At the same time, Algerian patriots (read:

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Arabic-speaking Muslims) celebrated the expulsion of colonial settlers and imperialist overseers who had imposed on Algeria for over a century, under the pretence that the *Département* of Alger (Algeria) was not different from the *Département* of Haute-Loire.

Failed re-colonization

Similar to the French case, during the war, the Netherlands suffered the indignity of German occupation. Afterward, following France's example, The Hague refused to accept the independence of Indonesia, which the latter had already gained under Japan's wartime occupation. The Dutch government vowed to reconquer the *Nederlands-Indië* (Dutch East Indies), although in territory it was 46 times larger than the Netherlands and seven times in the number of inhabitants. Another devastating imperialist war followed. The United States which pumped monies from the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe disliked the Dutch government's diversion of funds for its war of re-colonization in Southeast Asia. Finally, the Dutch government had to admit the ideological and economic untenability of its imperialist position on Indonesia. In 1949 the Netherlands recognized the Indonesian independence. The war ended and the Dutch interventionist troops were withdrawn to the metropolis in Europe.

If instead of limiting the purview to the European metropolises alone, the quality and state of democracy is assessed in still colonial Britain, France or the Netherlands, including their empires, then the conclusion is obvious. Most of the three empires' population did not live under democratic rule. Those few who were fully empowered "democrats" and at the same time convinced imperialists resided in the far-away metropolis. From the safety and comfort afforded by this geographic distance and socio-political separation, convinced of their civilizational and moral superiority, the European masters enjoyed democracy at home and arbitrarily ruled (*imperare* in Latin; hence, *imperium* empire) over the hapless multitudes of colonials overseas.

In the imperialist opinion, popularly expounded until the mid-20th century, colonials needed protection and guidance that white masters kindly and readily extended, because the natives had not yet matured sufficiently to be eligible for citizenship. To achieve the prescribed level of development colonials were expected to improve themselves by working diligently and following European colonizers' example and orders. Anti-colonial movements dubbed this unequal arrangement exploitation. Imperialists preferred to refer to it as the West's "civilizing mission". Aspiring natives could "evolve" themselves, until they became worthy of the sta-

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tus of *évolué* (evolved one). On this basis, a selected few could obtain a *carte d'immatriculation* (a certificate of political and civilizational "maturity") which conferred on them legal equality with the white masters. In 1957, in Belgian Congo with the population of 13 million, out of 50,000 *évolués* a mere 1,557 were holders of this certificate.

Authoritarian Iberia: between empire and democracy

After the Second World War, the undemocratic character of their empires posed a serious ideological and economic dilemma to these metropolises that prided themselves to be advanced democracies of Western Europe. Not such qualms for Western Europe's established autocracies. Neither did Madrid nor Portugal have to tie themselves into rhetorical and legal knots on this issue. The governing elites of Francoist Spain and António de Oliveira Salazar's Portuguese Estado Novo did not have to spend time on such fruitless efforts to square metropolitan democracy with imperial authoritarianism. From the standpoint of ideology and governance, both Iberian metropolises were homogenously authoritarian like their overseas empires. By the turn of the 1970s, the remnants of Spain's once worldwide maritime empire had been effectively limited to the Spanish Sahara (today's Spanish Sahara under the Moroccan occupation). Although amounting to two-thirds of the territory of Spain, the colony's population of about 70,000 was negligible from Madrid's perspective.

Portugal was one of postwar Europe's poorest countries of little demographic potential, because its population of almost nine million in 1963 was then constantly shrinking until the end of dictatorship in 1974. In 1960 Portugal's GDP per capita in 1985 US dollars amounted to a paltry 1,800, growing slowly to 5,000 dollars two decades later, already under democracy that was also bringing economic fruits. In comparison, Spain fared much better, the same economic indicator stood in the country at $3,100 in 1960 and jumped to $7,400 in 1980. Spain developed more rapidly, thanks to tourism and Madrid's decision to not engage in costly imperialist wars after independence was granted to Equatorial Guinea in 1968. In turn, autocratic Portugal seized on its empire as the main pivot for the reinvention of this country.

Already in the interwar period, not burdened by destruction or military expense incurred by the two world wars, Lisbon embarked on pro-imperial propaganda. Its hallmark was the oft-reprinted map, titled *Portugal não é um pais pequeno* (Portugal is not a small country). It depicted Portugal together with its colonial possessions interposed against the map of Europe in the 1930s. In this designation,

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such an imperially enlarged Portugal extended from Lisbon in the west to the Polish-Soviet frontier in the east, and from southern Sweden to northern Greece. The map came in the wake of the 1933 constitution that innovatively defined Portugal as *estado-nação unitário* (unitary nation-state) composed of Portugal and its overseas provinces (*província ultramarina*). The term colony was dropped and after 1950 the concept of Portuguese Empire strategically disappeared from public discourse. The future belonged to the tri-continental (pluri-continental) nation-state of Portugal.

Following the Great Depression, the economic outlook in Europe was bleak. To ameliorate the situation, Lisbon encouraged emigration to the country's overseas provinces in order to deal with unemployment and for the sake of making the unitary character of pluri-continental Portugal a socio-political reality on the ground. In 1960 Angola's GDP per capita was half of Portugal's, while in Mozambique it amounted to two-thirds of the home country's indicator. What statistics did not show was the highly unequal distribution of wealth in the colonies. White settlers (colonizers) from Portugal owned most of it. In 1960, at 170,000, the Portuguese (white) settlers accounted for three per cent of Angola's population. They enjoyed an opulent plantation-style lifestyle, comparable to that led by apartheid South Africa's whites or known from the US's pre-Civil War South. The provincial capital of Luanda was a richer and more cosmopolitan city than Portugal's capital of Lisbon.

Before the dream of democracy could be realized in Portugal, the country's remaining colonies had to be granted independence.

What appeared to be a colonial paradise incarnated soon came tumbling down. Between 1961 and 1974 Lisbon was compelled to fight numerous brutal imperialist wars in Angola, Mozambique or Portuguese Guinea (today, Guinea Bissau) for preventing increasingly inevitable decolonization. The autocratic regime was desperate to keep the pretence of tri-continental Portugal alive. Eventually, the human, economic and political cost was too high to bear. In 1974 the Carnation Revolution toppled the authoritarian system, heralding the rise of democracy in Portugal. To the leaders and the elite, it was obvious that democracy would be a contradiction in terms if implemented only in the European province of pluricentric Portugal. It turned out that before the dream of democracy could be realized in Portugal, first of all, the country's remaining colonies (overseas provinces) had to be granted independence.

Empires are inherently unequal in constitutional, economic, political or social sense. Hence, establishing democracy in an empire is a sheer impossibility. Having observed the Portuguese dilemma, the Spanish quickly learned the lesson. In

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1975 the country's dictator Francisco Franco died. The governing elite knew that most Spaniards wanted democracy, as enjoyed by Western European and American tourists, who had been flocking to the Spanish beaches since the 1950s. The elite decided to go with the flow of the popular will. Madrid did nothing to prevent Morocco's seizure of Spanish Sahara. Rabat's move spared Spain's new democratic government a headache of deciding on how to proceed with the return of independence to the country's last colony. The remnants of the country's empire gone, Spain was set and ready for building a successful democracy.

Russia: democracy or empire?

In socio-economic terms, the bi-continental Soviet empire was quite similar to its Portuguese counterpart. Many of Moscow's overland provinces, be it Azerbaijan, Estonia, Kazakhstan or Ukraine, were richer in consumer products and the availability of decent accommodation than this empire's Muscovian metropolis, extending from Moscow to Leningrad (St Petersburg). In the eyes of many Soviet citizens (mainly ethnic Russians, or the empire's colonial masters), even the capital of world communism lost in competition to the truly European cities of Lviv, Riga or Vilnius. The latter come together with their meticulously preserved old towns that boast medieval, renaissance and baroque architecture, which is so conspicuously absent in Moscow.

Why did democracy not strike root in post-Soviet Russia, despite genuine efforts in this direction, following the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union? After all, Boris Yeltsin let go of Russia's colonies known under the euphemistic designation of "Soviet socialist union republics". However, despite this unexpected bout of decolonization, the Russian ruling elite remained relentlessly imperial in their mindset, including convinced democrats. They saw this unplanned decolonization of 1991 as a temporary (or even tactical) setback. Nothing of significance would prevent restoring the Russian Empire, as it was at its peak – namely a tri-continental Russia, including Alaska. Second, already in 1993, Yeltsin ditched democracy altogether when he ordered the shelling of the Russian Duma, which disobeyed the president's will. Third, the 1991 split of the Soviet Union at best amounted to a semi-decolonization. A quick glance at the map ascertains that as many as 21 national (autonomous) republics spot today's Russia, accounting for a third of the country's territory and a fifth of its inhabitants.

With the two imperialist wars of genocidal character (1991–1994, 1999–2000), Moscow suppressed the Chechen anticolonial movement for independent Ichkeria. No genuine decolonization of the neo-imperial Russian Federation would be

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allowed. The bloody example made Tatarstan think better about its earlier drive towards independence. The Kremlin would not have it even at the cost of levelling the Tatar capital of Kazan. The ethnically Russian settler colonies in Asia conceded and scaled down in their appeals for autonomy.

Hence, whoever succeeds Vladimir Putin on the Kremlin's throne and whatever a political system of governance is adopted for another incarnation of "new Russia", one thing is certain. No democracy will happen in this country unless Russia undergoes full decolonization, like Portugal in 1974 or Spain in 1975. Without resigning from the ethnically non-Russian and settler ("white" Russian) colonies, democracy will remain just an elusive dream for the Russians. Even if a charismatic leader promises a democratic system of government to Russia and the country's inhabitants enthusiastically embrace the project. De facto deep inequalities in legal status and opportunities that are inherent in empires would quickly prevent this yet another attempt at democracy in Russia without decolonization. In the debacle that would inevitably follow, Russian imperialists would swiftly get the upper hand, binning any hopes for democratization. Like Yeltsin's governing coterie did after 1993 and by choosing, in 1999, as successor the unabashed imperialist, which Putin is.

Formally, all Russian inhabitants enjoy the same equal citizenship. But as the Orwellian norm is in empires, some are more equal than others. In Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine, per unit of population defined in ethnic terms, more Bashkirs die than ethnically Russian Muscovians. No democracy can be built on a foundation that in reality remains ready-made for the revival of an empire or for the maintenance of the really existing empire under the guise of a different designation. The latter, for instance, is the case of communist China. Had democrats prevailed at Tiananmen Square in 1989, no democratic China would have emerged, unless it had freed (permitted for the decolonization of) Inner Mongolia, Tibet or the Uyghurs' homeland of Altishahr (Xinjiang). In a nutshell, democracy and imperialism do not mix. EE

Tomasz Kamusella is Reader (Professor Extraordinarius) in Modern Central and Eastern European History at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. His recent monographs include *Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War* (Routledge 2018), *Politics and Slavic Languages* (Routledge 2021) and *Eurasian Empires as Blueprints for Ethiopia* (Routledge 2021). His reference *Words in Space and Time: A Historical Atlas of Language Politics in Modern Central Europe* is available as an open access publication.

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The Orthodox churches still think in imperial terms

An interview with Cyril Hovorun, a professor of philosophy at University College Stockholm. Interviewer: Vazha Tavberidze.

VAZHA TAVBERIDZE: I have read your essay published in 2015, titled "Christian duty in Ukraine". I wanted to ask, nine years later, what is the duty of a Christian when it comes to Ukraine?

