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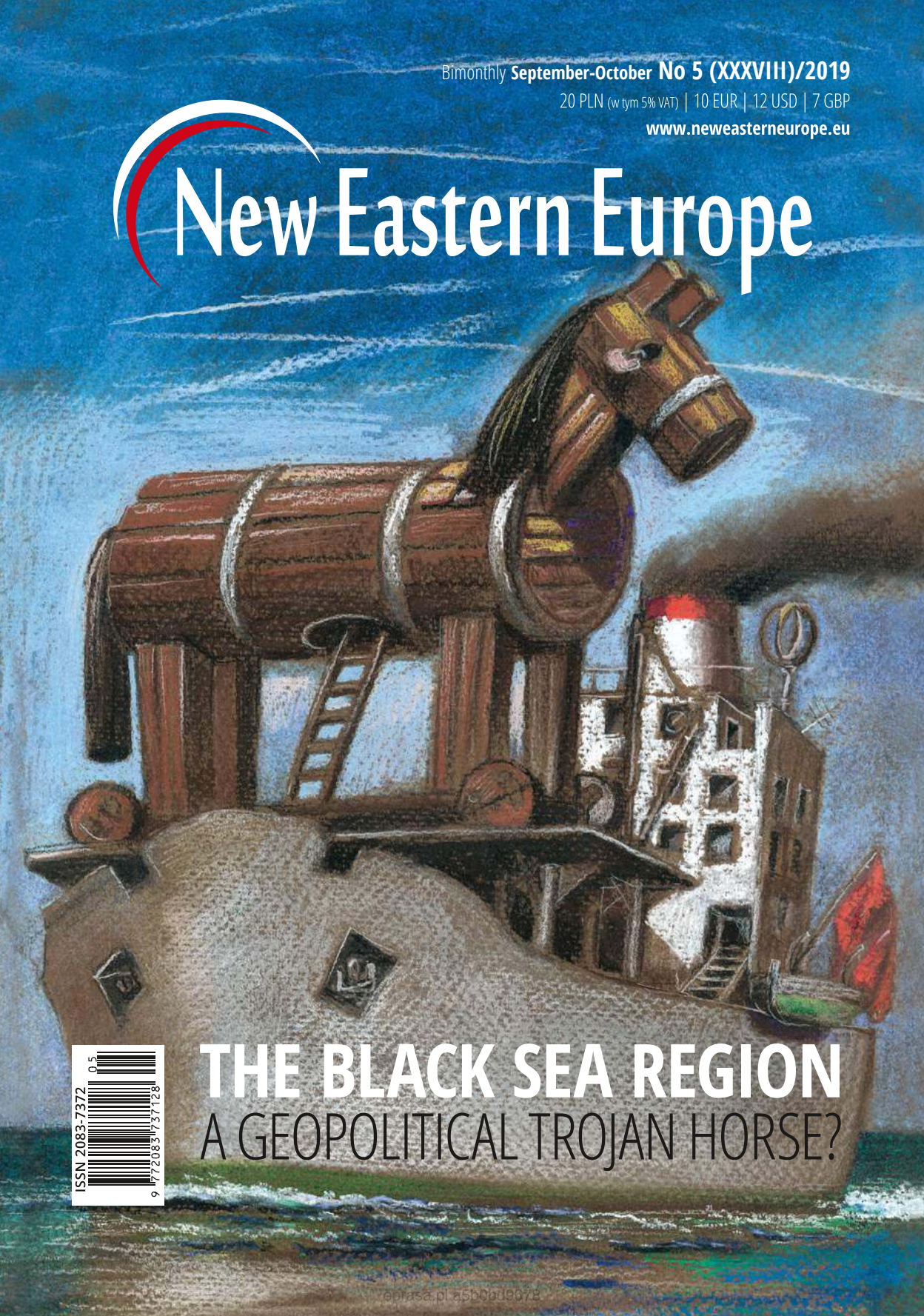

# THE BLACK SEA REGION
## A GEOPOLITICAL TROJAN HORSE?

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DEAR READER,

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea has turned into a region which became one of the centres of geopolitical competition between the East and West. Major world powers including Russia, Turkey, the European Union and NATO have a stake here; while other regional players like Ukraine and Georgia are directly affected by their actions. This was the case in August 2008 when Russia attacked Georgia in the Five Day War or in March 2014 when, in the aftermath of the EuroMaidan Revolution in Kyiv, the Crimean peninsula was annexed by the Russian Federation. Keeping these two events in mind, it is suffice to say that the region of the Black Sea is a geopolitical Trojan horse.

We have edited this issue in co-operation with the Polish Embassy in Tbilisi (which is currently serving as the NATO contact point), inviting authors from the region to provide you with various dimensions of the Black Sea states from such perspectives as security, culture, geopolitics, economics and geo-strategy.

Our authors illustrate the growing interdependencies that are emerging in the region. Their analyses help us imagine how future developments that may take place here will largely depend on wider international factors. And these developments include, as many of our authors warn, cost of western inaction. It is our aim that with the publication of these texts, we can help raise awareness of the situation and sentiments surrounding the Black Sea region.

As always, we would like to encourage you to keep in touch with us online via our social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and make sure to check out the NEE web site at www.neweasterneurope.eu for the latest updates and commentaries on the wider region. We highly encourage you to subscribe, if you haven't done so yet, as it is the best way to support our non-profit project.

*The Editors*

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# Contents

## Black Sea region. A geopolitical Trojan horse?


7 **The Black Sea region. A complex and dynamic space**
Tomasz Stępniewski
*Countries in the Black Sea region remain hostage to geopolitics and history. The impact of various factors on the shape of relations on this area is still very noticeable. Thus, any examination of the geopolitical situation here that does not account for historical conditions may diminish the complexity of the situation on the ground.*

12 **Security takes centre stage in the Black Sea**
Zurab Agladze
*The annexation and militarisation of the Crimean Peninsula has given Russia greater access to use enhanced military capabilities to project its forces in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and apply pressure on the other countries in the region, particularly Ukraine and Georgia.*

25 **Georgia's long and uncertain road to NATO membership**
Giorgi Goguadze
*Georgia's membership of NATO lies at the core of its foreign policy. The ambition is beyond the line of ministries and state bureaucratic apparatus, as it represents the utmost desire of the entire country.*

31 **The shift of dominance in the Black Sea**
Sophia Petriashvili
*Turkey's policy in the Black Sea, which mainly aims to deter NATO's presence in the region, has diminished its overall role, making it more vulnerable to Russia's growing influence.*

38 **A sea of insecurity**
Emil Avdaliani

44 **A playground for influence**
Leo Sikharulidze

48 **All is not quiet on the eastern front**
David Batashvili

54 **The dimensions of Georgia's frozen conflicts**
Nino Kukhianidze


## Opinion and Analysis


60 **The cost of five years of war in Donbas**
Janek Lasocki
*In the last five years since the start of the war in Donbas, a new wave of civic engagement has risen in the post-industrial city of Sievierodonetsk. Now the civil society has to learn how to co-operate with city officials and between themselves.*

67 **The time for big ideas**
Svitlana Oslavska

72 **From Piața Universității to #rezist**
Ruxandra Cesereanu
*The true goal of the 2107 protests in Romania was the fight against passivity. Many of the protesters would not have bothered to vote in the last general elections, but through their presence on the streets, they cast their vote in their own way. It was a fiesta in the truest sense.*

78 **The risks and rewards of investigative journalism in Central Eastern Europe**
Lorenzo Berardi

85 **When the state turns against its own citizens, resistance becomes duty?**
Aleksandra Zdeb


eprasa.pl a5b0bd9678

90 **Biological weapons resurface in disinformation campaigns**
Nurlan Aliyev

95 **Promises and challenges. Internationalisation of the transition economies**
Kiril Kossev

## Interviews

101 **With one foot in the Soviet past and the other in Europe**
*A conversation with Zhanna Maksymenko-Dovhych*

108 **Striving for the good of all, but not himself**
*A conversation with Tetiana Mykhailova*

## Stories and Ideas

114 **There will be no singing revolution in Russia**
Wojciech Siegień
*The Russian authorities are wiser after the occurrence of numerous colour revolutions in post-Soviet states. They have been working on a new arsenal of measures capable of halting events that could lead to social protests. The independent music scene is a perfect illustration of this.*

## Art, Culture and Society

129 **Covering up cross-border co-operation between Lithuania and Kaliningrad**
Gil Skorwid

136 **Inside Kyiv's co-living community**
Dominic Culverwell

141 **Prides of the former socialist bloc**
Katarina Novikova and Wiktor Trybus

## History and Memory

148 **Forgotten tales of Germany and Ukraine's past**
Adam Balcer

## Eastern Café

157 **Attempting to escape the unescapable**
Kinga Anna Gajda

162 **Corrupt yes, Russian spy unlikely**
Taras Kuzio

168 **Much needed context to the mystery of Kazakhstan**
Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska

172 **Forgotten revolutionaries**
Kamil Jarończyk

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# The Black Sea region

## A complex and dynamic space

TOMASZ STĘPNIEWSKI

Countries in the Black Sea region remain hostage to geopolitics and history. The impact of various factors on the shape of relations on this area is still very noticeable. Thus, any examination of the geopolitical situation here that does not account for historical conditions may diminish the complexity of the situation on the ground.

The geopolitical rivalry and the clash of interests between the superpowers have been present in the Black Sea region for centuries. During the Cold War when the East-West divide was at its height, the Black Sea was "excluded" from geopolitical competition between the superpowers as it became the domain of mainly one player – the Soviet Union.

The dismantling of the *Pax Sovietica* and the subsequent collapse of the Cold War gave rise to a new geopolitical situation in the Black Sea region. The former USSR was superseded by the Russian Federation and other political entities independent from Russia, yet having strong bonds with the region both in terms of geography and their political and cultural interests. These were new states like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also former Soviet satellite-states such as Bulgaria and Romania. In other words, the collapse of the USSR entailed the emergence of a new system of geopolitical power in the post-Soviet space.

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## A wider region

The post-Cold War transformation enforced a change in the political arena where new players appeared, ready and capable of effectively participating in the ongoing game. They immediately became an attractive subject of international relations with the existing superpowers striving to exert influence on them. This seems to be the case of the post-Soviet states of the Black Sea region, reborn in 1991, whose political existence produced (and is still producing) far-reaching changes in this part of the continent. The evolution involved such aspects as geography, politics, economy and military issues but also brought about changes of psychological and cultural nature.

In the early 21st century the importance of the Black Sea region has notably grown, which has led to, on the one hand, a fight for influence among the main global and regional players and, on the other hand, the uncompromising rivalry which reinforces the integrity of the region. An analysis of the specific character of the Black Sea region does not only concern its geographical problems, however. It frequently encompasses geopolitical, geo-economic, cultural, social and security issues as well. The literature of the subject fails to offer a clear definition of the geopolitical character of the region – it is assumed to cover the area of Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania and Greece in the west, Ukraine and Russia in the north, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the east, and Turkey in the south. The inclusion of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Greece in this zone is problematic as they have no immediate access to the Black Sea. Yet, in view of their historical, cultural and civilisational affinity and the geographic proximity, they do seem to belong to the region. This extended area – including third states and organisations and countries without a Black Sea coastline – has been referred to as the Wider Black Sea region. Its significance derives from the fact that it borders other areas strategic to contemporary international relations – such as Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Russian Federation, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Mediterranean Sea (eastern part) and the Middle East.

An analysis of the Black Sea region should encompass geopolitical, geo-economic, cultural, social and security issues.

The post-Cold War geopolitics of the Black Sea countries, and of the third party players in the region, are frequently analysed in the framework of three levels: 1/ the littoral states, 2/ the states affiliated with the region and 3/third countries and organisations attempting to exert influence and shape the balance of power in this part of the world. What's more, any analysis of the geopolitical situation of the region without accounting for the historical conditions may diminish its complexity.

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## Three perspectives

As far as the first level of the analysis is concerned, that is the geopolitics of the littoral states in the Black Sea region, it needs to be said that they include six countries: Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia. The first two, i.e. Turkey and Russia, can be regarded as both regional and external players, since their policies in the region are clearly an outcome of their foreign policy. Both of them enjoy an extremely strong geopolitical position and both are keen to maintain the status quo in the region. The difference between them lies in the fact that Turkey is a NATO member, while Russia seems to be the largest threat to the security of the region (as illustrated by the war with Georgia in August 2008 and the ongoing conflict in Ukrainian Donbas and the annexation of Crimea).