CYRIL HOVORUN: I think that duty stems from the Gospel, from the words of Jesus. Everything that Russia does actually violates all ten commandments, which are basic for all monotheistic religions, but particularly for Christianity. So this violation of the commandments should be condemned clearly, by the Christians: thou shall not kill, shall not steal, and so forth. Yet, it seems that the Christians – and I don't want to generalize, I should say that many Christians in different traditions, including Orthodox, are very clear about this war, they have been very explicit and have spoken up against the war, and perform their duty as Christians very well. Yet when we talk about the ecclesiastical structures, the patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops and so forth, the hierarchy of the church, and those who sometimes identify themselves with a church, I think it is a wrong identification. The church is much larger than them. The church is made up of people. And as I said, many people expressed very clearly their condemnation of the war. But the churches, the official churches, in their official statements, they are hesitant, and therefore there is a gap, a significant difference between what the people in the churches think and say, and what the official churches think and say, this is a big problem for global Christianity.

We see that while the entire world has expressed very clear concerns and solidarity with the Ukrainian people who are under Russian attack, the churches, as a rule, either keep silent, or still use euphemisms to describe the war, they try not to name the perpetrator prop-

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erly. They hesitate to make their position clear. This applies to the big ecumenical communities like the World Council of Churches, which quite often uses problematic language to describe the war. And it has a tradition of putting Ukraine and Russia on the same footing, and they treat this war as a war where all sides are somehow to be blamed for the war. Even with the Roman Catholic Church, which is the largest church, still, the language is not always clear. On the one hand, Pope Francis has clearly condemned the war and expresses solidarity with the Ukrainian people, but at the same time, he uses ambiguous words and language to describe the war, which upsets people in Ukraine. For example, when he called it a fratricide. He also said that the war was caused by "NATO barking at Russia's door". The language is uneven when it comes to explaining the war. Of course, he's very clear in supporting Ukraine in expressing his solidarity and empathy with the people. Some churches do not do even that, especially the Orthodox churches, which seems very strange. The majority of Ukrainians are Orthodox and they expected much more solidarity from the Orthodox people, Orthodox countries, including Georgia, for example.

I am curious what you think is the reasoning for those Orthodox churches to exercise reluctance, but let's look at the Vatican first – why the ambiguity?

There has been a long tradition since the beginning of the 20th century, when the Vatican tried and still tries to use language where they do not name a perpetrator by name. This was the case with Hitler, for example, or Mussolini. The Vatican tried to develop political relations with various regimes regardless of whether they were good or bad, and for this reason they try to avoid the language of confrontation. It seems that the Vatican is still hopeful to develop some kind of relationship even with the Kremlin and to leave room for manoeuvre. Sure, Pope Francis did famously say to Patriarch Kirill that he should stop being an altar boy to Putin and instead of talking politics he should talk the language of the Christian faith. Yet officially, when the Vatican hesitates to condemn violent regimes and hesitates to name perpetrators, it is a political decision. When it comes to the Orthodox churches, I believe they are hesitant to condemn the war also for political reasons. I believe it has to do with the Byzantine legacy. The Orthodox churches still think in imperial terms, in the back of their mind, Byzantium is still alive. I think many Orthodox churches nowadays perceive Russia as a sort of new Byzantium, as a reincarnation of the old imperial authority, which favoured Orthodoxy. They are ready, prepared to forgive everything that this new empire does, just for this dream of Byzantium. Sometimes it is in the subconscious that they feel that the Kremlin, this centre of power, at least claims that it protects Orthodoxy. And the churches seem to be captivated or paralyzed by this dream of the reincarnation of Byzantium.

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Photo courtesy of Cyril Hovorun

But there are plenty of examples even in Byzantine history when the church, the clergy and the emperor were at odds. They didn't always go hand in hand, there were not just political disputes between them, but also ideological. Don't we see that happening here? The church calling out the imperial authority for what it is, a false Byzantium?

I think the reason for that is that people who make references to Byzantium don't know Byzantium for what it truly was. They have a dream about Byzantium, but their design is mythological, not rooted in historical reality. Take, for example, the way Byzantium is constructed by one of the main ideologists of Putin, Metropolitan Tykhon Shevkunov, who is now in Crimea. He has created his own bizarre Byzantium, he has produced a movie about Byzantium and published a book as well, and in all his designs, his vision of Byzantium is a complete fantasy. It has nothing to do with reality. So people who dream about Byzantium, they often don't know much about Byzantium or do not want to know if it doesn't serve their interests. The historical fact that there was always a tension between the church and the state in Byzantium doesn't exactly help people who dream about the new Byzantium between the church and the state.

Could there be other reasons for it as well? Let's take a scenario where a certain Orthodox church's reluctance to speak up is motivated by political common sense, or rather, a survival instinct of sorts, not to alienate Moscow. This could be the case for the Georgian Orthodox Church for example…

I said that the Byzantine dreaming is one of the reasons, but not the only one. Certainly, there are some real political reasons for the churches to abstain from judging Moscow. Take, for example, the Church of Antioch, it is very much dependent on the Assad regime in Syria. And Assad is really a puppet of the Kremlin. Take the Serbian Church, the Serbian government is very much under Russian influence and the church complies. The same is true in Georgia. Unfortunately, the government, the present government is quite pro-Russian and quite anti-Ukrainian, which is a very different outlook compared with its people's opinion. The church unfortunately, relies on the opinion of the government, so political issues play a very important role in the way the churches stand vis-à-vis this war. This is what I call "political

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Orthodoxy", which is a distortion of the true religion. That's what we are observing in Russia to a great extent – the official policy of the Moscow Patriarchate is a distortion of Orthodoxy.

Speaking of Russia as the new Byzantium – how big is the impact and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, which appears to be trying to turn this into some sort of a new crusade, a holy war for Russians?

I have quite a radical opinion about that. My opinion is that without the Russian Church, this war would probably have not happened. It would have been impossible. The war needs ideas, the war needs explanations and reasons. This war does not make any sense without the explanations provided by the church. That doesn't mean that the church's explanations make any sense speaking from the Christian perspective, but they at least constructed ideas that attempt to explain the war and pretend to inspire people to go to war. Most Russian soldiers who go to the frontline are interested mostly in money, they are mercenaries, but when the church says it's a holy war, it's a just and righteous thing to do, it also gives them a social capital of sorts. The Russian population is deprived of many things as a result of the war. And this deprivation is compensated to a great extent by the explanations provided by the church, which explains this war as a kind of existential, metaphysical, cosmic battle against the powers of evil incarnated in the West. I sometimes compare this war with a mine. A mine has explosive material inside and it has a fuse that actually causes it to explode. So the explosive material is the weaponry, Russian artillery, tanks, jet fighters etc. The fuse is the ideas, without ideas, the explosion would not happen. And that's what the Russian Church does – it provides the fuse. That's why I think the role of the church is absolutely crucial in this war and the Russian Church needs to be held accountable for this as well. When that day comes, when all the perpetrators of the war, all those who are responsible for this war are brought to justice, I think there should be a tribunal, an international court. In this framework, I think we should consider bringing those in the Russian Church who are responsible for the invasion to justice.

Looking at Ukraine, what is your take on this overarching and ongoing religious dispute and conflict between the Orthodox churches?

There are two Orthodox churches in Ukraine today. One is autocephalous, independent. And the other one is still connected with the Russian Church. The connection is unclear, even the representatives of the church seem to be split on the matter, some deny the connection, some say they still recognize Patriarch Kirill. It is really a grey zone, and this dispute is problematic, because Ukraine needs the unity of its people in withstanding the aggressor. The churches contribute to this consolidation. Unfortunately, I'm talking about both churches. They use different rhetoric, they use different ar-

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guments to accuse one another, the autocephalous church accuses the quasi-Moscow Patriarchate of collaboration with the aggressor, and the other accuses the first of being non-canonical and schismatic, which is also a big exaggeration. So they use exaggerations to fight each other. The churches are one of the dividing lines of the society at the moment. Which is very unfortunate.

As far as I understand there is pending legislation in Ukraine which is designed to curb the influence of the Moscow-connected church and ultimately outlaw it. Kyiv explains that this is aimed at preventing religious institutions from becoming a conduit for Russian influence. Yet Ukraine critics argue it is more about clamping down on religious freedom.

First of all, I should say that legally, it is impossible to ban or outlaw the church because the law, at least its draft – we still don't know what the final version will look like – does not envisage a precondition for that. The legislation never mentions the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, let alone says that it will be prohibited. The law provides that churches should have their administrative centres in the country. The aggressor country, which is Russia, should be deprived of registration and the church should be registered differently. If the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that claims that it is not a part of the Moscow Patriarchate anymore is afraid of being prohibited in this way, then it is an implicit way to acknowledge that yes, they are still a part of the Moscow Patriarchate. So in order not to be afraid of the consequences, they just need to break ties, very clearly and honestly, with Moscow. The real harm is how it all will be perceived internationally, it is already harmful for Ukraine, so I think it is better not to proceed with this legislation. But again, I do not see in this draft any threat to religious freedom in Ukraine, the level of religious freedom in Ukraine is very high. And the religious diversity is astonishing. It's a polyphony of religious beliefs united for the Ukrainian cause. For example, take the relations between Muslims and Jews in Ukraine, nowhere in the world can you find such friendly relations between these groups as you do in Ukraine. EE

Cyril Hovorun is a professor in ecclesiology, international relations and ecumenism at University College Stockholm. He is originally from Ukraine, where he first began his studies in theoretical physics before moving to the study of theology at the theological seminary and academy in Kyiv.

Vazha Tavberidze is a Georgian journalist and staff writer with *RFE/RL's* Georgian Service. His writing has been published in various Georgian and international media outlets, including *The Times*, the *Spectator*, the *Daily Beast* and *New Eastern Europe*.

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Winter is a constant struggle for survival

On the Avdiivka front, the challenges faced by Ukrainian paramedics in the cold

JOSEPH ROCHE

The second winter of Russia's war against Ukraine is much harsher than the last, with temperatures sometimes nearing minus 20 degrees centigrade. Yet, the low temperatures do not change the intensity of the combat. The Russians waited for the deep cold and the ground to solidify to launch new offensives, including in Avdiivka, where volunteer combat medics attempt to evacuate and save the lives of wounded Ukrainian soldiers.

In Donetsk Oblast, the purplish-blue flashing lights of an armoured 4x4 turned ambulance tear through the thickness of the night. On the battered asphalt, fires sketch reddish stains. Fog covers the ground, and Oleh Kyrsa, 32, the ambulance driver, presses on the accelerator. The night is calm and the vehicle, noiselessly, makes its way up the M030 road connecting the Bakhmut sector to the city of Sloviansk. Earlier in the day, Ukrainian forces had stopped a new Russian assault. "It's just another day," Oleh smiles, without taking his eyes off the road.

By the end of December, the commander of the ground forces, Oleksandr Syrsky, now head of the Ukrainian armed forces, had reported on his Telegram channel

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that intense fighting was taking place across the entire eastern front, and that the Ukrainian army, from Kupiansk to Bakhmut through Lyman, was continuing to resist, wave after wave, the assaults of the Russian army.

Every minute counts

About ten kilometres north of Sloviansk, at the cost of tens of thousands of deaths, the Russian forces, after months of fighting, had nevertheless managed to break through Ukrainian positions in the Avdiivka sector and begun the arduous encirclement of the city. On February 12th, Dmytro Riumshyn, the commander of Ukraine's 47th Separate Mechanized Brigade, warned of the advances of Russian forces within the city.

"Every minute counts," says Oleh in a calm tone. In the back, Oleksandr Babenko, 24, a paramedic, and Serhii Derenko, 32, an anaesthesiologist, are taking care of a wounded man. His condition is critical, whispers Serhii while injecting a syringe into his patient's arm.

All of them work for MOAS – a medical and rescue organization that since the first days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has supported the Ukrainian army. Though the organization is completely independent and receives no funds from the Ukrainian government, it has helped the Ukrainian army save the lives of more than 20,000 soldiers.

MOAS is a medical and rescue organization that has supported the Ukrainian army since the first days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Comprising 150 Ukrainian health professionals including doctors, MOAS, with its 50 ambulances, navigates across the entire Ukrainian front from south to east.