The policies of Bulgaria and Romania, as members of the European Union and NATO, are influenced largely by the interests of these two organisations. Ukraine and Georgia, meanwhile, are key transit states whose importance in the modern world has been growing along with the increase of their geo-economic positions. Additionally, Georgia is a state where conflicts escalate on a regular basis, resulting in the destabilisation of the situation throughout the region with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

With regard to the second level of the analysis, that is the geopolitics of states affiliated with the region, it is agreed that they include: Greece, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Greece is a member state of NATO and the EU. Understandably, it guards the interests of those bodies. However, due to its geostrategic position, Athens naturally controls the waters of the Aegean Sea and access to the Black Sea straits (which are under Turkey's control). Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan (but also Georgia) play the double role of the "stakeholder" in the game between the parties concerned and, at the same time, are the "buffer zone" between the West and East. Moreover, since the end of the 1980s, the South Caucasus (i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) has been beset by numerous ethnic, social and political conflicts which make it one of the least stabile post-Soviet areas. The instability and conflict-prone character of this part of the world is not only the result of a clash of political interests but also from specific historical factors. That is why the Black Sea region can be referred to as an ethnic, cultural and religious melting pot.

The final, third level of the analysis, namely, the geopolitics of key third-party players in the region, aims to examine the influences of the following superpowers: the EU, the United States, and NATO. In this respect, first the content of the EU's policy needs to be looked at more closely. The shift of the EU border eastwards, which took place in 2004, and its expansion following the inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 was particularly important for the Black Sea region; it brought

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about an undeniable change in the balance of power throughout south-eastern Europe. The eastern border of the EU came closer to the Black Sea region which automatically entangled the EU in the geostrategic rivalry of the area.

In this way, the Black Sea has become, to some extent, an internal basin of the EU. In other words, the shift in the balance of power within the region gave the EU new instruments of influence. In the 1990s the EU initiative in the Black Sea focused on financial and technical support for the union's eastern neighbours. So far, despite successive attempts at changing the image of the EU in the Black Sea, via instruments such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership, the EU has failed to come up with a consistent and comprehensive strategy for this region in the 21st century. The interests of the United States here are seen mostly through the lens of America's concrete geostrategic goals. The third player – NATO – has been shown as invariably placing the region in the "out of area" category, despite its direct involvement through the membership of Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania in its structures.

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## Growing significance

Nevertheless, the Black Sea states remain hostage to geopolitics and history. The impact of the factors outlined above on the shape of the relations in the region is still very noticeable. It has manifested in the activities of certain entities and the objectives and interests advanced in the foreign policy of other countries. Even today, the Black Sea region is "a stake" in the foreign policies of such superpowers as Russia, Turkey, the US, the EU and NATO. Moreover, the security of the region remains an extremely complex issue mainly due to its multidimensional nature (military, energy, ecological, political, etc.).

The security of the region remains an extremely complex issue mainly due to its multi-dimensional nature.

Given the growing geostrategic significance of the region, its security and stability will depend on tightening co-operation and integration with western structures and on the capacity of Black Sea states to actively contribute to the new architecture of security put into effect by NATO and the EU. Closer and more constructive relations between the countries of the region and the EU offer a chance for a successful implementation of democratic reforms in the area and a peaceful settlement of local conflicts. Future development will also depend on wider international factors which could influence what happens here. This refers to the bilateral relations between the EU and Russia, NATO and Russia, the EU and Turkey, and Russia and Turkey. It also takes into account the interactions between the above-mentioned players and the US, which has shown a keen interest in the state of relations in Black Sea.

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# Security takes centre stage in the Black Sea

ZURAB AGLADZE

The annexation and militarisation of the Crimean Peninsula has given Russia greater access to use enhanced military capabilities to project its forces in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and apply pressure on the other countries in the region, particularly Ukraine and Georgia. In response, NATO and the Euro-Atlantic community have started developing a new approach to Black Sea security.

The Black Sea region over the centuries has been the subject of interest of empires and powerful states. The region, as a security space, has a complicated history. It combines a central maritime space with limited access and coastal areas that link it to the regional security complexes of Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East – and that often intersect and overlap. The Black Sea region is of crucial significance for Europe, being a major crossroad and critical intersection of east-west and south-north corridors.

Despite its geopolitical importance, this region has always been a divider rather than a unifier of different geographical spaces and spheres of influence. The Georgian-Russian War in 2008 and the annexation of Crimean Peninsula in 2014 showed that this characteristic remains. And security is still a major challenge for countries of the region. Security challenges are determined by many aspects, but the main factors include the absence of a regional identity; the weak level of economic integration; and the differing levels of democracy and foreign policy among

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the regional states. In addition, the divergent views of the big players, like Russia, the United States, NATO and the European Union, play a role in the future development of the Black Sea.

## Russian strategy

"Everything that happens today is the result of an attempt to introduce the concept of the unipolar world." These words belong to the Russian President Vladimir Putin when he spoke at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. Before and after the Munich event, representatives of the Russian political elite often emphasised that the former republics of the Soviet Union make up the sphere of Russia's exclusive zone of influence and they will not accept western intervention or a decline of Russia in the region. While these statements did not directly threaten the use of military force, the situation that unfolded in Crimea highlighted that the use of military force is a privileged and permanent option for Russia in order to maintain influence in the Black Sea region.

In order to comprehend Russia's actions, we should better understand how it sees itself and the other countries in the region. Russia's revisionist policy in the Black Sea is determined by the identity of itself as a strong and dominant state. The Kremlin's main goal is to create a multi-polar international order where Russia will be one of the power centres. Consequently, Russia seeks to end NATO's domination over the European continent in the security sphere and to prevent the enlargement of NATO and the European Union further East. Therefore, it is not surprising that Russia is using military force in order to maintain its influence in the Black Sea region – even if it is at the expense of the neighbouring countries' sovereignty (like Georgia and Ukraine).

Nevertheless, NATO and the Euro-Atlantic community do not agree with the Kremlin's policy in the region. The most fundamental point of contention between the West and Russia is the status of the former Soviet republics of Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Russia views these states as part of its exclusive sphere while the West views them as free sovereign states that have the right to join western institutions like NATO or the EU if they wish to do so. In addition to that, US policy in the region towards the promotion of democracy, foreign aid and the free flow of information directly conflicts with Russia's view.

After Viktor Yanukovych fled Ukraine in February 2014, Russia seized the possibility of a vacuum of power in Kyiv, launching a process that eventually resulted in the illegal annexation of Crimea. The military phase of the operation began on February 27th with the occupation of official buildings and soon after by uniden-

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tified armed soldiers, later known as the "little green men". Moscow gained full political control over the peninsula after a referendum was held on March 16th which was declared illegal by the Ukrainian authorities and recognised by only a small handful of states. Because Russia achieved its goal with low military cost, it decided to continue the military phase of operations and invaded eastern Ukraine with the help of proxy forces.

## Rapid militarisation

Why is the Crimean Peninsula, which is located in the Black Sea, so important to the Kremlin? The annexation and militarisation of the Crimean Peninsula gives Russia a strong platform to project forces and political influence in Ukraine, the Black Sea region, and far beyond. With great access via Crimea, Russia can now use its enhanced military capabilities to project forces in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Russian has an enhanced military presence in Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, Libya and Egypt. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula is directly related to Russia's ambition to become an influential power in Eurasia.

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The annexation of Crimea has had a direct impact on the security of the region due to the fact that the Kremlin has begun a process of the militarisation of the peninsula. The Kremlin set up an A2/AD system (anti-access, area denial) which allows Russia to deny other countries access and free movement in the region. By creating this system, the Kremlin ensures that NATO will not be able to establish any sort of stronghold, particularly in former Soviet republics. This system includes the deployment of the "Bastion" coastal defence system which includes anti-ship and air defence systems; S-400 missile systems; "Pantsir" S-1 air defence missile systems; Tu-22M3 strategic bombers; and naval assets such as heavy frigates and submarines equipped with Kaliber cruise missiles. In addition to the military resources, the Kremlin has drastically increased the number of personnel deployed to Crimea, including a reconnaissance brigade, two naval infantry brigades, one artillery brigade, one nuclear, chemical, and biological defence regiment, a coastal defence missile brigade, three fighter regiments, one helicopter regiment, and two air defence regiments. The militarisation of the region is not limited to the Crimean Peninsula; Russia is also increasing its military presence in the two Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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## NATO support in the region

Unfortunately the Black Sea has never been high on NATO's priority list. However after the developments in Ukraine, the West acknowledged that the Black Sea and its subsequent militarisation is a core of Russia's political agenda and it is not willing to abandon its effort in the near future. In response, NATO and the Euro-Atlantic community have started developing a new approach to security in the Black Sea. Even though NATO and the wider transatlantic community have an interest in deterring or quickly resolving sovereignty challenges in the region, Russia has enough ability and will to deter this process. One recent expression of NATO's interest was the 2016 Warsaw Summit communique highlighting NATO's commitment to non-ally partners such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The statement, and subsequent actions, illustrate that the Black Sea region has become a greater priority for NATO, and the West declared it is ready for a prolonged standoff against Russia. The first element in this process is the diplomatic and financial pressure of economic sanctions placed on Russia by the West. The second element is a process which will enable NATO to rapidly deploy military forces in the region should conflict arise.

The third element focuses on maintaining the freedom of movement and protecting allies in the region. NATO has undertaken specific measures towards this aim, including greater military patrol and reconnaissance aircrafts, an increase of naval forces present in the Black Sea through the Bosporus Strait, enhanced training and education programmes for Georgia and Ukraine, increased military assistance funding for non-NATO countries, and increased military exercises in the region.

The fourth element is direct military aid to non-NATO countries. Ukraine was recently granted a comprehensive assistance package which includes aid to increase its intelligence capabilities, assistance to reorganise and develop naval forces (including the relocation of the naval academy from Sevastopol to Odesa), and resources to reorganise and strengthen the military industry. Similarly, Georgia was granted the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) as part of the NATO Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative (DCB). The SNGP is aimed at improving Georgia's defence capabilities, increasing its resilience, enhancing interoperability with NATO and supporting its NATO membership preparation process.

Currently, the SNGP consists of 14 initiatives:

- NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre
- Defence Institutional Building School
- Logistic Capability Development
- Intelligence Sharing and Secure Communications

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- Aviation
- Air Defence
- Special Operations Forces
- Military Police
- Acquisition
- Maritime Security
- Cyber Security
- Strategic Communications
- Crisis Management
- Counter Mobility.

Beyond NATO, the United States is working directly with its partners and developing bilateral co-operation programmes. The US Congress has approved the sale and delivery of defensive weapons to Ukraine and Georgia (including anti-tank "Javelin" missiles delivered to Georgia and Ukraine in 2018). In May 2018 the Congress also approved 250 million US dollars to go towards military assistance in Ukraine. The Congress has voted for military support previously, but at the time it was blocked by the Obama administration. It appears that officials in the Trump administration are more willing to provide this aid.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Black Sea region is becoming one of the most important security points in the current East-West standoff. None of the parties has shown any indication of backing down, and with the greater militarisation of the region, particularly on the side of Russia, the Black Sea will remain a possible host to a military standoff. Of course any outcome is possible, but certainly a more peaceful one would require all sides to take a step back, and put real effort into trying to reach an agreement that would take security-related issues out of the Black Sea. NEE

Zurab Agladze is a founding member of the Georgian Strategic Analysis Center. He has 18 years of experience in international relations, defence, education and management. His military service includes, among others, being the senior military representative of Georgian forces in Iraq, commander of the 5th Infantry Brigade and commander of land forces. Between 2013 and 2015 he was rector of the National Defense Academy of Georgia.

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THE FREEDOM AND SOLIDARITY DAYS BROUGHT MORE THAN **220,000 PEOPLE TOGETHER** FROM DIFFERENT PARTS OF POLAND AND ABROAD **TO CELEBRATE THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF POLAND'S FIRST PARTLY FREE ELECTIONS**. THE 10 DAY CELEBRATION, WHICH OCCURRED FROM JUNE 1-11 CONSISTED OF MANY DIFFERENT EVENTS SUCH AS ARTS AND CRAFTS, SPEECHES, DEBATES, CONCERTS, ETC.

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*Photo: Renata Dąbrowska / ECS Archive*

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*The opening of the round table and the days of celebration.*
*Photo: Dawid Linkowski / ECS Archive*

*Visitors expressing their thoughts and answering the question "what do you wish for a free person".*
*Photo: Daniel Frymark / ECS Archive*

Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, the Mayor of Gdańsk, when summarizing the event, expressed her gratitude to the donors and 250 volunteers from all over the country: "We were able to thank the Poles, who in the 1970s and 80s, won freedom for us."
"These were days of peace," Basil Kerski, Director of the European Solidarity Centre, added.

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*One of the many events included a family walk through the European Solidarity Centre's Permanent Exhibition where parents and their children were able to learn more about the history behind the Solidarity movement.*
*Photo: Renata Dąbrowska / ECS Archive*

Jacek Bendykowski, the president of the Gdańsk Foundation, sharing the opinion of the guests in the Strefy Społecznej (social event zone), emphasized that many people managed to get from Gdańsk an atmosphere of joy and the idea that you can talk freely about everything.
"I know that this holiday is still going on and will last, because it depends on each of us, how we want to think about our small homeland, municipality, city, and finally about this homeland with a capital 'H'", summed up the Mayor of Gdansk.

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## INTERNATIONAL CIVIC FORUM: 1989-2019. THE BIRTH OF NEW EUROPE

The International Civic Forum was a two-day event open to the public and took place during the Freedom and Solidarity Days. Speakers brought different regional perspectives and competences while speeches included discussions about Polish democracy, culture and the excluded, forgotten, and the invisible. Participants had the opportunity to hear, among others: Polish presidents and prime ministers; people of culture and media, such as Agnieszka Holland, Anda Rottenberg, Krzysztof Czyżewski and Adam Michnik; researchers and scholars like Małgorzata Omilanowska, Timothy Garton Ash, Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński and Ireneusz Krzemiński; local government officials including Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, Rafał Trzaskowski and Rafał Dutkiewicz; former oppositionists such as Bogdan Borusewicz, Bogdan Lis and Władysław Frasyniuk; as well as the architects of change after the elections on June 4 1989: Grażyna Staniszewska, Aleksander Hall and Leszek Balcerowicz.

The Freedom and Solidarity Days brought an atmosphere of joy and with these and the many different events, participants were able to express themselves in a variety of ways through art or through speech, and even with their presence they made a statement by recognizing this wonderful historical moment. Therefore, with the openness and energy of the people the spirit of the term Solidarity truly came to be.

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# Georgia's long and uncertain road to NATO membership

GIORGI GOGUADZE

Georgia's membership of NATO lies at the core of its foreign policy. The ambition is beyond the line of ministries and state bureaucratic apparatus, as it represents the utmost desire of the entire country.

Recent polls in Georgia suggest that support for the country's membership of NATO is at more than 70 per cent. Euro-Atlantic integration is Tbilisi's near-term objective. The longer-term strategy to move closer to NATO is non-negotiable for the state. Considering its geographic location, in the company of a hostile neighbour, Georgia adamantly wants to gain security by joining the Alliance. However, NATO is not only a security choice for Georgia; it is also a reflection of its political values and foreign policy.

## The echo of history

In order to see the bigger picture of Georgia-NATO relations, one should first step back to recent history and examine the first steps Tbilisi took towards NATO. NATO-Georgia relations have been of great importance for Georgia's foreign policy for decades. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia was dragged into bloody conflicts, triggered by the Russian Federation. The dramatic decline of economic welfare, the disintegration of territorial control, and the weakness of state

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institutions posed serious challenges to the development of the country, especially its foreign policy. Moreover, Georgia naturally fell under the strong influence of Russia which was visible until the very end of the 1990s. Yet, even then, Georgia found windows open to start relations with NATO, which still looked blurry in the eyes of Georgian decision-makers.

Attempts to establish relations with NATO took place during the government of Eduard Shevardnadze (1992–2003). The very first steps were taken when Georgia joined the NATO-run North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992 (NACC) and the Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme, signing the agreement on March 23rd 1994. In 1997 Georgia signed onto the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and ratified the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). In 1998 official relations were established between Georgia and NATO that revealed an open diplomatic mission. And in 2002 Georgia formally announced its aspirations to join NATO.

The new millennium was a period of accelerated relations between Georgia and NATO. The partnership level increased in its quality and aspirations. In 2002, during the NATO summit in Prague, Georgia expressed its desire to take part in a new programme called the "Individual Partnership Action Plan". In December of 2003 a draft of the Individual Partnership Plan of Georgia was drawn up and submitted the following year. Georgia thus moved on to the so-called second stage of the Euro-Atlantic integration. The Rose Revolution and the assignment of a new government is also a pivotal point in these relations. The idea that the only way for Georgia to prosper as an independent, sovereign and functional state is through western partnership was cemented in the hearts and minds of the nation. The cycle of reforms led to a strategic decision by NATO in 2006 where member states agreed to offer Georgia "Intensified Dialogue", which raised the membership perspective to the upper level and covered a full range of political, military, financial and security issues relating to possible NATO membership.

In 1998 official relations were established between Georgia and NATO, and in 2002 Georgia formally announced its aspirations to join the Alliance.

Positive public opinion of NATO was further stirred by its aggressive and hostile policy towards Russia. Every step towards co-operation with NATO was seen by the Kremlin as a threat and thus it took action against Georgia, such as an economic embargo, mass deportation of ethnic Georgians from Russia and the sabotaging of critical infrastructure (including gas pipelines which led to a heat shortage during the winter in Tbilisi). The 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest was expected to be a potentially major turning point in Georgia-NATO relations. Supported by the United States, the

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Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg (left) meeting with Georgia's prime minister, Mamuka Bakhtadze, during a recent visit to the country. Recent polls in Georgia suggest that support for the country's membership of NATO is at more than 70 per cent.

United Kingdom, and a number of Eastern European member states, the idea of an eastern enlargement did not find support amongst other continental powers, such as Germany, France, and Spain. However the summit did shift Georgia's status to that of an aspirant country with member states pledging that Georgia would one day become a full member.

In August 2008, Russia finally sealed its vision on the existence of a sovereign Georgia by triggering a full-scale war and occupying two strategic regions of the country. One could argue that the war became possible after Georgia and its allies fell short of convincing NATO member states to grant the Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia. However another interpretation suggests that leaving Georgia without an MAP gave the green light for Russia to attack.

## Practical and political co-operation

At the Wales's summit in 2014, Georgia was granted an important tool – the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) aimed at improving its defence capabilities, increasing resilience, enhancing interoperability with NATO, and sup-

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porting the NATO membership preparation process. Currently the SNGP consists of the following initiatives: the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre, the Defence Institutional Building School, co-operation in areas like logistic capability development, intelligence sharing, secure communications, aviation, air defence, special operations forces, military police, maritime security, cybersecurity, strategic communications, crisis management, and counter mobility. Each of these priorities strengthens the institutional capacity of the country and its defence institutions.

It is important to highlight that over the years Georgia has transformed from being a consumer of security benefits to an active contributor of stability and peace internationally. Georgian troops participate in various NATO-led missions and play a crucial role in legitimising the state's ambition to join the Alliance as an active supporter of the organisation's core principles and objectives.

Georgian forces also participated in the NATO-led Kosovo Force mission from its inception in 1999 until 2008. Georgian forces had already enjoyed a strong reputation for its participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. It has also indicated a willingness to participate in the post-2014 follow-up Resolute Support mission to train, advice and assist the Afghan National Security Forces after the ISAF mission has concluded. Georgian forces are involved in NATO Rapid Reaction Force which further boosts the country's interoperability with the Alliance. In addition, Georgia participates in the counter-terrorism effort, Operation Sea Guardian (former Operation Active Endeavor), in the Mediterranean Sea which was launched in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001.

The annual military exercise of NATO members in Georgia highlights the importance of the high political and military co-operation that is taking place. Furthermore, in 2016, Georgia hosted another meeting for the North Atlantic Council chaired by the Secretary General, signalling significant support to NATO-Georgian Commission and general co-operation between the subjects.

## Enthusiastic and sceptical allies

One could say that Georgia now faces the reality of dealing with enthusiastic and sceptical allies. It enjoys high support from a particular group of countries but struggles to convince others to include it as part of the Alliance. Georgia is viewed as a strategically important partner by all three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and the Visegrad Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia). Since Georgia embarked on an active process of reform, aiming to consolidate de-

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mocracy and become a constituent part of Euro-Atlantic institutions, relations with it has become a key priority for each of the other country's respective foreign policy.

The US remains a key ally of Georgia in its path towards NATO membership. Georgia and the US have close bilateral relations which serve to further the interests of both parties. Considering that NATO's enlargement in general has been largely driven by US policy, it is important that Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspiration enjoys bipartisan support in the US providing for a sustainable and reliable support in the long run.

When it comes to NATO enlargement, it is clear that Berlin is more cautious.

Another crucial partner is Germany. However, when it comes to NATO enlargement, it is clear that Berlin is more cautious. Georgian diplomats and stakeholders still have to make better inroads with Berlin's policymakers. While Germany does not principally object to Georgia joining NATO, Berlin has no clear idea how to deal with Georgia's aspirations to become part of western institutions. Since Germany remains unconvinced in the short term about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future, especially in regards to granting Georgia an action plan, it feels more comfortable fostering the sustainable economic development in Georgia and supports the long-term Europeanisation of Georgia through various projects. France, in two critical moments, has played a central role in EU policy towards the Eastern Neighbourhood: it acted as a peace-broker in the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, and, with Germany, it is currently co-leading the mediation efforts in Eastern Ukraine. It is important for Georgia to gain a better grasp of France's preferences and factor them into its foreign policy.

## Obsolete Russian policy

Using brutish force, Russia attempts to mark its sphere of influence in its immediate neighbourhood. Shortly after the August War in 2008, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed decrees recognising the independence of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states. This move marked an important change in Russia's approach as it now openly started to support separatist regions and used these conflicts as political leverage for influencing Georgia's foreign policy. The Kremlin views this process as an attempt by post-Soviet countries to escape Russian influence. As stated in the 2015 Russian National Security Strategy report: "A determining factor in relations with NATO is the unacceptability for the Russian Federation of the Alliance's increased military activity and the approach of its military infrastructure toward Russia's borders".

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The Kremlin sent a clear message to the Alliance that any further integration, such as granting membership to Georgia, will result in increased destabilisation and even direct annexation of Georgian territories (i.e. South Ossetia and Abkhazia). The threats are an important deterrent for the West which fears the further deterioration of relations with Russia and the creation of new unstable zones, like in Ukraine. Therefore any move towards greater integration would require a lot of work from the side of Georgia vis-à-vis NATO members to strengthen their support and to influence attitudes of those who seem to be against it.

There are different scenarios which could lead Georgia to unconventional ways of joining NATO. The dominant way among security policy experts foresees inviting Tbilisi into the Alliance without Article 5 commitments (which states an attack on one state is an attack on all) towards the occupied regions; at least before any official jurisdiction of Georgia is restored on Abkhazia and the Samachablo regions. In this way, NATO would only take full security responsibility for 80 per cent of the country.

However, one should not limit the options and the West should re-think and consider how much has changed since the first Washington Summit in 1949. The emerging hybrid threats and rising populism pose serious questions of the integrity and dedication of the Alliance. It is high time to prove that NATO is committed to its decisions, especially its Open Door Policy.

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# The shift of dominance in the Black Sea

SOPHIA PETRIASHVILI

Turkey's policy in the Black Sea, which mainly aims to deter NATO's presence in the region, has diminished its overall role, making it more vulnerable to Russia's growing influence. Russian's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a clear signal that the Black Sea is gradually becoming a Russian lake, upsetting the equilibrium that has been in place for nearly a century.

Despite centuries of political and military conflicts and other power dynamics around the Black Sea, there has never been a period in history when a common conception of the Black Sea region existed – not even among the littoral states. Accordingly, the Black Sea region has gradually evolved into a unit of analysis, a sort of framework under which certain power dynamics are analysed by different scholars and policy-makers. Thus, the Black Sea regional security is difficult to examine and ofentimes becomes the combination of security perspectives of two main regional powers – Turkey and Russia – assessed within the context of the transatlantic security architecture.

## Balancing power

Reflection on the historical background of present day politics oftentimes plays a role of a good prologue, advancing our understanding of political, economic and military strategies animated by key regional and international players within a particular context. For centuries, starting from the conquering of the city of Con-

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stantinople in 1453 up to 1809, the Black Sea was regarded as an Ottoman lake and had gained the status of an inner sea of Turkey. The Black Sea regional dynamics started to change in the 18th century though, when, after the six-year-long conflict between the Russian and Ottoman empires, the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca provided Russia with direct access to the Black Sea via the Kerch and Azov ports. The creation of the Crimean city of Sevastopol further strengthened the image of Russia as an emerging Black Sea power while the Ottoman Empire was slowly on the decline. And yet, despite all those victories, Russia has never managed to successfully materialise one of its primary aspirations (which served as one of the motives to enter the First Wold War) connected to the Black Sea region – to gain control of the Bosporus and Dardanelles, known as the Turkish Straits, known for their extreme military and economic strategic importance.

The 1936 Montreux Convention had set up a particular power balance in the Black Sea region which Russia unsuccessfully tried to change.

After the First World War, when the 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne created the foundation of Turkey's statehood, Turkey gradually regained its status as a regional power. It not only managed the growing conflict of European states in the region, but also brokered the 1936 Montreux Convention, which secured its sovereign right to control the Straits, granting free movement of vessels belonging to Black Sea states that were not at war with Turkey. Non–Black Sea powers could only send their warships of 15,000 tonnes per vessel (45,000 in aggregate) and could only stay in the Black Sea for 21 days.

The Montreux Convention had set up a particular power balance in the Black Sea region which Russia unsuccessfully tried to change one more time during the Second World War, forcing Turkey to revise the agreement over the Turkish Straits in 1946. The event known as the crisis of Turkish Straits soon paved the way for the United States to include them in its containment policy towards the Soviet Union following by Turkey's membership of NATO in 1952.