"He was wounded this morning near Bakhmut. A shell exploded in his face," Oleksandr explains. "He has a cranial trauma but we don't know more."

The man is lying on a stretcher, his face covered in thick bandages. Just a blood-dried fleshy mouth reveals itself through the wraps. He is peaceful. He has fallen asleep. He was stabilized earlier in the day, and tonight the MOAS team is taking him to one of the military hospitals in the city of Dnipro, 200 kilometres away.

Oleh drives on a seemingly bottomless wavering road, and his eyes squint to decipher the few metres lit by the ambulance. It is almost like any other night for the MOAS team. After almost two years of war, the team is now accustomed to the intensity of combat, the long hours of assessments, and war injuries. Only one piece of data today seems to cut through their routine: winter.

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Harsh winter

If it is the second winter of the war, it is nonetheless much harsher than last year, with temperatures sometimes nearing minus 20 degrees centigrade. Oleksandr, one of the medics, shares that the low temperatures do not change much about the intensity of the combat. If the rainy period and the end of the Ukrainian counter-offensive allowed them to catch their breath, then the Russians waited for the deep cold and the ground to solidify to launch new offensives against them.

> This winter has been much harsher than last year, with temperatures sometimes nearing minus 20 degrees centigrade.

"With the cold and frost, everything takes much longer," explains Oleksiy. "Everything is slowed down, and we have to drive even more carefully to avoid obstacles."

Artem Bildly, 34, a former civilian paramedic and one of the team leaders of MOAS, explains that an evacuation that used to take seven hours can now take more than nine. "It can even take up to 12 hours depending on the condition of the wounded. Sometimes we have to stop from hospital to hospital to get new blood transfusions."

Daniil, callsign "Rebbe", in his forties and a combat medic in the third assault brigade, downplays the impact of the freeze on their movement. "It's more dangerous than in summer, that's undeniable, but at the same time, the freeze allows us to move again. During the rainy season, it's almost impossible to work, and if the fighting is less intense for this reason, we still continue to evacuate wounded."

Faced with the continuous flow of injured and long evacuations, the small team barely had time to sleep the night before and made more than five round trips between the front lines and the regional hospitals.

"We are forced to drive very slowly… the hardest part on these bumpy roads is being able to brake in time without ending up off the road," explains Artem. "But despite our vigilance, we regularly witness accidents."

Another difficulty of winter, Artem explains, lies in the additional costs imposed by the deep cold. This can range from snow tires, to winter fuel, or even winter wiper fluid to ensure good visibility.

Rebbe is also concerned about the impact of the front. "At line zero, when we evacuate our wounded, the vehicles are not heated, so we compensate with chemical heating blankets, but we only have a few and they are very expensive." Rebbe explains that unfortunately, the Ukrainian army does not supply them with this type of equipment, and they are forced to rely on the generosity of donations and volunteer aid.

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All these additional costs amount to a sorely missed income that they could have invested in the health of the wounded they evacuate. But the most crucial thing is that the cold profoundly impacts the aid provided to their patients.

Artem, between two silences, explains that the patient must always be kept at a body temperature above 37 degrees centigrade. "To achieve this, we equip ourselves with electric heating blankets, infusion warmers. We also try to maintain a high temperature in our vehicles."

"We had the case of a young soldier whose body temperature had dropped to 32 degrees," explains Serhii.

"He was not seriously injured, but due to the cold and the duration of the evacuation, he arrived unconscious at the hospital and had a cardiac arrest." The young soldier was miraculously resuscitated. Unfortunately, this is not the case for everyone, confirms Artem, and in winter, hypothermia remains an important factor in death. "Hypothermia kills slowly without one realizing it. That's why winter remains a struggle for survival at every moment."

Joseph Roche is an independent French journalist and geopolitical analyst who covers the war in Ukraine for various outlets.

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MOAS is bringing emergency medical care, pharmaceutical aid and first response services to the people impacted by the violence across the country.

Photo: Nicolas Cleuet / Le Pictorium

MOAS personnel take a break from their life-saving activities. They need to be ready at any given moment to spring into action when receiving a request for help.

Photo: Nicolas Cleuet / Le Pictorium

A MOAS doctor cleans up as he waits for the next mission. The MOAS team is not funded or sponsored by the Ukrainian government, however they work closely with civilian volunteers and military units. It is estimated that their work has saved over 20,000 lives.

Photo: Nicolas Cleuet / Le Pictorium

ІКАР

MOAS
UKRAINE

A MOAS team works to save the life of a wounded soldier during the harsh winter of 2024. "With the cold and frost, everything takes much longer," explains Oleksiy. "Everything is slowed down, and we have to drive even more carefully to avoid obstacles."

Photo: Nicolas Cleuet / Le Pictorium

MOAS is made up of 150 Ukrainian health professionals including doctors. Its 50 ambulances navigate across the entire Ukrainian front from the south to the east.

Photo: Nicolas Cleuet / Le Pictorium

Who are the Russians fighting on the side of Ukraine

AGNIESZKA PIKULICKA-WILCZEWSKA

After Russia invaded Ukraine, around a million Russians left the country and moved abroad, fearing mobilization or in protest against the war. While most of the new exiles are involved in different types of political or social activism, a small minority has decided to take up arms against their own people. They have organized into battalions fighting on the side of Ukraine.

In mid-March this year, Russians in the Belgorod and Kursk regions took to the polls to vote for their president to the tune of shots and explosions. Just days before the election, the two regions bordering Ukraine fell under relentless attack from Ukraine-based Russian military units. This was the third time that Russian citizens fighting under the command of GUR – Ukraine's military intelligence unit – had made an incursion into their homeland following the Bryansk and Belgorod raids in March and May last year, respectively.

In their Telegram channels, updated regularly as the operation continued, the Russian Volunteer Corps, the Free Russia Legion and the Siberian Battalion – the three Russian groups fighting on Ukraine's side – published videos from their actions and appeals to Russians: "Join the Siberian battalion! Fight against the imperial dictatorial regime by any means," one of them read. Calling themselves the "Russian liberation forces" conducting a "limited military operation", they also urged the authorities to evacuate civilians from the fighting zone.

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Russians fighting against Russia

According to the Russian Volunteer Corps, over 600 Russian soldiers lost their lives as a result of the operation, which lasted late into March 17th, the election day. The pro-Ukrainian groups have reportedly taken over and moved to Ukraine large stocks of military equipment, including two tanks. It is difficult to independently verify these numbers, but it is not numbers that are crucial here. By bringing the war back to Russia, ahead of the presidential election, the units showed ordinary Russians that they are not safe in the comfort of their homes and that Vladimir Putin's iron-fist rule hardly brings peace and stability. The government cares little about people's security and well-being.

Russians fighting against Russia have also provided a convenient image for Ukraine's public relations in a time when the result of the war is far from certain. Russian citizens resorting to treason to fight against Putin's regime, risking their lives for the sake of defending Ukraine, confirms Ukraine's higher moral ground vis-à-vis the dictatorial Russian regime, hated by its own people. At the same time, the occasional cross-border incursions are organized by Russians, keeping Ukrainian soldiers away from Russian soil, although the recent raid has been accompanied by Ukrainian missiles falling on Russian cities.

While the presence of Russians in the ranks of the Ukrainian foreign legion serves several purposes, the beginnings for these Russian wannabe soldiers were far from easy. Following the Russian invasion, Kyiv banned Russian citizens from entering Ukraine, while those who were already living in the country found it hard to join the then forming voluntary units.

> The recent cross-border incursions are organized by Russians fighting for Ukraine, keeping Ukrainian soldiers away from Russian soil.

"It was impossible to interact with any government bodies having a Russian passport. We, as a group of Russians, had nowhere to go and apply. In the end, we decided that we should create groups of our own, just like the Belarusians, Chechens and many others did," Vladimir "Cardinal", a member of the Russian Volunteer Corps, told me on the phone in April 2023. "Some of us used to be part of Azov's first team back in 2014. The rest were associated with the National Corps (Azov's civilian movement). In August [2022] we registered our division, and in autumn we received official status, contracts, salaries and everything else."

But it took several months yet for the Russian Volunteer Corps to start recruiting volunteers from abroad. With the help of the Poland-based Civic Council, the first group of new recruits crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border in January 2023. But

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recruitment has remained a lengthy and complicated process. As Denis Sokolov from the Civic Council tells me, there are hundreds of desperate Russians willing to join the fight. For safety reasons, however, they should only apply to join Russian units once they are out of Russia, but even then it can take many months to receive security clearance and cross into Ukraine. According to a source with knowledge of the Russian volunteer battalions, who refused to be named, there are currently between 300 to 400 Russian citizens fighting on Ukraine's side.

A fight for Russia as an ethnic state?

After Russia invaded Ukraine, around a million Russians left the country and moved abroad fearing mobilization or in protest against the war. While most of the new exiles are involved in different types of political or social activism – as the results of the Outrush research project suggest – a small minority has decided to take up arms against their own people. Those who decided to join volunteer units may never see their families again, and never return to the streets in which they grew up. They are also legitimate targets for their country. Their families might be in danger, too.

What unites those who decided to join the Russian military units in Ukraine is not only hatred of Vladimir Putin and his regime. It is also the belief that Russia remains an imperial power, a remnant of the Soviet Union with an artificially overgrown territory which can only survive if it allows for the secession of its constitutive parts. That is, if it liberates the colonized ethnic regions and gives freedom to its minorities. They differ, however, in how they see the future of Russia itself.

The Russian Volunteer Corps grew out of the wider Azov movement. Their founder, Denis Kapustin "Nikitin", nom de guerre White Rex, has long been known as an extreme-right activist, a hooligan, mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments organizer and entrepreneur selling fascist-inspired merchandise. Many far-right watchers, including Antifascist Europe, have referred to him as a neo-Nazi. After leaving Russia in 2001, the 38-year-old and his family moved to Germany where he became well-known among extreme-right and hooligan circles and over the years made connections with various nationalist groups across Europe. In 2018 he moved to Ukraine, where he set up his own MMA club and became involved in the activities of the Azov movement. At the time, Kyiv was already a safe haven for many Russian extreme-right activists who flocked to Ukraine in the wave of post-Maidan euphoria, often escaping prosecution back home. In 2019 Germany issued Nikitin a Schengen ban for alleged "efforts against the liberal democratic constitution". When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, he proved to be an

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effective organizer, respected commander and a skilled fighter. He has never abandoned his extreme-right views, however. He continues to post on his social media in the same spirit and most of his fellow fighters from the Russian Volunteer Corps share his ethno-nationalist views.

"Russians are the only people in the Russian Federation who do not have their own national and cultural autonomy. Even the possibility of creating an organization based on Russian national identity is prohibited," Cardinal tells me. "We understand the nation as an ethnic community, not as a political one. The Russian Federation, the government and its propagandists, are trying to turn all the peoples that inhabit the country into common Russians. They are trying to reconstruct these peoples' identities and create something incomprehensible by putting them into one pot. We understand why this is being done. Because for an ethnic Russian, an ethnic Ukrainian, for example, will never be an enemy, because he is his brother, a Slav. But for a Russian imperialist, everyone who is not Russian in the wide sense is an enemy. Such Russians have a cult of territory, they dream of annexing and expanding indefinitely. It is like cancer. And we want to fight this."

Cardinal continues by saying that the Russian Volunteer Corps wants to create a Russian nation state out of the regions that are predominantly populated by Russians. He assures me that people of other ethnic backgrounds will be welcomed in the new Russian state, as long as they accept the local rules.

Cardinal grew up in Moscow and has long protested against Putin. He moved to Ukraine before the full-scale invasion. He misses some things about his hometown, but he is not too nostalgic. The next time he visits Moscow, he tells me, he will be in a tank, with a weapon in his hands, liberating Russia from the imperial Russian Federation, fighting the imperialists.