While the Cold War was characterised by some sort of a power balance among Turkey, the Soviet Union, NATO and the US, the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union saw a post-Soviet power vacuum. Only after the peaceful revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine, complemented by Romania's and Bulgaria's NATO membership in 2004 and European Union membership in 2007, had transatlantic powers found themselves on the doorstep of the Black Sea region. The local dynamics started to change with new roles for Ankara and Moscow. All those shifts had implications on the Black Sea security architecture, making other Black Sea littoral states and their neighbours more vulnerable and dependent on the ups and downs of Russia-Turkey relations.

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## Russia returns

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's perspectives towards the Black Sea can be clustered into several different phases, each one having its own specific features and implications for regional security. Phase one covers the period between 1991 and 1994 and is characterised by the emergence of ethnic conflict, and the establishment of a totally new post-Soviet status quo; at that time the so-called regional outlook was shaped by ethnic conflict and was marked with Russia searching for a new role or niche in the world. The second phase covers the period of 1995–2002. This period was mainly dominated by the Chechen war which was also used as a prism through which the Black Sea region was perceived.

Phase three lasted from 2003 through to 2008 – with the final year becoming a turning point with regards to Russia's role in the Black Sea. During this period, the Azov-Black Sea zone started to be considered a zone of strategic interest for the Russian Federation. Phase four started with the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, while phase five began with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and regained the attention of western powers towards the Black Sea region and its security. Phase six is directly connected to Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 where the Kremlin clearly demonstrated the might of its Black Sea fleet by deploying both offensive and defensive systems.

Depending on the phase, Russia's engagement in regional affairs altered from nominal to active. However, one of the key foundations of the Russian strategic vision that remained unchanged during all this time is that it believed it had more right to play a leading role in the region (and beyond) than any other side. One has to admit that Putin's statement "to turn Crimea into a fortress" has been gradually becoming reality, thus upsetting the regional balance of power between Turkey and Russia (that is, shifting it in favour of Moscow). With the annexation of Crimea, Russia's de facto coastline grew from 475 kilometres to 1,200 km (about 25 per cent of the sea's total shorefront) which is almost as much as Turkey's 1,785 km coastline (around 35 per cent). It has been constantly advancing its military advantage both on the sea and in the air without being counter balanced by any other power, including NATO, or its member state Turkey.

In principle, major strategic factors in the Black Sea and its surroundings have not changed much for Russia since the 19th century. The Kremlin still perceives Crimea as it military source, aspires for its possible control over the Turkish Straits with an overall intention to maintain and expand its sphere of influence and military presence – sort of a rollback policy of the 21st century, but this time applied by the Russian Federation against the western powers and in some cases Turkey.

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Photo: Website of the President of Russia (CC) http://en.kremlin.ru

A Russian naval parade of Black Sea Fleet ships. Russian's annexation of Crimea is a clear signal that the Black Sea is gradually becoming a Russian lake.

## Turkey's Black Sea tango

In the current "Perspectives and Policies on Security Issues," published on the website of the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs, we read that "the security of the Republic of Turkey has been dictated by two main elements: geography and longstanding ties with the neighbouring countries. These two determinants make Turkey a key regional security player in Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions and beyond. In the last couple of years, Turkey has also demonstrated its capacity to act as a global actor beyond these regions." While the above statement carries a large portion of truth, it is not certain on how much prestige and influence Turkey has today to be a key player in its own neighbourhood, let alone on a global level.

Due to the historical conception of the Black Sea as its own inner lake and partially because of the fear among Turkish officials that the United States had a desire to become more active in the region, Ankara has been trying its best to make sure that that no other regional or international power could penetrate into the region and threaten its dominant role. For decades Turkey believed the best way to serve its interests in the Black Sea region would be to keep the US and other European countries at arm's length.

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Led by a strong desire to maintain its sovereign right over the Turkish Straits, Ankara prioritised the Black Sea maritime security while separating it from other issues in the region. For years Turkey, in partnership with Russia, promoted several maritime security initiatives like the Black Sea Harmony and the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor). Interestingly enough this was done not only with the intention of responding to the changing security challenges of the littoral states, but also to keep NATO out of the region. Despite a strong lobby from Romania and Bulgaria – both EU and NATO member states with direct access to the Black Sea – to expand NATO's role on issues like smuggling and terrorism in the region, Turkey favoured an alternative approach called Black Sea Harmony – a UN initiative. Furthermore, during the August 2008 war in Georgia, Turkey did not allow two US hospital vessels (the USNS Comfort and Mercy) to cross the Bosporus into the Black Sea.

## Gradual shift of power

Turkey's policy, which aimed to deter NATO's growing presence in the Black Sea region, in reality diminishes its influence by dragging Ankara further away from transatlantic institutions and making it more vulnerable to Russia's growing influence. Russian's annexation of Crimea was a clear signal that the Black Sea is gradually becoming a Russian lake. And Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 further complemented that shaping by unveiling Moscow's interests to treat Turkey as a platform for its military ambitions – gaining access to Egypt via its current military basis of Lakatia and Tartus in Syria for which naval support through the Turkish Straits would be of crucial importance.

Turkey's growing dependency on Russia has raised concerns of NATO and its allies.

As Moscow and Ankara found each other on the opposite sides during the war in Syria, this further contributed to the changing balance of power in the Black Sea in favour of the Kremlin. While the US and other western powers unified their forces with the People's Protection Units (YPG) – the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that Turkey considers a terrorist organisation – during their fight against ISIS and Bashar al Assad, for Turkey it became an inevitable preventive measure to strengthen its ties with Moscow, the only realistic player able to contain the YPG and thus pacify some fears. However this only strengthened Turkey's dependency on Russia and raised the concerns of NATO and its allies. Of course, there were some clashes between Turkey and Russia as well. One clear example was Turkey's

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downing of a Russian Su-24 in 2015. However Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's apology a year later followed by several summits between himself and Vladimir Putin further demonstrated how much Turkey needed Russia's support with containing the YPG in Syria.

Overall, the growing connections between Turkey and Russia do have some positive implications for both of the countries, their citizens, as well as other littoral states. Closer co-operation might be perceived as a foundation for greater stability in the Black Sea. However, it would be safe to assume the Kremlin's medium and long-term objectives, related to its political and military dominance, are not limited only to the Black Sea region, but also the wider Mediterranean. Turkey might want to reflect on and rethink its Black Sea policy and welcome a more active and engaged NATO. This would hopefully contribute to the revival of equilibrium between Turkey and Russia.

## Regional power dynamics – meaning for Georgia?

Even a short glance at the power dynamic within the Black Sea region makes it clear that Georgia needs to be very smart in how, and with whom, it will preposition itself and pursue its foreign policy within and outside the region. Russia clearly perceived it as a part of its near abroad – calling it its own under-belly – and its direct sphere of its influence. Various applications of hard power (e.g. the war in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, crawling occupation, etc.) and soft power (e.g. connections with religious groups, close ties with certain political parties like Patriots' Alliance, etc.) against Georgia would be further proof that the country needs to stay committed to its transatlantic aspirations for its own security and prosperity. One question, however, arises: Would closer ties with Turkey be the solution?

> Russia's growing power and influence in the Black Sea makes the overall context in the region less favourable for Georgia.

Even though Ankara and Tbilisi have been strengthening ties – with Turkey supporting Georgia's territorial integrity and even calling upon NATO during the 2018 Brussels Summit to extend its membership to Georgia (along with Bosnia and Herzegovina) – Ankara's increasing dependency on the Kremlin and Russia's growing power and influence in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions makes the overall context in the region less favourable for Georgia. Furthermore, taking into consideration the complexity of the regional issues that Turkey might be willing to address, Georgian interests might not be the top priority. In the hierarchy of preferences, Turkey would probably prioritise the issue of Crimean Tatars

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(supporting Muslims in the region has been its historic mission since the times of the Ottoman Empire) or Azerbaijan's interest in Nagorno-Karabakh over those of Georgia. This puts Georgia in a challenging position, requiring wisdom to navigate the complex regional dynamics, reminding Turkey and other European powers that it also matters and can actually play a positive role in counter balancing the growing Russian influence.

The observed changes in the power balance of the region and the growing influence of Russia with its increasing military ambition will represent a greater threat not only for intra-regional states but for the transatlantic parties. Turkey, while maintaining mutually beneficial economic ties with the Kremlin, needs to understand that it has to change its tactic of keeping NATO out of the picture – where giving it a more active engagement and presence should be welcomed. At the same time, NATO and the EU should rethink their previous approach towards the Black Sea region, becoming more pragmatic and realistic. Otherwise growing Russian power, which is already at the doorstep of not only the Black Sea but also the Mediterranean regions, will become harder to contain.

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# A sea of insecurity

EMIL AVDALIANI

The Black Sea has always been an important geopolitical theatre. The November 2018 Russian attack on Ukraine's naval convoy illustrates the Kremlin's desire to assert dominance in the region and causing greater insecurity and uncertainty for those pro-western states that are situated along the sea coast.

The Black Sea, though serving as an extension of the wider Mediterranean space, has always been strategically important in global politics. The level of interest global powers have expressed in the region has varied from time to time, but the sea has its own merits as a space where historical steppe lands from the north, the isolated South Caucasus, the wider Middle East and the Mediterranean met each other. Powers around the Black Sea have evolved and have even substantially changed over the course of centuries, but one fact has remained the same – the Sea remains a relatively unstable space in today's geopolitics.

## Historical context

A brief history will suffice to bring context to the presence of perpetual competition within the Black Sea region. The gradual expansion of the Ottoman Empire from the south and the Duchy of Muscovy (later transformed into the Russian Empire during the 18th century) in the 15th and 16th centuries from the north eventually brought both powers into direct contact in the Black Sea. Thus began three centuries of economic and diplomatic competition, not to mention direct military conflict between the two rival powers.

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Consider the following examples. Tsar Peter I, the Great (1682–1725), elevated Russia to the status of a land and maritime power on equal footing to the Western European empires of the time. A critical element for achieving this was to gain access to the seas around the Russian heartland – in this case the Black Sea. There were unsuccessful attempts to get control over the Azov Sea and the Tsar did not have enough time to attain his aims in the Baltic Sea area – as most of his reign was spent on containing and eventually defeating the Swedes in the north and establishing a footing on the Baltic Sea.

Peter's attempts in the Black Sea were repeatedly emulated by subsequent Russian monarchs, with Catherine the Great (1762–1796) finally succeeding in gaining control over the northern parts of the region. One of the most famous Russo-Turkish wars was the one of 1768–1774 when Russia, under the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, was given free access to the Sea of Azov through the Kerch Strait and into the Black Sea. Moreover, the Crimean Khanate gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, making it easier for Russia to complete its conquest of Crimea in 1783. Thus the Ottoman naval supremacy in the Black Sea was gradually eroding. The Russians built naval bases in Crimea and gained control over Georgia's Black Sea shore.

Russian naval dominance in the Black Sea, and geopolitical superiority in the surrounding territories, lasted through the end of the First World War. The Turks, unless helped by the French and the British (as happened during the Crimean War of 1853–1856), were unable to resist the Russians. The Russo-Turkish competition of the 17th century through to the early 20th century illustrated that general peace in the Black Sea could only be reached if one power controlled the entire body – similar to what the Romans attained when they controlled the entire Mediterranean Sea.

This meant that the West should have always helped the Turks limit Russia's ambitions, lest the Black Sea was lost to western navies. During the Cold War, the Black Sea region did not feature much in the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union; but by the end of the Cold War it provided a geopolitical vacuum. Turkey (independently or as a member of the NATO alliance), Ukraine and other Black Sea countries hoped for a larger influence in this erstwhile "Russian lake".

## Turning point

This is where Ukraine becomes important. Ever since Ukraine's independence in 1991, Russia has worried that Kyiv might shift its allegiance to the West. This would have caused an intolerable security breach for Moscow and an end to the Kremlin's

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ambition to restore an empire similar to the Soviet Union. Thus when events in Ukraine took place in 2014, it was truly a turning point for the Black Sea region.

Russian activity in Ukraine demonstrated that, despite some concrete steps in furthering bilateral relations, Turkey and Russia still remain geopolitical rivals with overlapping interests in several strategically vital regions. One such theatre is the Black Sea. Turkey's geographic position gives it the longest shore along the Black Sea and natural control over the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits – making it capable of projecting its military and economic power across the entire Black Sea. Turkey, like Russia, has a natural interest in extending its influence in the Black Sea, leaving little room for the two powers to find a foundational compromise in the long run. The Turks fear that, by annexing the Crimean Peninsula, Russia got the upper hand in terms of military infrastructure and the ability to cover all the shores of the Black Sea. Thus there is a potential for deep disagreement between Ankara and Moscow, particularly as Turkey is worried that it is not only in the north that Russia is collecting geopolitical assets, but also in the south, in Syria.

> Turkey's geographic position gives it the longest shore along the Black Sea and natural control over the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits.

The Black Sea region in 2018 witnessed some interesting developments. On November 25th Russian gunboats attacked Ukraine's naval convoy, rammed a tugboat and seized it along with two other Ukrainian ships. The vessels were traveling from the Ukrainian port of Odesa (on the Black Sea) to the Ukrainian port of Mariupol (on the Sea of Azov). The only route to access Mariupol was the Kerch Strait that separates Russian-controlled Crimea from Russia proper. Previously, Ukrainian and Russian sailors were causing problems for each other which often ended in temporary arrests. However, the November events near Crimea marked a new level of escalation between the two states. While the situation in Donbas is relatively calm – with occasional fighting along the contact line – the overall state of affairs points to the fact that large-scale military action is unlikely to happen in east Ukraine. Perhaps another theatre where Moscow could pressure Kyiv is at sea, and its activity might be a negotiating tactic, or first a step, towards further securing the Sea of Azov.

The sealing off of the Kerch Strait would be significant for Ukraine, especially for its economy as it is the only route for its boats to reach the ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol. A large part of Ukraine's maritime economy depends on trade through these two ports as Ukraine's Black Sea ports are not that competitive and it would be difficult for Kyiv to re-route trade from the Azov ports to the Black Sea ones. If a veritable blockade of the Azov Sea continues, then we are likely to see a further drop in economic activity. For instance, exports entering through Mariupol

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have already dropped 58 per cent in recent years. Because of the difficult security situation, foreign investment has been close to zero. At the same time, Russia's actions might be regarded as a logical continuation of earlier ones. The annexation of Crimea, temporary closures of the Kerch Strait, as well as the construction of the bridge from the Russian mainland to the peninsula, would still not mean a total domination of the Azov Sea or straits if Ukraine's boats are allowed to sail into the Azov basin.

## Wider perspective

Russia's drive to dominate the Kerch Strait and the Azov Sea might also reflect Moscow's strategic thinking. The Kerch Strait is an approximately 40-kilometre-long channel that is no wider than 15 km. The strait links the Black Sea to the Azov and is important as it allows the control of water routes and energy resources coming in and out of the Azov Sea. Thus, it was inevitable that Russia and Ukraine would fight for the territory. Indeed, there were cases well before Russia-Ukraine relations plunged. In 2003, for instance, Russia and Ukraine nearly went to war over the strait when Russia started the construction of a bridge to one of the islands in the Azov Sea.

However, following the EuroMaidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014, the dispute took a much more serious turn, seeing the two countries now battling for control of the Black and Azov seas' military and economic transportation lines. The Kerch Strait is a continuation of the Northern Caucasus into Crimea, home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, located at Sevastopol. That is why Moscow is concerned that the pro-western government in Kyiv could potentially allow the strait to be used by western military fleets and even by NATO. The Russians want to retain direct access to the Don River safe, closed to the military alliance. Moscow also believes, theoretically, that the strategically important Don River could be used by foreign troops to access the Russian mainland. As such, we need to put Russia's actions last November into a wider geopolitical perspective. Yet, even if the closure only turns out to be a temporary move, Moscow is sending a clear message to Kyiv regarding the tools it has to limit potential western military encroachment in the Black and Azov seas.

In many ways, most of the Black Sea countries' sovereignty and integration into the western political and economic system (i.e., NATO and EU) is contingent upon direct US support and power in the region which can be inserted via the sea. The starting point, of course, is the understanding that the United States' power in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea has always been limited compared to other re-

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gions. This is largely due to the fact that the US is a sea power surrounded by large swathes of water and its reach into the depths of the Eurasian continent through the deployment of troops is constrained.

## Elegant decline

Let us start with s basic numbers. The earth is a relatively modest-sized planet – 40,000 kilometres in circumference at the equator, while its total surface area is 510 million square kilometres. Nearly three-quarters of the planet is covered by water. The power controlling the planet's oceans thus commands numerous economic and military developments across the globe. Americans understand this well, seen in their efforts since the late 19th century to expand their naval capabilities. The 20th century was the American century, but this is now changing. China and India are now building navies, along with Iran's growing assertiveness in the Persian Gulf, and Russia's growing assertiveness in the Black Sea.

It is also important to see what China is doing. Their strategy is more to dilute American power than to engage outright. This is a clever approach (more like a hit and run) and it creates uncomfortable conditions for rival powers. Ancient Chinese strategists give some interesting insight into how the Chinese could be seeing their present-day competition. Pure numbers and power overstretch is also to blame. Consider the following fact. During the Cold War, to maintain dominance the US deployed fleets (up to 1,000 ships) mostly in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as in the Mediterranean. In a striking contrast, today, it has fewer than 500 ships while the number of competing sea powers is on the rise.

Throughout history, sea power has proved to be far more long-lasting than other forms land power, and it can be an indicator of a nation's power.

Another possible reason for the decline in US naval capacity is globalisation. The faster the pace of globalisation, the bigger the need to control every corner of the planet – as a minor military confrontation in Asia, Europe or the Middle East, for example, could transform into a global problem. Sea power throughout history has proved to be far more long-lasting than other forms land power, and it can be an indicator of a nation's power. The US might hope to retain its global dominance by enlisting allies with similar geopolitical aspirations to its own. But even here it would mean that the US would be revealing that its naval power is in a relatively weaker position. Many would call it an elegant decline.

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This, in many ways, is what the British experienced before the First World War. The country had been the main naval force in the world for almost two centuries, but the rise of the US and German naval fleets were becoming more evident and potentially threatening to the British order at sea. One of the reactions from Britain was to deny the trend and claim that their power would be unmatched. It is difficult to admit your declining power and influence.

What does all this mean for countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova? It means that, while today the US has an interest in the Black Sea, in the long run its focus will shift more towards containing China at sea, and this is far away from the Black Sea region. Washington will thus be less able to properly address the Russian navy in the Black and Azov Seas. As argued above, there are simply not enough naval resources at America's disposal. The scenario is unfortunate for Tbilisi and Kyiv, particularly as both are keen to expand and keep their nascent (e.g. Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port) or already existing ports (e.g. Ukraine's Berdyansk, Mariupol) secure. The Black Sea region has therefore entered a period of deep insecurity. And what is more worrisome, there is less chance, due to the global maritime trend, that this area will be the primary focus of the world's sea powers. NEE

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# A playground for influence

LEO SIKHARULIDZE

The Black Sea region is once again becoming an arena attracting large powers to invest and develop. However, the growing interest among the various powers also leads to a higher risk of conflict and confrontation, something that this region is already known for, historically.

Hellenes referred to the Black Sea as *Póntos Áxeinos* which derives from the ancient Persian word *axšaina* used to describe objects of dark colour. The Black Sea region has, historically speaking, been an arena of confrontation between different nations. It has witnessed the glorious rise of empires as well as their crushing defeats. During the heyday of the Ottoman Empire, the Black Sea was referred to as an "Ottoman Lake". European states have also been historically involved in the disputes over the region. As Boris Toucas, a visiting fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, wrote: "The Bloody 1853–1856 Crimean War between the Ottoman Empire and Russia left hundreds of thousands dead. France and Britain sided with the Ottomans during the conflict, as they feared Russia's growing strength would result in Russia's hegemonic position in the region". The war between Georgia and Russia in 2008 and the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 have brought back the Black Sea region to the forefront of the international political agenda.

As Chris Miller, the author of *Putinomics*, has argued: "There are three main reasons to look at the Black Sea as a coherent region, rather than merely as a medium-sized body of water: security, energy and European and Eurasian integration". The fact is the Black Sea is increasingly becoming an epicentre for the clash of interests between the major powers, and at the same time it creates the basis for possible

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co-operation among them. Paradoxically, the growing importance of the Black Sea region also serves as the catalyst for the challenges which might arise due to the conflicting interests of international actors in the region. Security and energy, in the context of Black Sea, are of increasing interest to Iran and China – one being a traditional player in the region with the latter being a newcomer.

## Economics and geopolitics

An integral part of the reasoning behind Chinese foreign policy regarding the Black Sea region is economic in nature since China and its "peaceful rise" is impossible to imagine without the Belt and Road Initiative – a cross-continental project aimed at creating new trade routes between China and Europe. The numbers do not lie and the financial muscle serving as the backbone for Chinese expansion in the region is substantial. Calling it the "project of the century", China announced its Belt and Road initiative in 2013 with a promise to invest 150 billion US dollars each year. For Georgia, the prospect of providing a significant number of jobs in a country with an unemployment rate of 12.7 per cent was understandably attractive. It joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – which was set up to help finance the Chinese-led project – in 2016 and signed an agreement where the bank will provide 114 million dollars to build a new highway.

Looking at the broader picture, especially from a geopolitical point of view, China joined the cohort of major powers rediscovering the economic and strategic value of the Black Sea region. This has led to some concern from the United States. US-based companies have been one of the lead investors in building the Anaklia deep-sea port, the largest infrastructure investment project in Georgian history. The port is seen not only as a means to complement the Chinese project, but also as a way to compete with them. In June of this year, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, during a joint statement to the press with Georgia's Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze, said: "I communicated our hope that Georgia completes the port project. The project and others will enhance Georgia's relationship with free economies and prevent Georgia from falling prey to Russian or Chinese economic influence. Those pretended friends do not have Georgia's best interests at heart." Considering the ongoing trade war between China and the US, it is no surprise that the two global powers are in an open competition and it seems that Georgia may be one of their fields to compete in.

China has joined the cohort of major powers rediscovering the economic and strategic value of the Black Sea region.

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## Regional players

Unlike the US or China, Iran has been a regional player in the Caucasus and Black Sea region since the early days of civilisation – when Iran was still officially known as the Persian Empire. The international isolation of Iran since its Islamic revolution in 1979, however, has put some degree of constraint on its capacities to fully engage in the region. The 2015 nuclear deal (from which the US withdrew under President Donald Trump) gave Iran some economic freedom and reports indicated that Tehran saw Georgia as a possible trade corridor between the Black and Persian Seas. Like China, Iran's primary motivation in the region is economic. It has declared it aims to bolster its own transit potential and to deepen its newly re-established trade relations with Europe.

During the 1990s, when the collective West and China were more or less uninvolved in the South Caucasus, Iran was undertaking diplomatic effort to safeguard its potential economic interest in the Black Sea. As Nika Chitadze from the International Black Sea University wrote in 2012: "after restoration of the national independence, in 1995, former President of Iran Hasemi Rafsanjani visited Georgia with a three-day visit, when after the meeting with the former President of Georgia he travelled to West Georgia to observe the functioning of Batumi and Poti ports at the Black Sea coast. After the visit, Rafsanjani has pointed out the importance of those ports for the economy of Iran."

Unlike the US or China, Iran has been a regional player in the Caucasus and Black Sea region since the early days of civilisation.

A major constraining factor for Iran, in order to be more actively engaged economically in Georgia, is political. Georgia's main strategic partner, the US, understandably cripples any initiative aimed at the development of bilateral relations between Georgia and Iran; and considering the latest developments between the two states, it is less likely that any further positive economic or political development will take place in the foreseeable future.

Within the context of these power dynamics, the global interest in the Black Sea will only increase. Turkey and Russia, both traditional regional actors, also play a major role. However they lack the financial resources to directly challenge the interests of America or China. What Russia lacks in financial resources is compensated by its military presence in the region; more importantly, one should underline the fact that its military presence is not limited within its borders. In all of the unresolved conflicts in the Black Sea region, there is a Russian military presence, either as an occupational force or a "peacekeeping" force; Russia therefore possesses substantial assets in order to reinforce its geopolitical agenda. Russia is

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also the only major player that would potentially benefit from the cancellation of any new project in the Black Sea, as the status quo is far more suitable to the Russian Federation than the new players such as China.

## Setting a precedent

As for the Turkish factor, relations between Georgia and Turkey have been cordial. Turkey is the only neighbour state of Georgia where the border demarcation is agreed upon. Meanwhile, military co-operation has been one of the fundamental components of co-operation between Georgia and Turkey. A recent report from the Turkish Centre for Strategic Research notes that Turkey and Georgia have signed several military agreements and that the "Turkish army has made contributions to modernising the Georgian Army". Therefore the initial stages of co-operation between Georgia and Turkey have been focused on security. The successful development of security co-operation has, in turn, translated into greater collaboration within the energy sector. The same report indicates that "three projects deserve special attention: The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline project; The Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline project; and the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku Railway project". These projects serve obvious economic purposes, but they also set a precedent of Georgia hosting internationally vital economic projects in the Black Sea region which could encourage more international actors to co-operate with and invest in Georgia.

Nevertheless, the Black Sea represents a growing region of interest – first and foremost due to its economic and security potential. However, along with the security-related potential, which regional or global powers find in it, paradoxically, security is also a major constraining factor for development. The number of unresolved conflicts in the northern and eastern shores of the Black Sea is the most obvious indicator. Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, for example, are all involved in conflicts which pose a threat to any project potentially undertaken in the Black Sea region. The dynamics of the region and its potential to become a reliable global trade route is wholly dependent on the management of these conflicts. One could argue that the elevation of the Black Sea in economic terms would only serve as a positive in relation to the conflicts present in the countries bordering the Black Sea.