De-Putinization

The Siberian Battalion is also anti-imperial, and they too see the future of Russia as divided into smaller ethnic parts, but its goals are nothing like those of the Corps. The Battalion is open to all ethnic groups and ideologies and brings together people from as varied views as anarchists, the Free Ingria Movement – a group fighting for the independence of St Petersburg and the surrounding region – and even Muslims.

Siziy is a 26-year-old tall white man. He looks shy and withdrawn when I meet him in a café on the outskirts of Kyiv. His nom de guerre means "grey blue" and is likely not accidental. As a child, Siziy lost all his body hair. The doctors were helpless, and no one could explain the root cause for his condition, let alone cure it.

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He spent years in hospitals, visiting homeopaths and religious healers. His mother came to believe that only God could cure her son. They would visit holy sites across Russia, join pilgrimage trips, or bathe in holy water even four times a year. For Siziy, Orthodoxy soon became synonymous with suffering. In April 2022 he converted to Islam, which has since been an important part of his identity, the final destination after long years of spiritual searching.

While his condition has prevented him from serving in the Russian army, he is physically fit. He trained in taekwondo for years and has led a healthy lifestyle. When Russia invaded Ukraine, he felt that joining the war was his duty. Staying in Russia in the comfort of his family home seemed pointless, a waste of life in the face of Russian barbarity in Ukraine. He left the country and applied to join the Siberian Battalion. After a lengthy wait, he crossed into Ukraine, leaving behind a prosperous business, his friends and family. His parents found out about his decision when he was already in Ukraine, but they accepted it.

"I would like Ukraine to return to its borders from 1991 and the total de-Putinization of Russia. I would like the Russian people to finally see the truth and bow their heads to the Ukrainians and Georgians. I would like to see repentance, first of all, for Putin's regime and everything it imposed on people," Siziy says. "I would like the regions to have the right to self-determination and for people within their regions to decide what laws they want to adopt and how they want to build their relations with the world. Russia has destroyed federalism."

Just like Cardinal, Siziy made a decision that is irrevocable. And he, too, believes that he will one day return home with a rebellion. While it is hard to expect that a few hundred Russian partisans will abolish Putin, constant drops of water can wear away a stone. With the raids of the Russian regions bordering Ukraine, the three groups little by little hope to change the minds of the locals.

On their Telegram accounts, Russian units promote a programme for law enforcement officials from Russia who want to switch sides and become voluntary hostages of Ukraine. It is called "I want to live".

"There is no point for you to risk your life in the name of a criminal regime, which treats all Russians as cannon fodder. Save your life and the opportunity to contribute to the creation of a free Russia," the announcement on RVC's Telegram channel reads. To switch sides, Russian officials can use a chat-bot or contact any of the Russian units. According to the Corps' channel, in the recent raid, the Russian units took 27 hostages. It is unclear how many of them, if any, were voluntary. EE

Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska is a Polish journalist and writer focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. Her most recent book is titled *Nowy Uzbekistan* (New Uzbekistan) and was published in 2023.

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Minority communities and their future in Ukraine

The case of Roma

STEPHAN MÜLLER, NATALI TOMENKO AND VOLODOMYR YAKOVENKO

Today, all of Ukraine's communities are fighting to protect the country from Russian aggression. This includes the Roma, an ethnic group that faces particular challenges in relation to their place in society. The integration of Roma, both now and after the end of the war, will be a key test regarding the success of a new Ukraine.

Ukraine is home to more than 100 national minorities and communities. Members of these communities are victims of Russia's full-scale aggression just as much as the members of the majority population. The communities in Ukraine also participate in defending Ukraine against the Russian aggressors. Crimean Tatars, Greeks, Hungarians, Roma, Koreans, Romanians, Moldavians, and individuals from various other communities are fighting on the frontline. They often stand together with Jews and Muslims, who are defending the country alongside their Christian and Atheist neighbours.

The diversity of Ukraine and the contributions of members of these communities in defending the country are often overlooked. Outside observers and international decision-makers tend not to notice the existence and specific challenges of these communities. Instead of insisting on their equal inclusion in assistance, recovery, and reconstruction programmes, they are often ignored. One way these issues come to the forefront is through receiving negative attention, as is the case

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with the anti-Ukrainian stance of the Hungarian government and the pressure it exerts on issues related to the Hungarian minority.

Diverse challenges

Roma face strong institutional "antigypsyism" and are not generally respected as an integral part of Ukraine. One should not forget that in the years before the Russian full-scale invasion, pogroms and other forms of violence were committed against Roma. Many Roma from eastern Ukraine who are now IDPs in western or central Ukraine experience antigypsyism. Institutional antigypsyism can also be built upon centuries of anti-Roma laws, such as those introduced during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy or in the Soviet Union. And the experiences of the Holocaust, during which tens of thousands of Ukrainian Roma were murdered, continue to resonate today.

Antigypsyism is often expressed through the disregard for differences within the community or the diversity among Roma, with Roma being stereotyped as "all the same". However, Roma in Ukraine represent a very diverse group with various social, religious and professional backgrounds. This diversity is something that Ukrainian society should appreciate.

Roma in Ukraine represent a very diverse group with various social, religious and professional backgrounds.

Other communities encounter different obstacles. Hungarians face scepticism from the majority due to the irredentist attitude of some of its members and the pro-Russian position of the Hungarian government. On the other hand, many Ukrainian Hungarians support Ukraine and participate in defending the country against the full-scale invasion of Russia. In addition to different national communities, Ukraine is home to a variety of religions – different Christian denominations, Islam or Judaism – and to people of colour. The respective communities have different positions and needs which must be considered when it comes to assistance programmes or planning for the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine. Yet, what all the communities have in common is that many of their members are fighting on the frontlines, defending Ukraine against the Russian aggression.

To a certain extent, Russian aggression brought the communities and the majority population closer together, but wartimes and post-war periods also create specific challenges for members of minority communities, particularly for the most vulnerable and oppressed ones. Minorities are at particular risk of being targeted by violent extremists and neglected in the distribution of or access to humanitarian aid. They are also often excluded from rebuilding efforts in war-torn countries,

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marginalized in post-war nation-building processes, and "misused" by one of the fighting sides or external actors. Among minorities, more vulnerable communities such as Roma face even greater risks. In addition to having endured centuries of discrimination, Roma do not have a kin state that could advocate for their interests. Racism towards Roma has been somewhat accepted in society and violence against Roma has not always been persecuted by authorities. Their economically weaker position increases their vulnerability even more. The negative attitude towards Roma could be further exacerbated by the traumatic wartime experiences of individuals in the conflict-affected regions of Ukraine. This heightened tension increases the risk of violent or discriminatory acts against Roma in the post-war period.

Experiences from other wars show that challenges in wartime and the post-war period can escalate into tensions or serious problems for members of minority communities. In post-war periods, ethnic majorities often overlook the contributions made by minority communities during the conflict, failing to recognize them as integral parts of society, especially when resources are limited. When we look at the wars and their aftermath in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo or Syria, Roma and Roma-related groups such as Dom or Abdal have been disproportionately affected due to their greater (economic) vulnerability, exposure to violence that has forced many to flee, and treatment as unequal citizens by both local authorities and the international community.

Social and mental recovery

An important lesson learnt from post-conflict settings is the necessity to consider the rights and needs of all communities during the early planning stages of the post-conflict period so that they will not be neglected after the war. Recovery and reconstruction must be viewed not solely as tangible processes but also as efforts to rebuild society and reshape people's mindsets. Wars, unfortunately, "normalize" violence. Post-war violence, such as attacks by former combatants against communities that have historically faced violence and are marginalized within society, may be tolerated and inadequately prosecuted.

Therefore, it is paramount that these communities are recognized as integral parts of Ukraine also after the war. The post-war nation-building process must actively involve them and acknowledge their contribution to defending Ukraine. The time to prepare the ground for a post-war democratic, diverse and inclusive Ukraine is now. First and foremost, this entails ensuring the equal inclusion and consideration of the rights and specific needs of all communities in assistance, recovery, and reconstruction programmes. In addition, it is imperative to strengthen social cohe-

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sion within the Ukrainian society. This kind of "social and mental recovery" must include and even promote the diverse communities of Ukraine from the outset.

Such an approach would counter the false narrative of Ukraine being an anti-minority country, and instead promote the narrative of an inclusive and diverse Ukraine. It would also help prevent or at least decrease inter-ethnic tensions or even violence after the war, and thus contribute to social cohesion and a successful post-war recovery. Finally, it would bolster the country's envisaged accession to the European Union. To this end, Ukrainian authorities will have to eliminate racist attitudes and corruption that pose a threat to the equal participation of communities. Internally, they would have to pay close attention to make sure that radical groups will not gain too much power, particularly at the local level. They will also have to take adequate anti-corruption measures.

Manipulations and provocations

Anti-minority attacks could come from (Ukrainian) extremists or be orchestrated by external actors with vested interests. Attacks against the Roma community, for example, could be used to stir up tensions and shift blame onto Ukraine. External actors would be ready to exploit any incidents of anti-community violence or related political developments for their agenda. This could include Russia and its supporters in the West misusing these incidents. Additionally, extremists on both sides might incite tensions in the Transcarpathia Oblast between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Hungarians, which could also impact the large Roma community in the area.

It would be in Ukraine's best interests to take further steps to promote and enhance the inclusion of all communities to show its readiness to uphold and foster inclusivity within the country. The situation of the Roma, as the most vulnerable community, and that of other communities, serves as a significant indicator of Ukraine's democratic maturity.

The amendments made to the Law on National Minorities (Communities) in December 2023 showed that Ukrainian authorities are ready to address some needs and requests from these communities. The amendments also demonstrate that advocacy from international organisations and governments can bring about change. Extending this willingness to accommodate additional needs is imperative since the fight against racism and antigypsyism is hardly mentioned. Ukraine will not achieve diversity and inclusivity unless it firmly addresses these issues.

The assertion made by the former president of the Czech Republic, the late Václav Havel, that the position of Roma is the litmus test for civil society, remains

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relevant today, not only in Ukraine but also in all EU countries. Yet, in many cases, these civil societies have failed. However, in the case of Ukraine, this litmus test could be used to assess whether international and national policies are genuinely committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive Ukraine.

Unity in diversity?

Another relevant document is the state target programme "Unity in Diversity" which is designed to support the implementation of the relevant laws. On May 2nd 2023 Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers approved the concept of the state target national cultural programme until 2034. In September 2023 the government of Ukraine approved the programme, which can be considered an ambitious and positive step forward. The programme acknowledges the participation of members of the communities in defending the country against the Russian aggression and raises the need to fight discrimination. However, the programme falls short when it comes to Roma, as it does not mention the root causes of discrimination, antigypsyism, and the need to combat them.

The omission to address the fight against antigypsyism is surprising since the report of the European Commission stipulates that the Roma-related policies of Ukraine must be fully aligned with the EU Roma Strategic Framework, which places a strong emphasis on the fight against antigypsyism. The "Unity in Diversity" programme aims to ensure that at least 90 per cent of individuals belonging to national minorities (communities) and indigenous peoples of Ukraine feel integrated into the Ukrainian society, while also striving for at least 90 per cent of Ukrainian citizens to recognize them as integral parts of the Ukrainian society.

Without combating antigypsyism, Ukraine will struggle to persuade the ethnic majority that Roma are an integral part of the country, and the Roma community may not feel fully integrated into the Ukrainian society. Besides, the overall content of the programme focuses primarily on cultural support and promotion, lacking provisions for promoting the political participation of communities. Thus, the current approach might make it difficult to achieve the two expected results.

Minorities in the recovery plan

Ukraine's National Recovery Plan consists of a variety of plans addressing different policy fields. The situation, rights and needs of Roma are primarily dealt with in the section titled "Ethnic Affairs and Religion". The document rightfully high-

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lights the need to counter Russian propaganda concerning negative inter-ethnic relations in Ukraine. It emphasizes the necessity for minorities to be accepted by the ethnic majority as integral parts of Ukraine, and conversely, for members of minorities to perceive themselves as integral parts of Ukraine. However, the focus on "culture and information policy" – despite its importance – shows that the rights, needs and concerns of Roma (and other communities) are not prioritised in all relevant policy fields. Consequently, important issues, such as the need to fight antigypsyism in all its forms or the fight against racism in general in all its forms are not included. It is important to recognize that the fight against antigypsyism is essential for the success of any socio-economic policy or measure.

Other unaddressed yet relevant issues include access to documents for IDPs and returning nationals. Appropriate documentation is essential for receiving compensation or requesting reconstruction of destroyed property. The inclusion of Roma in housing projects for IDPs or returnees is also not discussed. Drawing from experiences of accommodating Roma and other ethnic groups from Ukraine as IDPs or temporary protection holders abroad, we can assume that the Roma will not be welcomed by other IDPs or returnees in common housing projects. We can also expect that the local authorities or other organizations will not ensure that Roma are included in such projects. Housing reconstruction projects in previously temporarily occupied territories should consider the specific circumstances of neighbourhoods primarily inhabited by Roma.

The recovery plan fails to address other key challenges specific to the Roma community. Many Roma lack property rights for destroyed or occupied property, which could pose obstacles to receiving compensation or reconstruction assistance. Many of them are either not registered at all or lack all necessary documents. Additionally, many Roma settlements are also not connected to local or regional infrastructure networks. Reconstruction or infrastructure development programmes should therefore actively engage with Roma neighbourhoods and explore ways to involve them in the reconstruction process.

Many Roma lack property rights for destroyed or occupied property, which could pose obstacles to receiving compensation.

Unfortunately, the National Recovery Plan does not address the situation of Roma in the field of education or the labour market. Generally, Roma have lower levels of education, and employment rates are significantly lower. This is particularly true for Roma women. Thus, it would be important to include programmes to assist Roma children and to develop vocational training programmes for women and youth. The recovery plan could also create special scholarships for Roma children to attend secondary schools and universities. Additionally, all these programs

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should incorporate outreach and informational activities targeting the Roma community to raise awareness about available opportunities.

Roma Strategy 2030

In addition to the inclusion of Roma in mainstream policy documents, there are also documents tailored to address Roma-specific issues. Ukraine adopted the "Strategy promoting the realization of the rights and opportunities of persons belonging to the Roma national minority in Ukrainian society for the period up to 2030" (Roma Strategy 2030). The action plan has been adopted at the end of 2023. The Roma Strategy 2030 includes eight targets, the majority of which focus on addressing socio-economic and cultural aspects. For example, the second target aims to combat discrimination. However, neither this target nor the Roma Strategy 2030 in general addresses the need to fight antigypsyism, the root cause of discrimination and social exclusion of Roma. Additionally, they could advocate for the idea that Roma must be recognized and actively promoted as integral members of society to mitigate potential threats.

This omission is striking, especially since the European Union pays particular attention to combating antigypsyism. Consequently, the Roma Strategy 2030 is not in line with the requirements of the European Union. The Ukraine 2023 Report of the European Commission from November 8th also refers to Roma. Importantly, the report highlights that "Roma should also be included in the recovery and reconstruction efforts of Ukraine". In addition, the report raises the need to adopt an action plan and provide sufficient resources for its implementation. This goes beyond the typical requests outlined in European Commission reports for countries in the accession process to implement National Strategies for the Inclusion of Roma. The European Commission seems to have learnt its lessons from post-war Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Roma could only marginally benefit from recovery and reconstruction efforts or did so belatedly.

Full alignment with the EU framework would require Ukraine to prioritize efforts to prevent and combat antigypsyism, even during times of war, alongside the implementation of socio-economic measures, to meet the criteria for joining the European Union. However, one must be realistic. In light of the war and its impact on the society, the situation of Roma and other communities will not be a priority for the government, nor will the relevant governmental authority responsible for national minorities and communities obtain sufficient resources. Financial and technical assistance from external sources, such as the European Union and individual member states, is indispensable for achieving the equal participation of

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Roma and other communities, and ensuring that they are recognized as integral parts of Ukraine.

Lessons learnt and moving forward

This brief analysis of the situation of the communities in Ukraine with a focus on Roma should have made it clear that it is in the interest of all actors – the government of Ukraine, the Ukrainian society, and western partners – to strengthen efforts to achieve equal participation of Roma and other communities in Ukraine and not to repeat mistakes made in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. A common understanding that Roma and other communities are considered an integral part of Ukraine must be enforced through a variety of measures which have to go beyond current approaches proposed in laws and policy documents. These documents could be amended or extended; they could even be accompanied by other laws and policies.

Most communities in Ukraine have kin states that are concerned about their situation and advocate for the government and the EU to protect their rights and address their needs. Roma do not have such a kin state. They are often left to rely on their own, typically weak, international networks, intergovernmental organizations, or individual countries to campaign for the fulfilment of their rights and needs. However, international civil society or think tanks largely overlook their needs and rights, failing to advocate effectively for the equal participation of Roma.

The Ukrainian government and Roma civil society in Ukraine are aware of these needs and understand what actions should be taken. International organizations and individual countries should have already learnt lessons from other wars and post-war settings, encouraged the implementation of appropriate policies and allocated sufficient resources to help prevent the pursuit of a simplistic policy of assimilation. Moreover, the international community should serve as a watchdog to ensure that Ukraine actually implements the measures outlined in various policy documents. EE

Stephan Müller works as an advisor on international affairs
with the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma.

Natali Tomenko is the deputy director of ARCA –
the Youth Agency for the Advocacy of Roma Culture "ARCA".

Volodomyr Yakovenko is the executive director of ARCA –
the Youth Agency for the Advocacy of Roma Culture "ARCA".

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Murivat Beknazarov's art as memory

KAROLINA KLUCZEWSKA

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant more than just the fall of a government. For many, it also brought about the end of a way of life. This includes the artist Murivat Beknazarov, who through his work fought to defend the memories of Soviet Tajikistan's unique cultural life.

When I went to meet Murivat Beknazarov in his studio in Dushanbe for the first time, on a warm autumn day in 2018, he explained to me the location by phone. Since street names are rarely known due to frequent renaming, he told me to find the so-called "artists' house" in the north of the city. "Just ask around, everyone knows this place," he said. That was probably the case in Soviet times, but not anymore. As it turned out, no one knew where this place was, not even people living in neighbouring buildings.

Over the next few years, I continued regularly visiting Beknazarov in his studio on the ground floor of a white, two-story building on what is now Omar Khayam Street. As a researcher interested in socialist art, I interviewed him multiple times: he was one of the most prominent monumental artists and painters of Soviet Tajikistan. Later, our interactions turned into a kind of friendship between a master and a novice. Every time I talked to him, I could not shake the impression that for the last 30 years he has been holding on tightly to a world that did not exist anymore. Rather than for Soviet governance, it was a nostalgia for the social world which emerged in Dushanbe in the 1970s and 1980s: a multinational society, a vibrant artistic community and prestige associated with his profession. That atmosphere profoundly contrasted with Tajikistan's turbulent transformation after the

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Soviet Union's collapse, which was marked by a civil war, poverty and mass emigration. When many of Murivat's friends either died or left the country during the war, he stayed in Tajikistan, in the "artists' house", and safeguarded that lost world and its people in his memory and artworks.

This essay pays homage to the artist Murivat Beknazarov (1943–2023), whose life and works were deeply intertwined with the history of art in Tajikistan, including shifting relations between the state and artists, and a changing function of art.

Sadvarg – Khorog – Dushanbe – Tallinn – Dushanbe

Beknazarov was born in Sadvarg in the Vanj district in the Pamirs, which are among the world's highest mountain ranges. One of his first childhood memories was from his father's funeral, when several men came on horseback to pay respect to the deceased. His widowed mother was not able to raise her several children on her own and eventually remarried. Her new husband did not want to raise her children from the previous marriage, and thus they were distributed among relatives. Murivat did not adapt well to his uncle's family and eventually moved to a boarding school in Khorog, the main city in the Pamirs that was of strategic geopolitical importance due to its location on the Soviet border with Afghanistan. Many years later, the representation of a child's longing for its mother became one of the main themes in his artworks.

Beknazarov's biography holds many similarities with other top Tajik artists of his generation.

Despite the separation from his family, he loved his time at the boarding school. As he told me, living conditions there were much better than in most Tajik households at that time. Children were always well-fed and dressed. All teachers in the boarding school were Russian women, who maintained discipline and made sure that the children kept learning. When he was in the second grade at school, Murivat met a Russian artist who was travelling through the Pamirs and got stuck in Khorog during the harsh winter. While waiting for the spring to depart, the man launched an art club for local children. He would put different objects on the table and the children drew them. That is when Murivat became fascinated by art.

Beknazarov's biography holds many similarities with other top Tajik artists of his generation. These were mainly men, born in the 1940s in poor families in peripheral areas, and raised in state orphanages and other residential institutions where their talent was noticed and developed through state scholarships, initially in Dushanbe and then further, in other Soviet republics. After completing his fine

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art studies in Dushanbe in 1963, Beknazarov received a scholarship to study monumental art at the distinguished Estonian Art Institute in Tallinn. He considered himself lucky to study in Tallinn rather than in Leningrad or Moscow. In peripheral places, there was less pressure to follow the socialist realism doctrine and more space for artistic freedom. As he told me, "At the Leningrad academy, artists had to follow the canon. They could have perfect technique, but there was little subjectivity in their artworks. In Estonia, the focus was on developing a unique, individual style, not on killing it."

Climbing up the ladder

Despite obtaining a prestigious education, Beknazarov's return to Dushanbe in the 1970s was not a bed of roses. The art scene in Tajikistan was fully in the hands of the Tajik branch of the Soviet Art Fund that administered state orders. These were de facto the only source of artist income at that time. This institution was run by the first generation of Tajik artists educated in the European fine art tradition (brought to Tajikistan with the establishment of the Soviet Union in this region). They were not fond of the self-confident youth educated outside of Tajikistan, who were now returning home to start working. The newcomers were seen as serious competitors because of their skills. Moreover, they were considered unpredictable ideologically due to their experimental, non-doctrinal approach to socialist realism which was the official, state-supported artistic style. The Art Fund was hesitant to commission them new projects and even provide studios where they could work.

Throughout the 1970s, Beknazarov slowly worked his way up in the system. He was commissioned to prepare several large-scale mosaic panels around the country, from production halls to kindergartens. Because of their combined didactical and decorative role, monumental art used to be very prestigious and profitable for artists. Given that mosaics were located in places with high public attendance (such as workplaces, schools and hospitals), they served to display the Soviet ideology with its ideals and values.

Albeit created at state orders, all Beknazarov's mosaics stood out. They were much less ideological than most mosaics from that period, in that they reflected his own take on the Soviet ideology rather than the official party line. With their motion and emotions, Beknazarov's mosaics resembled expressionist paintings rather than the usual propagandistic monumental art. He has never depicted cosmonauts and Soviet scientists. Instead, he used the brightest natural stones and opaque glass tiles called "smalti" to show his own interpretation of typical Soviet topics, such as peace, motherhood and economic production. For instance, his

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Murivat Beknazarov in his studio in Dushanbe, March 2019.

mosaic from the late 1970s, located on a cultural centre in Dushanbe's Ispechak district, reinterpreted these three motives as a celebration of nature. The artwork points to parallels between the upbringing of a child and care for the earth so that it produces fruit that will feed people.

Reflecting on his approach to art, Beknazarov told me that "Artists need to have their own style, it's like a unique handwriting, so that everyone immediately recognizes their work. Artworks should be individual, subjective. They need to be full of life so that a viewer is captivated. In art, you understand, there must be a soul. Without a soul, artworks are dead."