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# All is not quiet on the eastern front

DAVID BATASHVILI

A fateful combination of geopolitical facts has made Ukraine and Georgia key to the success of the Kremlin's strategic goal of imperial resurgence, which apparently can only be achieved by controlling the fate of these two nations. Consequently, Georgia and Ukraine have become the primary targets of Russian aggression.

The world is rich with geopolitical hot spots right now. Iran, the Levant, North Korea, the waters east of China – all provide credible risks of a major war. Sino-American competition is clearly a major international issue for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, multi-sided geopolitical struggle in the Middle East will certainly provide a plentiful supply of crises.

Another major geopolitical issue of our time is Russia's sustained efforts to restore its empire – in some novel form, to be sure, but to restore it nonetheless. This issue is as dangerous as the earlier-mentioned ones. Nevertheless, in comparison, it appears to be getting somewhat less attention and less priority in the West. It is true that the West has begun to react to Russian interference in Europe and the United States as it became nearly impossible to ignore. Yet, the intensely severe threat that Russia poses to its neighbouring states deserves more attentive treatment than it is getting presently. Similar to the problems in East Asia and the Middle East, the situation with Russia involves a serious risk for escalation, including the danger of a major interstate war.

Despite all of Russia's efforts since the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow's objectives in its former empire remain incomplete. Its actions to rectify this situation will continue and, possibly, escalate. All the states in Russia's European borderlands

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now face some kind of threat that has its origins in Moscow. The most endangered and viciously targeted ones, however, are Ukraine and Georgia.

## The Russian strategic rationale

Russia's goal, expressed in both words and actions, is to replace the world where the United States is the primary power with what Russians call the "multipolar" world order. In effect, it is the same model of international system that existed on the eve of the First World War. In this system several great powers have their own spheres of influence, carved out in various parts of the world. None of the powers possesses clear primacy. They continually wrestle with one another, grouping and re-grouping into fragile alliances.

It is easy to see why Russia's ruling regime finds such a model attractive compared to the currently existing US-led one. In this model, there would be greater room for manoeuvre to conduct Moscow's chosen strategy. The Kremlin, however, does not deem the official national borders of the Russian Federation as sufficient to carry proper imperial weight – either today or in the potential "multipolar" world of tomorrow. Hence, we have witnessed stubborn and aggressive efforts to gain some form of control over the nations that used to be within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Decision-makers in Moscow do not believe that Russia's long-term future as a great power can be guaranteed without such control.

A fateful combination of geopolitical facts has made Ukraine and Georgia key to the success of the Kremlin's strategic goals. Apparently, the successful attempt at Russian imperial resurgence can only be achieved by controlling the fate of these two nations. Consequently, Georgia and Ukraine have become primary targets of Russian aggression, which includes direct use of military force.

Existence of a truly sovereign Ukraine is incompatible with Russia's goal to reconstruct its empire due to a host of geographical, strategic, political and cultural factors. The demographic weight and economic potential of Ukraine – a country of 44 million people situated between Central Europe and Russia's own geopolitical core whose border is only about 450 kilometres from Moscow – is of key importance to that aim. The concept of *Russkiy Mir* ("Russian world"), a key ideological lever of modern Russian imperialism, is undermined by this partly Russian-speaking nation's refusal to bow to Moscow.

Ukraine also presents deep problems in terms of historical narrative and political identity. Many Russians see Ukrainians as people who are culturally very similar to them, and yet Ukraine has developed a democratic political model that is drastically different from Russia's traditional autocracy. Putin and his supporters

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claim that Russia can find no viable alternative to their authoritarianism. Ukraine makes this thesis look dubious. If a democratic Ukraine manages to make further progress, that can become unbearable for the Kremlin.

While Ukraine lies at the very core of the modern Russian imperial project, Georgia is crucially important to Moscow in its own right. The South Caucasus east-west transportation corridor runs through this country, representing competition to Russian east-west corridors. If Moscow were to become dominant in Georgia, it would be able to undermine or control this route. Georgian territory also connects Russia to its ally, Armenia; and Azerbaijan to its ally, Turkey. This means that if Russia can control Georgia, it will fully consolidate its influence over Armenia while cutting Azerbaijan off from Turkey and Europe. In that case Baku would have little choice but to negotiate the terms of its surrender in the Russian sphere of influence. For Moscow, that is why gaining Georgia means also gaining Azerbaijan. Moreover, if Georgia fell into the Kremlin's hands, that would deprive Central Asian states of any prospects of developing independent communication with Europe. In other words, from Moscow's geostrategic perspective, Georgia holds the key for the entire southern flank.

The majority within Georgian and Ukrainian societies are vehemently against submitting to Russia. Thus pro-Russian realignment in these countries cannot come as a result of a democratic choice. To achieve its goals in Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow needs to either place proxy regimes in their government or turn them into failed, disintegrated states. In the latter case, Russia would be able to manipulate the chaos to suit its own interests.

## Hard and soft power in Georgia

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to bully Georgia back into submission. In the early 1990s, it conducted what is now called "hybrid warfare" against Georgia which led to the de facto Russian takeover of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions – similar in its essence to the events in Donbas in 2014. Since then, the Kremlin has been employing a wide-ranging arsenal of military, covert, diplomatic, economic and propaganda activities to undermine Georgia's sovereignty. The direct military invasion of Georgia in August 2008, although particularly consequential and tragic, was just one episode of many in the continuous Russian effort to subdue Georgia. Today, Moscow pursues this effort as actively as ever, employing both hard and soft power.

Two Russian mechanised brigades with high-grade weaponry are based in Georgia's two Russian-occupied regions. One of these, the Tskhinvali region (sometimes

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referred to as South Ossetia – editor's note), is located just 40 kilometres from the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. A significant number of Russian forces are also based next to Georgia in the North Caucasus. Georgia, like Ukraine, is not protected by any military alliance guarantee. For the West, we are partners, but not formal allies.

Russian diplomatic pressure on Tbilisi is constant. Moscow absolutely refuses to admit Georgia's right to conduct its own foreign policy. Any advance in Tbilisi's co-operation with its western partners or any action that hampers Russian influence in Georgia is met with admonition and very thinly veiled threats from Moscow. Russian-affiliated political parties, organisations and public figures are active in Georgia, striving to promote a pro-Russian agenda. They are supported by massive propaganda and disinformation involving TV, radio, newspapers, websites, social media and online trolls. The West in general, NATO and the EU are attacked with particular deliberation. Russian-affiliated groups employ xenophobia and promote hatred towards minorities. Pro-western politicians and NGOs are targeted viciously.

Russian diplomatic pressure on Tbilisi is constant. Moscow absolutely refuses to admit Georgia's right to conduct its own foreign policy.

This information warfare has, so far, achieved only limited success. Georgian society is showing resilience in the face of Russian influence. This was demonstrated rather spectacularly in June this year with the sight of Sergey Gavrilov, a pro-imperialist Russian member of parliament and president of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, in the seat of the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament. It caused an enormous uproar with protest rallies lasting weeks. While their demands focussed on domestic matters, the protesters consistently targeted Russia's occupation, Moscow's continued aggression against Georgia, and Vladimir Putin. The whole affair demonstrated that years of Russian propaganda have failed to outweigh the impact of the occupation in the Georgian society.

This resilience is Georgia's advantage in the struggle to defend its sovereignty. It does not possess many other advantages, however. Georgia's position as a target of Russia's aggressive policy remains difficult.

## Possible scenarios in Ukraine

Things are also looking ominous in Ukraine. The direct military threat is probably more severe than in Georgia. There is, of course, an ongoing war in Donbas, with a hot frontline that supplies a never-ending stream of casualties. There have been no major offensive operations since 2015, but that could change very quickly.

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Meanwhile, Russia is engaged in a large-scale military transformation to make its options against Ukraine more viable. When the war started in 2014 there were no permanently based Russian units at Ukraine's border. Starting in 2015, Russia began to establish such units. As a result, Russia's region bordering Ukraine now hosts two armies: the 20th Army of the Western Military District (headquarters in Voronezh) and the 8th Army of the Southern Military District (headquarters in Rostov-on-Don). Along with other units, these two armies include three newly established mechanised divisions – the 144th in Bryansk and Smolensk Oblasts, the 3rd in Voronezh and Belgorod Oblasts, and the 150th in Rostov Oblast. These divisions keep growing with new regiments added in 2018 and 2019.

In a potential larger-scale war against Ukraine, Russia would probably employ most of its armed forces. Nevertheless, the placement of new large units along Ukraine's border enhances Russia's capability to start and wage such a war. Russia has heavily invested resources into enhancing this option should it make the decision in the future. If Moscow is convinced that no combination of non-military methods is ever going to satisfy its purposes in Ukraine, all bets might be off.

A potential military scenario could be very risky for Russia. Starting a large-scale war could prove much easier than ending it. Full occupation of Ukraine is impracticable because of the size of its territory and its population – not to mention the strength of Ukrainian armed forces. Even taking over a large part of Ukraine could prove too much for Russia. The drain of resources would be enormous with Ukrainian resistance never ending and the West taking new punitive measures against Moscow. It probably would not end well for Russia's imperial ambitions and for the regime in the Kremlin itself.

If Moscow becomes convinced that no combination of non-military methods is ever going to satisfy its interests in Ukraine, all bets might be off.

There is always a chance, however, that Russia can work out a military scenario better suited for its purposes. For example, one scenario might involve the direct use of Russian armed forces within a limited area – perhaps just Donbas, or between Kharkiv and the Sea of Azov. If such an operation were successful, the gains made might be limited enough for Russia to "digest" successfully. Moscow would avoid the insurmountable problems associated with occupation of a larger portion of Ukraine.

A limited territorial gain by itself would not lead to an accomplishment of Russia's strategic goal. The point would be to inflict the shock of casualties and territorial losses on Ukrainians, undermining the legitimacy of their government and increasing the chances of internal destabilisation. Moscow could then exploit the

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destabilisation to attempt breaking up Ukrainian sovereignty, like it did in 2014. Such a project would not necessarily be successful. A Russian military victory would not be guaranteed, destabilisation would not be certain even in the case of a Ukrainian military defeat and an attempt to use destabilisation could fail. But a Russian enterprise along these lines is possible.

This is only a sample scenario, of course. Moscow may take an entirely different approach to achieve its aims. Nevertheless, the facts are that Russia shows no signs of letting Ukraine go, and it is building up its military might with Ukraine in the cross hairs.

## Resistance

Despite Moscow's efforts, Ukraine and Georgia keep resisting Russia's influence. As a result, the Kremlin's objectives remain incomplete. At this point, Russia's strategic goals and the interests of the Ukrainian and Georgian people are mutually exclusive. The essence of the situation is that Russia wants to subdue us, while we refuse to be subdued, which leaves no room for any meaningful compromise. These are dangerous circumstances which contain a risk of escalation. Moscow has repeatedly shown that it is prepared to start an international crisis when it thinks its objectives require it. It is now setting the stage for a potential new military escalation in Ukraine. Georgia, meanwhile, is not safe either, being strategically vulnerable and a target of a sustained Russian subversion effort.

Georgia and Ukraine are located on an active geopolitical frontline. Its explosive potential is dangerous – the Kerch Strait incident last November was a vivid reminder. Its significance is huge because events here are decisive for Russia's fate as a great power. What is happening here deserves to get more attention from the US and Europe than is spared now. Otherwise, when another crisis breaks out, the West might be caught surprised and unprepared, again, just like it was in 2014 and 2008. NEF

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# The dimensions of Georgia's frozen conflicts

NINO KUKHIANIDZE

According to the Russian narrative, NATO at its border poses a risk to its national security. This narrative helps to legitimise the Kremlin's aggressive action, which is aimed at restoring dominance on what it considers to be its "sphere of influence". Yet the idea that Georgia reversing its Euro-Atlantic course would lead to the resolution of its internal frozen conflicts and ensure regional security is naïve.

When speaking about Georgia's frozen conflicts, it is important to acknowledge the different parties, aspects and dimensions in order to accurately assess the situation between Georgia, the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia. The conflicts can be viewed in three dimensions: first, an inter-power conflict between non-democratic rule and liberal democracy (i.e. Russia and the West); second, an interstate conflict between Russia and Georgia over the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and third, as two intrastate conflicts – between ethnic Georgians and ethnic Abkhaz over the Abkhazia territory, and between ethnic Georgians and ethnic Ossetians over what Georgians call the territory of Samachablo/Tskhinvali Region (also known as South Ossetia).

Which particular dimension one chooses to discuss the conflicts is a matter of political preference and a demonstration of loyalty towards a certain political narrative. Yet in order to get a clearer picture of the situation, all dimensions must be included. Hence, in order to adopt the right conflict transformation strategy, first

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the underlying causes and conditions, as well as all the parties involved within the conflict, must be identified.

## Divide and rule

Georgians along with the international community – especially after the five day war between Russia and Georgia which took place in August 2008 – view the fight as a Russia-Georgia conflict over the breakaway Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia has always been involved in the conflict in different roles. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse until 2008 its role was interpreted as being a mediator and peacekeeper. However after Russia's direct military intervention in Georgia, Russia came out as a party to the conflicts.

One popular narrative says that if Russia had not been the main actor in the evolution of these conflicts, either they would not have taken place at all, or at least a conflict resolution would not be as stagnant as it is today. This does not necessarily mean there were no issues in Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian relations, as some of these issues were a result of the Russian "divide and rule" policies which go back over 200 years.

Nevertheless, in order to fully understand the conflict dynamics, the framework containing all three dimensions outlined above should be reviewed. The nature of the inter-power (Russia-West) as well as the inter-state (Russia-Georgia) conflict is interest-based, although it could also be framed as value based. Georgia is striving towards liberal democracy and Europeanisation, while Russia opposes liberalism in general and the West in particular. The recent statements by Russian President Vladimir Putin where he implied that liberalism has become obsolete is a direct indication of the tension that Russia and the West are facing. The president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, criticised Putin's remarks by saying that "whoever claims that liberal democracy is obsolete also claims that freedoms are obsolete, the rule of law is obsolete and that human rights are obsolete … however, what really is obsolete is: authoritarianism, personality cults, and the rule of oligarchs."

Recent statements by Vladimir Putin where he implied that liberalism has become obsolete is a direct indication of the tension that Russia and the West are facing.

Of course the Russia-West confrontation can also be discussed in the context of a geo-strategic dispute between Russia and the United States and the EU, whose interests and intentions have crossed and conflicted in the South Caucasus. Considering Russia's geopolitical and imperialistic interest in the post-Soviet space –

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especially towards the countries in its immediate neighbourhood – Georgia, with its pro-West political orientation, poses a problem for Russia; it represents one of the battlefields of this confrontation.

## Pressure and punishment

The origins of the Russia-Georgia interstate conflict can be traced to Georgia's centuries-old struggle for independence and Russia's forceful attempts to gain control over Georgia (which has led to the occupation of Georgia on several occasions throughout the last two centuries). The tension between the two countries has undergone varying degrees of intensity. However the events on April 9th 1989 – when Soviet troops used lethal force against anti-Soviet Georgian demonstrators, killing 21 (most of whom were young women) and injuring hundreds – became a cornerstone in the history of Georgia and has directed Georgian-Russian relations in a certain direction. This tragedy significantly impacted the view of the majority of the Georgian public. After April 9th, support for the nationalist president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, vastly increased, ranging from dissidents to lecturers of Marxism-Leninism, and even members of the Communist Party. The horrific April events had awoken the national spirit, uniting an otherwise polarised society against Russian aggression. Throughout this tension, one of the most useful tools for Russia was to utilise separatist movements in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region, as means to punish Georgia.

When conflicts broke out in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, factors related to Russia's support for separatist movements contributed to the victory of those separatists in both wars, resulting in thousands dead and up to 250,000 displaced. Russia also brokered ceasefires and assumed a peacekeeping role, but as time passed its political economic and military investment in Abkhazia and South Ossetia undermined its claim of impartiality.

Relations between the two countries deteriorated after the 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought a new government in Georgia, which openly voiced its strictly pro-West course and its intention for a speedy integration into NATO and the EU. Moscow reacted by increasing pressure on Georgia, imposing a trade embargo and closing land, air and postal links. It also deployed additional Russian troops (allegedly peacekeepers and military equipment) to Abkhazia in April and May 2008, which led to the August 2008 war. As a result of this, hundreds of civilians were killed and around 30,000 people were displaced, Georgia lost control of additional territories in and around the conflict zones, inter-ethnic relations were damaged, and prospects for effective conflict resolution were postponed indefinitely.

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## Ethnic simplifications

The roots of the intrastate conflict dimension – that Georgia has separate conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia – can be traced back to an earlier period in history. They turned into violent conflicts only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In general the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus, including those of Georgia, can be traced back to the presence of nationalism over the past two centuries that sowed divisions in the Caucasus region (where multi-ethnic coexistence had been the norm). Another contributing factor was the nation-building processes in the Soviet Union, which created a hierarchy of ethnicities. As a consequence of the peculiar organisation of the Soviet Union into ethno-territorial units, the post-Soviet conflicts have all been ethnically framed. During the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, mobilisation based on ethnicity took place alongside the conflict development, rather than preceding it. Therefore the use of the term "ethnic conflict" would simplify and blur the full picture. However, the openly nationalist agenda of Gamsakhurdia coupled with separatist movements led to violent conflicts in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia resulting in thousands killed and up to 250,000 displaced. Following ceasefire agreements in 1992 and 1994 respectively, the conflicts remained "frozen" until a new wave of escalation took place in 2008.

When Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the EU, Russia quickly responded by signing treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The views of Russia, the EU and the US are fundamentally different on these conflicts. Russia claims that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are independent republics, while the EU and the US support Georgia's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, only a handful of countries recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, all of which are dependent on Russia's foreign policy, including Syria, Nauru, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

When Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the EU, Russia quickly responded by signing a treaty with Abkhazia on an "Alliance and Strategic Partnership" in late 2014 and a similar "Treaty for Alliance and Integration" with South Ossetia. Ossetians largely perceive this move as another step towards further integration into the Russian Federation. In fact, most Ossetians would like to see a unification of the "two Ossetias" and therefore an integration into Russia. This is not the case with Abkhazia, however. Yet, regardless of Ossetians readiness to unify, the formal annexation of South Ossetia is highly unlikely since Russia has not resolved its dispute with the West and Georgia. Russia has been quite successful in using these conflicts to impose pressure on its neighbours – and Georgia's NATO aspirations are one of the areas where Russia reacts with the most pressure.

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## NATO aspirations

The 2008 NATO Bucharest summit, which preceded the August 2008 war, can be considered one of the cornerstones in shaping the Georgia-Russia conflict. There is some debate that without the support of Russia's friends in NATO – namely, Germany and France – Georgia was unable to receive a Membership Action Plan that it was hoping to receive for advancing its NATO integration. It is also noteworthy that energy security issues were also discussed during the Bucharest summit and there was a debate whether the Alliance must first come up with a way to respond to energy cut-offs before moving closer to states like Georgia and Ukraine who are vulnerable to Moscow's energy politics. This debate may have affected the decision to not grant the MAP to Georgia at the summit. According to another view, during the summit Georgia received a "promise" that NATO will certainly open the possibility of membership for Georgia and Ukraine in the future – these assumptions imply that this statement deeply angered Russia, and that this anger was soon translated into full-scale war carried out against Georgia in the summer of 2008.

In 2011, the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said, on two separate occasions, that the August 2008 war thwarted NATO's plans to expand further into the post-Soviet space. Again in 2018, Medvedev, as prime minister, issued a stern warning that Georgia's membership in NATO could lead to a "horrible" new conflict.

NATO has made it clear that every sovereign nation has the right to choose its own security arrangements which is a fundamental principle of European security, and one that Russia has also subscribed to and should respect. As implied by the Alliance, enlargement is not directed against Russia and every country that joins NATO agrees to uphold its principles and policies, including the commitment that "the Alliance does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia".

According to the Russian narrative, having NATO at its immediate border poses a risk to its national security. However, this account is considered to be an attempt to create the image of a threat in order to legitimise its aggression. The idea that Georgia reversing its Euro-Atlantic course would lead to a resolution of its internal conflicts and ensuring regional security is naïve. Russia has violated its own agreements on multiple occasions.

## Highway control

It is important to highlight that the territories Russia is occupying reach into the middle of Georgia, next to a strategic highway which connects the east to the west – the shortest way for Russia to reach Turkey. The highway connects eastern

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Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia with Georgian Black Sea ports and Turkey. Russia's military base in South Ossetia, housing 4,000 soldiers and heavy equipment, is also nearby, while Russian border guards, subordinated to the FSB, are stationed only 450–500 metres from the highway. Another threat the Russians are posing is their artillery's proximity to strategic pipelines and railways that carry oil, natural gas and other goods from Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Europe. Cutting this line would leave the region defenceless, as happened in 2008 when Russian troops occupied Gori, a city in central Georgia next to the east-west highway. The country was paralysed, as was the entire region. Considering the so-called creeping occupation, which describes the process of moving the occupation line further into Georgian territory, there is a risk this highway could fall under Russian occupation. In this case, the Europe-Central Asia route will be cut off.

Ultimately, today's conflicts are directly related, as indicated above, to NATO's integration. This has aroused debate regarding whether a country with unresolved territorial conflicts can be accepted as a member state. Russia is using this discussion to its benefit, keeping the conflicts frozen and unresolved. Yet in some discussions, particularly those voiced by the Georgian Labour party, the deployment of US military bases in Georgia has been suggested as an alternative to Germany and France's obstruction of Georgia's NATO membership; basically establishing a similar type of treaty with the United States that Russia has established with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some experts point to the regular military training carried out by the US and other NATO members in Georgia and believe these events are the only thing that prevents Moscow from escalating its confrontation with Tbilisi.

The 2008 war gave Russia the opportunity to turn the South Ossetian territory into a military springboard in the South Caucasus. However the annexation of Crimea enabled Russia to turn Crimea into a military springboard in the Black Sea, along with Abkhazia. Through the Black Sea, Russia has direct reach to Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria (all NATO members). The Black Sea, for Russia, is a point of contact as well as a buffer zone. Given the circumstances, it is likely that the cold conflicts will remain frozen as they give Russia the ability to pressure Georgia and advance its interests in the region. NEE

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# The cost of five years of war in Donbas

JANEK LASOCKI

Beyond the catastrophic economic price Ukraine has been forced to pay, the war in Donbas has taken a terrible toll on the lives of millions of ordinary Ukrainians. Nothing but a lasting peace and reintegration can turn this situation around.

Seven years ago, in the summer of 2012, some ten thousand English and French football fans made the journey to Donetsk in eastern Ukraine to see their teams play in the group stages of the UEFA European football championship and then party in the centre of town. They took the newly delivered Hyundair Rotem Intercity trains from Kyiv or flew into the recently opened terminal at Sergey Prokofiev International Airport in Donetsk. It was the capital of the country's industry, the most populous region and at this time a calling card for Ukraine. No one then could have foreseen that the conflict that erupted less than two years later would turn the region into an active war zone.

Today the battles of Ilovaisk in 2014 and Debaltseve in 2015, the cyborgs of Donetsk airport or the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 have passed into Ukrainian history. The scale of Russia's military involvement has long since been proven – thanks in no small part to investigative groups like Bellingcat. In the past five years since it began, this war has, in many ways, transformed Ukraine. Ukrainians have had to pay a heavy price. Above all, there has been the cost to human life. The United Nations estimates that the number of conflict-related casualties has reached at least 43,000: 13,000 killed (including 3,000 civilians) and more than 27,000 injured. According to the International Committee for the

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Red Cross (ICRC), a further 1,500 people remain unaccounted for as a result of the conflict. Two million fled their homes heading predominantly to neighbouring oblasts (regions), but also west to Kyiv, and east to Russia. It is the bloodiest war and biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the collapse of Yugoslavia.

## Life in a war zone

Although most of the intense fighting took place back in 2014 and 2015, this is no frozen conflict. Hiding from shells and gunfire has become routine along the conflict zone. In 2018 alone the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission observed 312,554 individual ceasefire violations. Unlike the frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus or Transnistria, the frontline is not completely stable, nor is the situation predictable. In November 2018 the Russians took the conflict to the sea, opening fire on three Ukrainian vessels on their way to the Azov Sea through the Kerch Strait, capturing 24 crew members.

For anyone living close to the frontline, everyday life has been transformed. Ukraine is one of the most severely mine contaminated areas in the world. It has had the highest number of anti-vehicle mine incidents globally for three consecutive years and is third globally in terms of overall casualties, behind Afghanistan and Syria. An estimated 7,000 square kilometres in government-controlled areas alone are littered with mines and explosives, causing over a thousand recorded deaths and injuries since 2014. Access to farm land and between many villages is seriously restricted, while many people have been cut off from essential services.

Despite the presence of warning signs, incidents continue to happen. In April 2018 a family of four was killed when their car exploded on a landmine by the Siverskyi Donets River in Pishchane (the government controlled Luhansk region). In May 2018 three teenagers were injured and one 14 year old boy was killed when the grenade one of the boys had in his school bag exploded on a public bus in Debaltseve (the non-government controlled Donetsk region). In October 2018 two workers were injured returning from repairing a damaged pipeline supplying clean water to 45,000 people near Zalizne (the government controlled Donetsk region) when their truck hit a mine. Mine-related incidents remained the leading cause of child casualties in 2018.