Dushanbe high life

Gradual recognition was accompanied by a rising quality of life: his own flat, studio, car and a country house. His paintings were displayed at numerous exhibitions in Dushanbe and in other cities across the Soviet Union, as well as in Asian and African countries which maintained good relations with the Soviet Union (such as Mali, Burkina Faso, India and Nepal). He received several prizes and scholarships. He also participated in lengthy art camps in other socialist countries, of which he liked Bulgaria the most. He had a subscription to a Polish art magazine *Przegląd Artystyczny*, devoted to Polish contemporary art from that period – five decades later he still guarded his copies of this journal.

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But more than all places which he visited, he was fond of Dushanbe. Before the Soviet expansion to this region, Dushanbe used to be a small market town. In the 1920s, Dushanbe became the capital of Soviet Tajikistan and gradually turned into a fully-fledged city with Soviet architecture and infrastructure. Beknazarov's public recognition in his 30s and early 40s corresponded with the city's flourishing phase. Less than a third of the city inhabitants were ethnically Tajik, with the remaining population coming from other parts of the Soviet Union. Murivat loved that intercultural mix: "Dushanbe was like Babylon. It was full of different nationalities, speaking various languages and accents, everyone with their own story. You walk the street and pass by Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Germans and Jews." Beknazarov spent those years living an artistic high life, centred around the "artists' houses" bustling with life.

Soon after the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, newly independent Tajikistan fell into a bloody civil war between different regional factions. In that period, many people from the local artistic circle – Murivat's teachers, students and neighbours – left the country. His close friend, the composer Firuz Bakhor, moved to Germany with his wife who was a Russian German. Another one, the stained-glass artist Evgeniy Prosmushkin, a Moscow Jew whose family settled in Dushanbe during the Second World War, emigrated to Israel. Others died, like his older friend and master Asror Aminjanov, the father of Tajik monumental art. Those who remained struggled to survive, as the fully state-operated system of artistic and cultural production ceased to exist.

Beknazarov spent the war years locked in his studio, painting. His face was revealing of his Pamiri origins, making him an easy target for the pro-government fighters, given that the Pamiri minority was on the opposition's side during the civil war. The southern militias, fighting on the government side, were involved in an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Pamiris, including targeted killings of prominent individuals. Asked why he stayed in Tajikistan, Beknazarov admitted: "Yes, our world collapsed. Initially, I wanted to leave, but I knew that an artist without roots is not an artist. Artists need their roots to create, otherwise they wither like trees without water."

In the 1990s and 2000s, Beknazarov survived financially by selling his paintings to westerners who came to Tajikistan to work for humanitarian and development organizations which supported post-conflict peacebuilding. The artworks were cheap for them, but for the price of each painting local artists could feed their extended families for several months.

Over the last three decades, Tajikistan has completely transformed. The country is now characterized by a huge gap between a small group of rich people and the impoverished rest, with over a million labour migrants working in Russia. As the

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largely Russified Tajik Soviet intelligentsia and ethnic minorities left the country during the war, the ethnic composition and cultural mood of Dushanbe changed. Nowadays, when walking around the city one can hardly hear a language other than Tajik. Meanwhile, Beknazarov kept painting in his studio. As he told me, "I'm lucky to be an artist. My studio is my temple. I close the door and don't care about anything."

Paradoxically, these 30 years of grief for his lost world have been the most prolific period in his life. A big part of his sensuous artworks featured people who were important to him and who left him: Tajik Soviet art critics, composers, dancers, his friends, teachers and students. Another part included many versions of the same motif of a mother hugging a child, usually a boy.

Murivat means kindness

During one of our first meetings, Beknazarov told me that "I hope that your world will never be destroyed. I saw what it is like when your world falls apart and you're left alone. It's terrible, believe me. It's like when parents leave you and inside you, something breaks. It's the same when an empire collapses."

As he lived in the shambles of an empire, in the last years of his life Murivat often read about the collapse of ancient empires. He was not afraid to die but he feared that soon his art would be forgotten because the few remaining people who still knew him were also slowly passing away. While the contemporary Tajik government rehabilitated the status of folk art, which was not appreciated in Soviet times, fine art lost its previous prestige. As he said, "This country needs ornaments, not paintings."

Murivat Beknazarov liked roses, lilacs and lilies of the valley. He detested nationalism and considered all of its manifestations, in art and nation-building alike, to be anti-spiritual. He often talked with affection about his daughter from his first marriage, Shahnoza, and his second wife and long-term companion, the composer Lola Tolis. He was fond of Brahms, whose music he discovered from an Armenian neighbour when studying in Tallinn. He often read the Russian playwright Chekhov and the Sufi poet Rumi. He knew the Bible and Quran well but he was not religious. He liked flatbread with sour cream, bitter chocolate and black tea with sugar. EE

Karolina Kluczewska is a postdoctoral researcher at the Ghent Institute for International and European Studies, and a research associate at the Institute of Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies at the University of St Andrews.

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Serbian director finds way to confront dark past

JP O'MALLEY

Serbian film director Vladimir Perišić seems perfectly content belonging to a tradition of cinema that operates outside of the mainstream. There are no big budgets or huge audiences. But he is okay with that and can still find a cult audience across Europe that appreciates his work. "I like to work with small crews and non-actors and being in this marginal position allows me to have this artistic freedom," he admits.

Vladimir Perišić is not intentionally trying to sound like Vladimir Putin. But the Serbian director is deadly serious when he says that "the break-up of Yugoslavia was a huge historical mistake." He claims the six ex-Yugoslav republics – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia (including the regions of Kosovo and Vojvodina) – are today "all obsessed with their national histories, most of which are a total fantasy".

"The Yugoslav period was far better than what we are living through today in the Balkans," the 48-year-old filmmaker says. "All our problems started after the fall of the Berlin Wall." The title of Perišić's latest film is a fitting starting point for an in-depth conversation about political tragedy, national identity and bloody history between former comrades. Released last autumn, *Lost Country* is set in 1996. Perišić directed it, and co-wrote the screenplay with French filmmaker, Alice Winocour.

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Three generations

In the opening scene, which shares some resemblances to Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (1986), it appears as if we have entered a metaphorical Garden of Eden. In the idyllic surroundings of the Serbian countryside, we witness a grandfather and his teenage grandson harmoniously picking walnuts together. A die hard socialist, the grandfather (played by Duško Valentić), speaks to 15-year-old Stefan (played by Jovan Ginic) about his past heroic sporting glories – he once represented Yugoslavia at the Olympic Games in water polo. "The grandfather character still believes in Yugoslavia," Perišić explains. "In the 1990s, we [in Serbia] were still part of Yugoslavia, but it was the third Yugoslavia (the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) that was never [really] recognized."

Lost Country is predominantly set in Belgrade, with most of the scenes shot at night time.

"With this film I wanted to tell the history of Yugoslavia through three generations of one family," says the Serbian director. The third and middle member of that dynasty is Stefan's mother, Marklena, played by Jasna Đuričić. For most of the film, she smothers her fifteen-year-old teenage son with parental affection, almost as if he were a small infant. "I wanted to explore the idea of blood ties to the mother, which are the most primal and biological, and also look at this complex idea of loyalty to motherland," Perišić explains.

Lost Country premiered at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, where the lead actor, Jovan Ginić, was honoured with the Louis Roederer Foundation Rising Star Award. At last year's Sarajevo Film Festival, Ginić won the "Heart of Sarajevo" award for best actor. It is an impressive achievement for someone who never acted before. "I found Jovan in a water polo club," Perišić says. "But I often like to work with non-actors."

During this early part of the film making process, Perišić typically spends two years with an individual with no previous acting experience. He meets them regularly three times a week, giving them some fictional situation, and the creative space to improvise. "During this time, I do a lot of filming with them with my camera, almost like I'm making a documentary," he explains. "With this process I get to know the non-actors, I learn about their mannerisms and how they speak."

Lost Country is predominantly set in Belgrade, with most of the scenes shot at night time. The dark and melancholic mood appears to represent Stefan's ongoing confusion and anxiety. This stems from the alienation he feels at school. Old friends, who were once close, now shun his company. They have valid reasons though. Marklena, Stefan's mother, is a press spokesperson for the Slobodan Milošević regime and regularly appears on television and radio, sugar-coating the undemocratic –

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and often violent – actions of the thuggish authoritarian government. "I wanted to explore this story between a teenager who cannot articulate his feelings and inner conflicts to his mother," Perišić explains. "The irony, of course, is that despite being a so-called expert in communication as the spokesperson for the party, Marklena is unable to communicate with her own child."

Direct parallels

With his father out of the picture, and his mother out working most days, Stefan is left to his own devices at the family's luxurious and spacious apartment in the Serbian capital. The other Belgrade citizens (including Stefan's friends) we meet in the film do not live in such comfort. Most of them are on the breadline and regularly out on street protests, seeking better social and economic conditions from their government. Marklena, meanwhile, is paid handsomely to portray decent hard-working citizens as traitors and enemies of the state. Her actions as a propagandist for the government also directly implicate her in election fraud.

Perišić based this part of the film on real historical events. There were indeed student demonstrations in Belgrade in the winter of 1996. Perišić attended many of them. They occurred at a time when the government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (then comprised only of Serbia and Montenegro) demonstrated a blatant disregard for human rights. In November 1996 the government in Belgrade annulled the results of local elections won largely by the opposition in Serbia and then violently attacked those who protested. Media censorship was rampant too. Any independent media (not working for the government) was harassed and intimidated.

> In November 1996, the government in Belgrade annulled the results of local elections and violently attacked those who protested.

It does not sound that dissimilar to Serbia today. In early February, several MEPs in the European Parliament called for an independent investigation into the irregularities of the elections held in Serbia, on December 17th 2023, which saw President Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) win 46.75 per cent of the vote, while a pro-European opposition coalition, Serbia Against Violence, got 23.66 per cent. The accusations of election fraud triggered protests, including a hunger strike by some opposition figures. The Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, meanwhile, currently ranks Serbia in 91st place globally. Journalists working inside the country are regularly threatened and subjected to political attacks instigated by members of the ruling elite.

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Photo courtesy of Kinorama film company

A scene from Vladimir Perišić's *Lost Country* which premiered at the 2023 Cannes Festival.

Drawing direct parallels to the 1990s and the present situation in Serbia may be oversimplifying complex matters of history and politics, though, Perišić believes. "The historical context of the 1990s in Serbia was extremely complicated, with one big country [Yugoslavia], with a big history, falling apart," he says. "What I see today is some kind of continuity of Serbian authoritarianism that I don't think is exclusive to Aleksandar Vučić, I see it more like a product of a Serbian society that is very patriarchal, with a strong influence from the Orthodox church that has a very reactionary idea of what the family should be. Until we revolutionize this patriarchal model, the idea of the family and the position of the church, there will always be authoritarianism in Serbia," says Perišić.

Blood and soil

The director's own personal family history also provided some inspiration for *Lost Country*. His mother worked for the Milošević government in the mid-1990s – in the department of culture. "My personal private story is really not that important and I don't need to tell it," he says.

Perišić does, however, mention another real-life story that served as a source of inspiration for his latest film. Specifically, this was a newspaper article he came across about Ana Mladić, a medical student who during the early 1990s lived a protected life and was not interested in politics. In March 1994, aged 24, she committed su-

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icide at her family home in Belgrade with her father's gun, after learning about his role during the Yugoslav Wars. Her father was Ratko Mladić, often referred to as "the Butcher of Bosnia". The former commander of the Army of Republika Srpska is presently serving a life sentence in The Hague. In 2017 Ratko Mladić was found guilty of committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Those crimes include the murders of more than 8,000 Muslim boys and men in Srebrenica in 1995, the ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks and Croats, and the killing and terrorizing of civilians in Sarajevo during the near four-month siege of the beleaguered city. It was all part of a plan to create a "Greater Serbia" in parts of the former Yugoslavia.

"When I first read this story about Anna Mladić, I started thinking about how the politics of ex-Yugoslav republics was really the politics of blood and soil," Perišić explains. "And it got me thinking about this conflict of double loyalty. That is, a loyalty to a family member that you are related to by blood. And then a loyalty to some kind of moral inner imperative." Even today, people across the Balkans are still accused of betraying their country, the director explains. "When this happens, the people you come from become a tool of political control," says Perišić. "This duty you have to a family in the Balkans is still very strong, because the state institutions in the Balkans are so weak. This means the family is the most important atom of the society."

Perišić was born in Belgrade in 1976. By the time he reached his late teens, Yugoslavia had fallen apart, and the region had descended into war. "I had a feeling that during the 1990s we in the Balkans were living in a kind of historical dead end of the 20th century as the rest of the world went into some kind of normal direction," he remembers.

With some distance and time passing, however, Perišić sees things differently. "Now I see what [we lived through] during the 1990s was not an epilogue of the 20th century, but a prologue of the 21st century," Perišić explains. "Because the return of the far-right ideologies and extreme nationalism that we had in all of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, well, now you see that almost everywhere in the world."

"When this communist heritage at the end of the 1980s was rejected, the people also rejected the anti-fascist/partisan tradition," Perišić explains. "That was one of the main reasons I wanted to do this film."

Perception of reality

Lost Country is Perišić's first feature film since *Ordinary People* (2009). It tells the story of a 20-year-old soldier who experiences a loss of innocence, as he learns

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to accept the banality of violence in a wartime situation in the process of becoming a trained killer. Perišić's debut short film, *Dremano oko* (2003), told the story of a young boy (also called Stefan) who visits his grandfather's house in the countryside. Upon returning to the city, he finds out that many people have been killed during political demonstrations. While his parents seem unconcerned, the boy's schoolmates take another view. "Our perception of reality, depending on circumstances, is a theme that I am most interested in as a filmmaker … it's something I explore in this current film, and in *Ordinary People* and *Dremano oko*," Perišić explains. "This really comes from growing up in Belgrade in the 1990s, when I saw how hard it is to accept reality. It's like when reality becomes so uncomfortable, unpleasant or too problematic for us, there is some kind of border control, and we don't let reality in."

Perišić discovered artistic and intellectual freedom when he moved to Paris, where he has been living on and off.

In 2014 Perišić also contributed to *Bridges of Sarajevo*, a film which saw 13 European directors explore what the Bosnian capital represents to European history over the past century and what the city meant for Europe a decade ago. Since 2011 Perišić has worked as co-director of the Belgrade Auteur Film Festival. He has a love/hate relationship with the country of his birth. "Here in the Balkans everything is so politicized and there is no space for art and cinema," he says. The Serbian filmmaker discovered artistic and intellectual freedom when he moved to Paris, where he has been living on and off since his early 20s. After studying literature at Paris Diderot University, Perišić later graduated from film directing studies at La Fémis. "I was interested in 20th century avant-garde writers and in France I found [a culture] that was corresponding to my mode of thinking, which in Belgrade I could not find."

"In theory, in philosophy, and in art, there is still a strong left tradition in France," he says. "I would say I did not choose geographical exile, but rather a historical exile. This left tradition was destroyed in ex-Yugoslavia by the end of the 1980s. In France I could reconnect to this history of the left. And it's these values that I belong to."

Today, Perišić divides his time between Paris and Belgrade. "When I was younger it was much more complicated for me because I wished to live in a world that corresponds with my values and my beliefs," he explains. "But then you come to realize that this is not going to be the case and you discover that inner exile is not that bad, so I have learned to love my inner exile, because it's giving me this marginal position."

Perišić is perfectly content belonging to a tradition of cinema that operates outside of the mainstream. There are not big budgets, or huge audiences. But he is okay with that and can still find a cult audience across Europe that appreciates his

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work. "I like to work with small crews and non-actors and being in this marginal position allows me to have this artistic freedom," he says.

Perišić accepts – albeit somewhat reluctantly – that the death of Yugoslavia means it cannot be reformed again. "I still believe in some kind of Yugoslav cultural space, though," he says. "I think this space survived and I would say I live in this space."

"With *Lost Country* I had a lot of actors from both Serbia and from Croatia. He points out that despite the pain of recent history and conflict, both countries share (technically 80 per cent at least) a language. They share a huge part of communist history together, too. "I don't feel those borders between ex-Yugoslav countries," Perišić concludes. "Naturally we are here to collaborate and to build together." EE

JP O' Malley is a freelance journalist and critic.

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Through empathy you also become a witness

An interview with Marianna Kiyanovska, Ukrainian poet and translator. Interviewers: Kinga Anna Gajda and Iwona Reichardt

KINGA ANNA GAJDA: In your collection of poems *The Voices of Babyn Yar* you speak about the Holocaust through the voices of those who witnessed this atrocity. Your poems are not a one-person narrative but a polyphony of the different voices of witnesses who talk about what happened during the Second World War. That perspective is understandable. However, now Ukraine is again in a state of war and you and your loved ones are the witnesses to the crimes and destruction. What does this experience mean to you and how is it reflected in your poetry?

MARIANNA KIYANOVSKA: It is a very complicated experience. To answer this question, I need to refer to my book, titled in Ukrainian *Блискавка зустрічає воду і вітер*, which could be translated into English as *The lightning meets water and wind*. This collection of poems was published in Ukraine in 2023 and is in a sense a continuation of *The Voices of Babyn Yar*.

All the poems in *The Lightning...* are about the current war. I see an inner symbolic structure like that: *Babyn Yar...* as hell, *The Lightning...* as purgatory, and the new book I am currently writing as heaven. These books are nothing alike, but all of them are about war and death. *Babyn Yar...* resembles an ancient tragedy and can be seen as a chorus, while *The Lightning...* appeals to Heraclitus' concept of "Lightning as Logos" and is a mythologized epic about Russia's war against Ukraine. The third one has the title *Men, women, children, animals, birds, insects and shadows speak fruits from the tree of knowledge* (heaven), but I don't want to talk too much about it yet. The history of the *Babyn Yar...* collection is as follows. In truth, I started working on it twice. First, when I had to put my pain somewhere after my father's death in December 2015 but could not express it as at that time I was a recipient of the Gaude Polonia stipend and only returned

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to Lviv in July 2016. Secondly, between 2015 and 2018 I travelled with Ukrainian volunteers from Kharkiv almost to the front line in eastern Ukraine. Back then the war was called ATO, the anti-terrorist operation. Several times we found ourselves so close to the enemy that we were within the range of their sniper fire. And thus *The Voices of Babyn Yar* is an experience of my personal pain. Six months after my father's death, in July 2016, it became a vessel for my pain and grief. I also started writing poems which were based on my memories of those trips to Donbas. But those were not voices yet. It wasn't until September 2016 that I began writing poems, which later became part of *The Voices of Babyn Yar* – after my father's birthday on September 21st, and just a few days before the anniversary of the tragedy on September 29th.

IWONA REICHARDT: Your poems about the current war are intertwined with the poems from *The Voices of Babyn Yar*.

As I said, the current war in Ukraine started in 2014. But at that time, it was less known, also in other parts of the country. You had to come almost to the front line to see it yourself and have an opinion. Several poems included in *The Voices of Babyn Yar* were actually written in August 2016, not in September. But the poem that started it all ended up not being included in this book. During one of the trips, one lady whose sister was a witness told me that Russians executed local Ukrainian teachers and activists, about 18 people, in a ravine. I wrote a poem about this atrocity and published it on my Facebook page in August. But because it was on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre, and because there was no indication that the massacre happened near Donetsk, everyone thought that the poem was about Babyn Yar. I was invited to recite it at the commemorations in Babyn Yar. I was faced with a moral dilemma; I did not want to read a poem about today's war as a poem about the mass murder of Jews in the Second World War.

So yes, in the collection, there are a couple of poems which are not voices from Babyn Yar. One of them is a poem about a crematorium, and there were no crematoria in Babyn Yar. Sometime in October, I realized that I had about 20 poems about Babyn Yar. I sent them to my publisher, Leonid Finberg, who agreed to publish them. So, I kept on writing. I got so immersed in this process that it entirely devoured me. I stopped going out and was lying in bed, only getting up to write another poem. Afterwards, I would return to bed again. At some point, my husband could not bear it any longer, so he brought me a bottle of vodka that I drank for three days but I did not feel any alcohol in my body. I said it in many interviews already but let me repeat it here – I never thought that I would be writing about Jewish people. I only started reading about their history and culture when I was in university. At home, we did not talk either about Jewish or Polish people. It is not that I did

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not want to make friends with my Jewish peers. I had good relationships with them, but we never had conversations about what we can call "Jewish topics". I don't want to say that these topics were taboo, just something simply not talked about.

When I became a student, I became interested in the Holocaust, and at the same time began to read a lot about the Holodomor, the Volhynia tragedy, and Stalin's repressions. I learned about all these atrocities because I felt that it was my moral duty. I have no Jewish roots, so for me the Holocaust, the Holodomor, the forced deportation of Crimean Tatars and the genocide in Rwanda (in 1994), all alongside the Volhynia tragedy merged into one deep experience. As a translator of Polish-language literature, I have translated Jewish poets and writers but not because they were Jewish. Among them were Bolesław Leśmian, Julian Tuwim and many others. When I was writing my poems about Babyn Yar, I came to an understanding that those Jewish people who were to be murdered in the ravine were unaware that there, they would face death. That is why they took some personal things with them when they were summoned. They must have believed that the future would bring them life, whether good or bad, but life nonetheless. They were misinformed. Those who were also brought to Auschwitz could not fathom that they would meet their end.

KG: Thus, these voices from Babyn Yar and other poems that are included in the collection show a certain connection between the two wars…

Actually, now that I think about this book, I see that it combines three wars: the Second World War, the current war in Ukraine which started in 2014, and the war which is now taking place in Israel and Gaza. This thought brings tears to my eyes because it makes me realize that in these poems, I have woven more than I thought I would. Lately, when Ukrainians talk about the war in Israel we draw comparisons to the war in Ukraine. And vice versa, when we talk about what is happening in Ukraine, do we compare it to what is happening in Israel? Here in Ukraine, these parallels are perceived very differently compared to how they are seen in the West. Probably, it is because we have a historical memory which differs from that of people in the West.

IR: Would you then say that in our region we have our own way of interpreting this war? And this interpretation differs from the perspective people have, for example, in France?

Your question is whether our interpretation of the war can be universal, or if it is biased, right? To answer this, let me share my reflections on what I have read about wars in the past ten years. I have read a lot about different wars; however, I am interested not only in war as a phenomenon but also with regards to war-inflicted trauma and the memory of traumatic events. I have been trying to understand how trauma influences the way we process information. Indeed, a

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traumatized person interprets information and remembers it differently than someone who hasn't experienced a similar trauma. Trauma is a filter in itself. At some point, I started to think about war from a different angle. I recalled the writings of Hannah Arendt, who in the late 1960s wrote an essay about freedom in which she expressed her critique of the Vietnam War. This is, in fact, a very significant question: How distant a war should be to traumatize a person? And the second one: What makes a person a witness of war? These questions are of great importance to me because I am sometimes asked if I have the right to write about the Second World War and about the Holocaust which I did not experience. And if I have the right to write about the war given that I am not in Ukraine – temporarily, yes, but for almost two years by now. I have contemplated this question for quite some time, and, personally, I consider myself a post-memory witness to the atrocities committed during the Second World War. I am a witness, because when I was writing *The Voices of Babyn Yar*, my body was reacting to it. My hair turned grey in half a year. I felt as if all those atrocities were happening here and now.

KG: Does the trauma of today make you see the war differently?

I feel like a witness to two wars, and now the war in Israel adds to it. I also responded to the full-scale invasion physically. I had two very complicated spinal surgeries in 2022. A witness does not just see things – a witness also reacts to the atrocities with his/her body. It is a somatic reaction wherein the distance from the place of the crime does not matter. Think about it: a lot of people in Germany, Poland, or Czechia, who are citizens of these countries and have no blood or other ties to Ukrainians, are also witnesses to this war to the same extent as Ukrainians.

IR: How come?

Because they interact directly with this war as well. Even tears of compassion are an interaction.

KG: And because, as you said, they have similar somatic reactions when they see the committed crimes?

Somatic reactions may occur, but they are not always present. I see them as witnesses because of their connections with direct witnesses who were in trenches or bomb shelters, who have lost their family and friends. Through empathy, one can also become a witness, even while being far from the war in a physical sense.

IR: It is very interesting what you are saying that through empathy you become a witness. I don't know if you remember the discussions that were held during the wars that took place in the former Yugoslavia. At that time, one of our most influential writers, Stanisław Lem, asked the provocative question of whether as human beings we can be empathetic to every person, every tragedy, every death. These wars in the Bal-

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kans seemed to be far away from us, and there are defence mechanisms that allow us to also distance ourselves from the tragedies they brought on…

That's why I always look at how a person reacts. First comes trauma. From that moment, it decides what a person feels, thinks, and how a person communicates. Trauma indeed acts as a significant filter, and many people are unaware of its existence. I remember this discussion in the Polish press that you mentioned. But since we are talking about the Yugoslav Wars, I would like to refer to somebody who pondered over the lessons from the Balkans and today's war in Ukraine. The person I have in mind is Krzysztof Czyżewski, who made an important comment on the concept of victory in a recent interview with the Ukrainian Radio Liberty. Europe and all the world observed the Yugoslavian events, but no one said that the war in Yugoslavia would end in victory. There needed to be a compromise acceptable for all the parties, a consensus – that is what everyone was talking about. Yet victory is intertwined with the concepts of good and evil, and therefore, as a value, victory must endure. If it is excluded from the worldview of those who make up what we call the European civilization, then what happens to that civilization? Thus, Czyżewski says, Europe must support Ukraine not only for its practical interests but also because Ukraine can bring back this value of victory into European thinking. Think about it, Europe has not seen any victories for over 50 years now. Today, educated people don't want to say they want to win. Instead, they ask right away about the price of victory. But you need to understand that this is a trick. Czyżewski mentioned that unlike the war in the Balkans, which to a certain extent devastated a whole generation of Poles who have lost this understanding of the value of victory, the war in Ukraine is – paradoxically – saving Poland by bringing that understanding back. I see great value in this thought because it is tied to the promise that Poland will emerge as an important nation, and this transformation will be catalysed by the war in the East. Do you understand what I mean?

IR: Maybe not entirely… Please explain.

I see this war in Ukraine as paradoxically the opportunity to save Europe despite the horrible price Ukraine is paying. But Ukraine pays that price both for itself and for Europe as its inherent part. Now we are coming back to that understanding after 2014 when the Revolution of Dignity started in Kyiv. The return of solidarity in the face of war and the return of an understanding of the value of victory are now like a vaccine for European culture. Just look at Poland and the hate speech it has experienced in recent years. Hate speech starts like a disease in a weak organism. It acts like a poison, a venom. In Poland's case, the poisoning was very fast and strong. In my view, the war in Ukraine stopped it, even if partially. The empathy towards Ukrainians and the solidarity with Ukraine have changed Poland. I am not saying that there is no

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hate speech in Poland now, but it has weakened. In my view, this war even influenced civic engagement in the country, including the most recent elections. It was as if in the first months after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Polish society was undergoing a Maidan without a Maidan.

KG: What do you mean by that?

Let me refer to the recent film *The Green Border* directed by Agnieszka Holland, who showed this change very well. To me, this film is also a reflection on war – our war, even though only the final scene touches upon the war in Ukraine showing refugees from the recently shelled cities. Thus, the question arises – how does this scene fit into the context of the entire film? Firstly, the film is in black and white, a director's choice that helps us pay attention to detail and remember what was said. If this film was in colour, we would remember the characters' words much less.

IR: But the scene with the Ukrainian border that you mention is in colour.

Yes, yes, but think about the composition of this film again. The black-and-white part is like a chronicle, but then at the end, the shots of the station and the border crossing are in colour. An entrance to a new reality. I see a change of rhetoric here. This crossing changes the situation of the people who are escaping from the war – they escape to safety. That is why for me, the war in Ukraine has changed Poland in a very good way. And the film showed that too. NE

Marianna Kiyanovska is a Ukrainian poet, translator and literary scholar. She is a recipient of the Shevchenko National Prize (2020) and the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award (2022) for her poetry in *The Voices of Babyn Yar*. She is a member of the National Union of Writers of Ukraine and the Ukrainian PEN.

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

Iwona Reichardt is the deputy editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe*.

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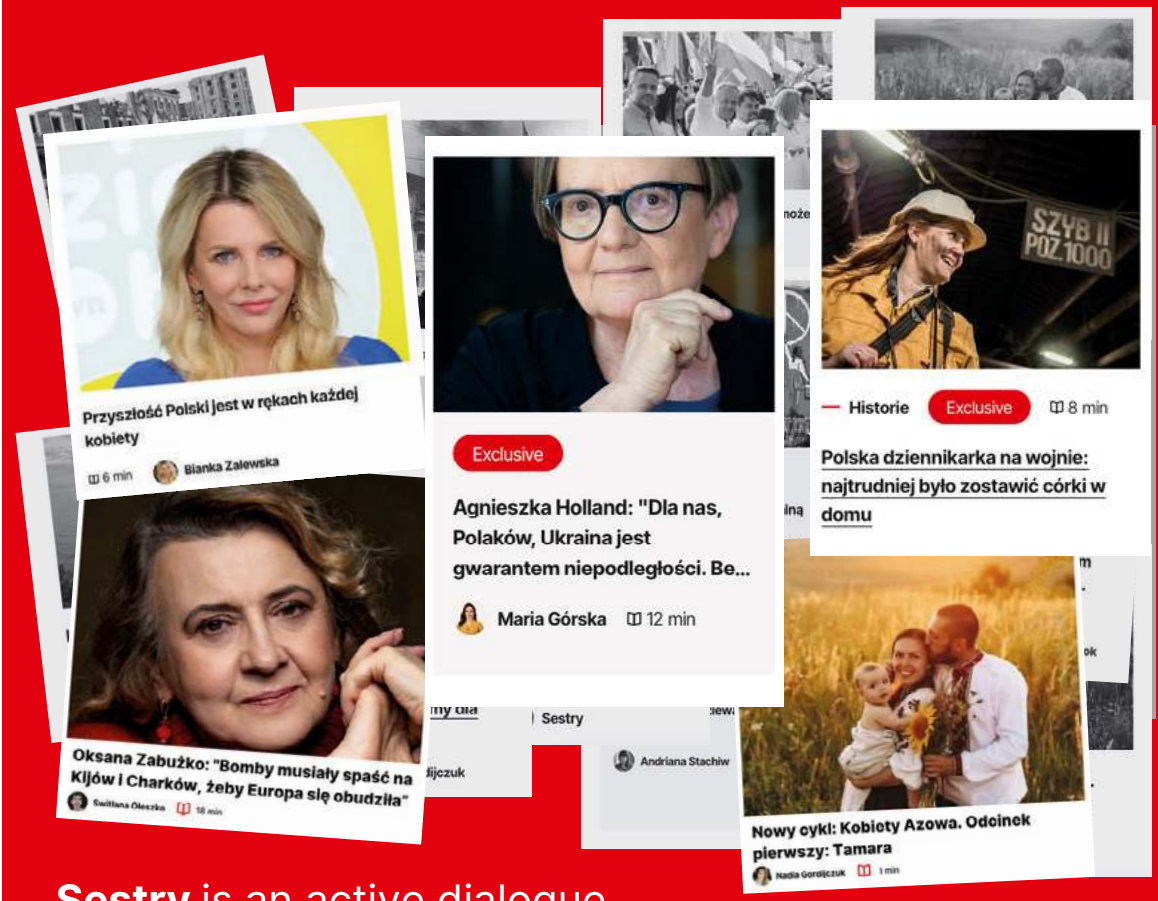

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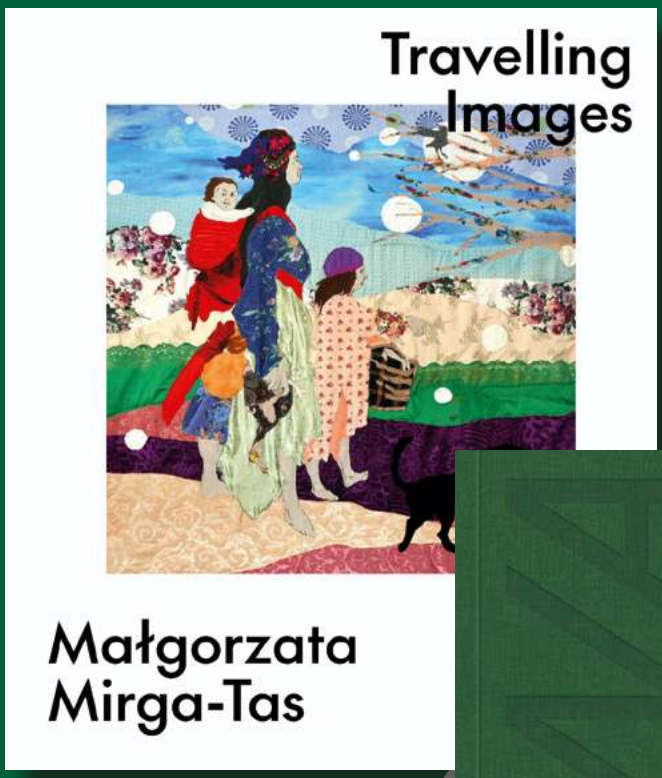

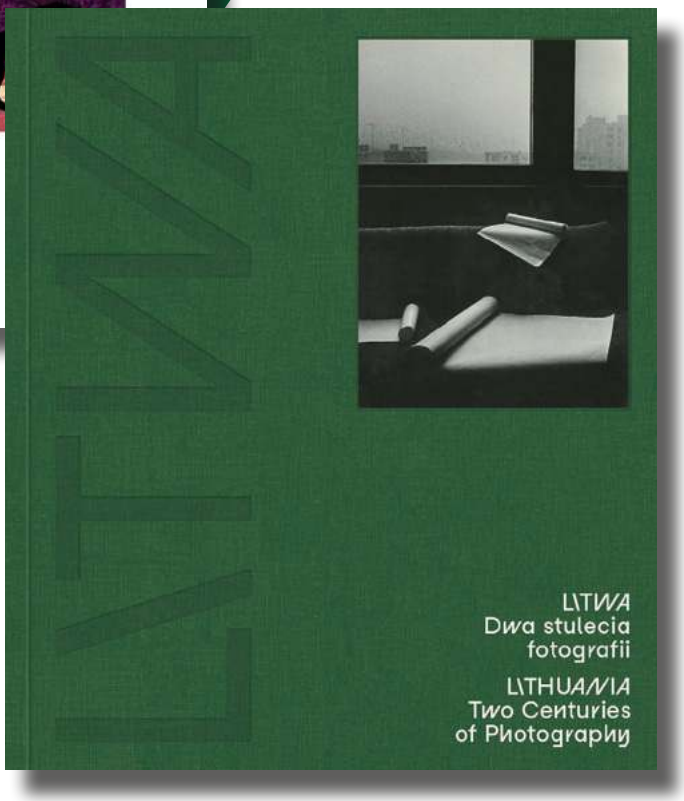

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