Water shortages have also become a fact of life. Almost all water supplies for the region come from the Sieverskyi Donets River. Water is pumped from the river to 1.2 million people in the Luhansk Oblast, via the Sieverskyi Donets Donbas Channel to supply the Donetsk Oblast with the use of a number of pumps that raise the height of the water. Continuous shelling has seriously damaged the infrastructure,

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limiting access to water in both the government-controlled and non-government controlled areas. According to international humanitarian agencies who are involved in providing water and purification chemicals, 30 per cent of people living within 20 kilometres of the contact line experience water shortages. In 2018, there were 37 stoppages of water and wastewater facilities with a cumulative total duration of 226 days, which was an increase from the previous year. Stoppages force families to buy expensive bottled water or use wells. Yet in some instances they have no choice but to rely on contaminated water and unsafe sanitation. As a result, in April this year there was an outbreak of gastroenteritis within days of a water stoppage.

Throughout the conflict, workers at the Voda Donbassa water maintenance company have risked their lives to restore water supplies. Nine have been killed and 26 injured since the conflict began, including three this year.

## Economic costs

Donbas residents have had to adapt to life within a new border, erected on the 457-km-long contact line which divides the government controlled and non-government controlled areas. Around one million people per month now make time-consuming trips to buy goods or to access social services, crossing through just five checkpoints. It is the elderly who are the worst affected.

Donbas residents have had to adapt to life within a new border, erected on the 457-km-long contact line.

Although there are 1.52 million registered IDPs (internally displaced persons), it is estimated that close to half this number never actually left and are in reality old people claiming pensions. A November 2014 law made pension payments conditional on registration as an IDP, for which they must have a permanent address in government-controlled territory. Every 60 days they must be verified and re-register. As a result, a disproportionate number of pensioners can be seen standing in line to cross each day. Conditions at the checkpoints are dire, with long queues outside, a lack of sufficient toilets and medical facilities, and no guarantee of safety when making the journey. In the first six months of this year, there were 28 incidents of people dying while crossing or waiting to cross the contact line. Most of these were pensioners who suffered heart attacks.

There is no doubt that Ukraine has also paid a catastrophic price, economically, for the war. Trying to calculate any precise figures, however, is difficult. In January 2018 Heorhiy Tuka, deputy minister for the temporarily occupied territories, told journalists that, as long as the "temporary occupation" continues, there

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is no way to put a number on the damage caused to Donbas. Looking at the extent of the physical damage, the collapse of heavy industry and the loss of tax revenue, however, can give a good illustration. In March 2015, following some of the most intense fighting, the World Bank assessed the total physical damage in Donbas from the war was at 463 million euro. According to economist Anders Åslund, who has studied this issue, this figure was "seemingly a very low estimate given the extent of the destruction".

The assessment factored in extensive damage to state owned buildings, natural resources and environmental protection services, electricity generation and distribution, and, especially, roads. The effects of shelling and the use of heavyweight armoured vehicles as well as the destruction of bridges has left the road network in a critical state. Five years on it is now thought that over a third of hospitals and clinics in Donbas have been damaged or destroyed; in addition, over 750 education facilities and at least 50,000 homes have also been damaged.

Government estimates have varied. Arseniy Yatsenyuk, when he was the prime minister, gave a figure of nine billion US dollars in 2015, while Hennadiy Zubko, the minister of regional development, said that 15 billion dollars would be needed for reconstruction. More recently, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told the 2019 Ukraine Reform Conference in Toronto that "According to tentative estimates, the restoration of Donbas will cost over ten billion euros." While these estimates get across the sheer scale of the destruction, there is a lot they cannot quantify, including the psychological scarring of children who have experienced their schools shelled or friends killed by mines, or the thousands of soldiers who have returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder (and in many instances then died by suicide), or the people whose lives could have been saved by hospitals and doctors that are no longer present.

## Industrial heartland no more

The economy of Donbas, which used to be the industrial heartland of Ukraine, is today a shadow of its former self. In 2013 Donbas contributed 16 per cent of the country's GDP and 25 per cent of its total exports. But war led to looting, damage and destruction of industrial equipment and infrastructure. Supply chains were broken, the banking system collapsed, and the region was cut off from the international financial transaction system. According to government estimates, by summer of 2014 the region's GDP had plunged by 70 per cent.

Around 20 factories were moved to Russia, including the Topaz radio-electric manufacturer, the Luhansk cartridge factory and the Khartsyzk machine building

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plant, while many others continued to function under their owners from before the war. This changed in March 2017 when Kyiv imposed a blockade of goods coming from the non-government controlled areas. The Russian-backed separatists then took control of over 43 large industrial enterprises in what they called a policy of "nationalisation". While the blockade was damaging for both sides, it was harder for the non-government-controlled areas to adapt to the loss of export markets and inputs from suppliers from the rest of Ukraine. With a lack of reliable data, Artem Kochev of the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, innovatively calculated the quantity of night time luminosity as a proxy for economic activity. He estimated that separatist rule had decreased economic activity by 38 per cent in Donetsk Oblast, 51 per cent in Luhansk Oblast, and that the 2017 blockade decreased GDP in the whole region by approximately 20 per cent.

Ukraine also lost substantial tax revenue from Donbas while at the same time it was forced to increase defence spending. According to the Swedish International Peace Research Institute, Ukraine boosted military expenditure by 21 per cent in 2018, amounting to 3.8 per cent of its GDP. Since the war began, defence spending has increased by 53 per cent. Although modernisation of the Ukrainian armed forces was long overdue, these funds could have been used on improving infrastructure or public services.

## Artificial divide

Ukraine has often been characterised as a country that can broadly be divided in two parts: the Russian-speaking south-east and the Ukrainian-speaking north-west. Maps of election results were often used to illustrate this. But this was always an artificial divide. Many people in Donetsk felt as Ukrainian as people in other regions, and no opinion poll conducted after independence has ever shown a majority in Donbas that either did not identity as Ukrainian or who wanted to secede from Ukraine. In the past five years, however, and for the first time, there is a physical border and Russian-backed separatists have done their best to cut ties from the rest of Ukraine, separating people for real.

In the first weeks after the conflict began, local media – such as the Donetsk TV channel Union, the 62.ua news site and the Donetsk News Agency – were forcefully taken over and became Russian propaganda outlets. Russian state TV, however, is still the main news source. Three new TV towers have been erected since 2014 to try and boost the signal of Ukrainian channels for viewers in the non-government controlled areas. It is difficult to know how much impact this has had but it is safe to assume that most residents are only exposed to anti-Ukrainian narratives. As

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Remains of a shelled Eastern Orthodox church near Donetsk airport.
For anyone living close to the frontline, everyday life has been transformed.

Emine Dzhaparova, a then deputy information minister, said in April 2018: "Ukraine is far from winning the information war… Ukrainian media have practically been erased from the self-declared 'People's Republics'".

New school curriculums have been introduced in non-government controlled areas, with a policy to erase Ukrainian historical narratives and celebrate local separatist "heroes" as well as present history from a Russian perspective. Ukraine's currency, the hryvnia, has been replaced with the Russian rouble and the separatist "republics" started issuing their own identification papers in 2017. In the days following Volodymyr Zelenskyy's election, Putin announced he would simplify the procedure for residents in the non-government controlled Donbas to be issued with Russian passports.

It is impossible to know how much impact this isolation has had on the people (although it is notable that, unlike some "frozen conflicts" in the former Soviet Union, people continue to cross the contact line in large numbers). No reliable opinion polls can be conducted; nonetheless, surveys that have been carried out can give us at least some indication. In December 2016 the Berlin-based Centre

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for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) conducted a telephone survey of 1,200 people living in the areas not controlled by Ukraine. They found that since the start of the war, a quarter of those living in the separatist-controlled territory felt more Russian and 54 per cent reported that they felt less like Ukrainian citizens now than before. Another survey conducted by Natalia Mirimanova for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue found that a decreasing number of IDP entrepreneurs would consider moving back. This would seem to suggest that the longer the status quo is maintained the more difficult it will be to successfully reintegrate the regions.

## Long road to reintegration

The war in eastern Ukraine has had a profound impact on the lives of millions of ordinary Ukrainians, many of whom now live in a permanent war zone. The local economy of the Donbas region has been devastated with implications for whole of Ukraine; and a new divide has been instituted where previously there was none.

There is much the Ukrainian government can – and should – do to ease the burden of life on the frontline. As Jana Kobzova of the European Council on Foreign Relations has argued, a new programme of revitalisation and reconstruction "should aim to reconnect the region – physically and mentally – with the rest of Ukraine". There is also more that Europe and other international partners can do. In 2018 the international humanitarian response was only 37 per cent funded. A continued commitment to reform in Ukraine is also essential to fulfilling the promise of the 2014 Revolution of Dignity.

Ultimately, however, there needs to be a lasting peace and reintegration of Donbas into Ukraine and it is no secret that this is something that cannot happen without Russia's acquiescence; and at this moment Russia seems to see little incentive in enabling such a scenario. International pressure on Russia should be maintained to clearly show that a resolution is an international priority. Perhaps one day, then, it might be possible to imagine Donetsk, again, being a calling card for a successful and united Ukraine. NEE

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# The time for big ideas

SVITLANA OSLAVSKA

In the last five years since the start of the war in Donbas, a new wave of civic engagement has risen in the post-industrial city of Sievierodonetsk. Now the civil society has to learn how to co-operate with city officials and between themselves.

In the spring of 2014 a large part of the Donbas region fell into the hands of Russian-supported separatists. Since then, the city of Sievierodonetsk became the new capital of the Ukrainian-controlled Luhansk region. It is located just 30 kilometres away from the border which separates Ukrainian-controlled territory with the separatist-held self-declared republics supported by Russian forces.

In 2014 a new era began for Sievierodonetsk – a city that is less than 100 years old and has a population of around 105,000. The regional administration is now based in the city. Public institutions moved here from Luhansk, while international NGOs opened their offices here. Several thousand new residents also came to the city. Together with the locals, they started diverse grassroots initiatives to improve their lives with activities varying from revitalising parks to building new institutions in the civic and cultural field. One can also observe these processes – to a greater or lesser extent – in other cities within the Donbas region.

## Flourishing civic life

During my recent visit to Sievierodonetsk, I took my family out to watch a movie. It was *Brama* – a Ukrainian mystic, horror drama about those who live in the Chornobyl exclusion zone. The screening was organised by a local NGO called the Crisis Media Centre "Siversky Donets". Located in a typical apartment block on Central Avenue (formerly called Sovietski Avenue), "Siversky Donets" is notable for

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the graffiti on its façade. This bright mural contrasts the rest of the block so much that I cannot help but think of it as a metaphor for all the creative projects in the city: a small bright dot on a desolate grey canvas. Since its foundation as a model Soviet town next to a chemical plant, Sievierodonetsk has always been a workers' city – it was called "the city of chemists" – and as a result discouraged independent artistic thinking or creativity.

The events of 2014 made it possible for new forms of social life to be born here. Siversky Donets is a product of those changes. The city was shortly occupied by separatist forces in the spring and summer of 2014. Later the Ukrainian government and humanitarian organisations turned their attention to Sievierodonetsk – and to other cities in Donbas – that had been taken back from the separatists. What is more, the citizens themselves felt more of an urge for civic engagement than before.

Founded in 2015, Siversky Donets became a contact place for many Ukrainian and international institutions, as well as activists and artists who wanted to organise something in the city. In the room where the film screening took place, I saw posters from all the projects connected with Donbas that have been carried out in recent years: from documentary film festivals to leaflets about medical reforms. The posters vividly illustrate how the city is linked to the processes taking place throughout the whole country (before 2014 it was more isolated and less linked to them). Siversky Donets also openly declares itself to be pro-Ukrainian: the national flag proudly hangs on the wall.

Local NGOs understand they can fulfil crucial social needs for the residents of Sievierodonetsk.

Siversky Donets was founded by locals and supported by the Open Society Foundation and the UK Embassy in Ukraine (many such initiatives are supported by international donors). It is one of a dozen NGOs and informal initiatives that have started operating here since 2014 – from Vostok SOS, which works with displaced people from the conflict zone, to the Greek-Catholic church. The latter is a very interesting case: despite the fact that the city is predominantly Orthodox, the church strives to become an open meeting space for people from different backgrounds. One day here I came across a lecture about the unconventional image of Taras Shevchenko. Local NGOs understand they can fulfil one of the crucial needs of Sievierodonetsk's residents – the need for a space where people can meet, talk and spend time together – and often they start with activities for children and teenagers.

One of the youth projects is called "Hochu Budu" (which can be translated as "I want, I will"), located in a former kindergarten. The positive impact of such initiatives is that they bring a new lease of life to otherwise unused spaces. The church,

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for example, occupies a former dormitory. Kyrylo Dubrovin, the co-founder of Hochu Budu, shares his thoughts on how things have unfolded over the past five years. He talks about the possibilities of travelling around Ukraine and meeting people from different regions. One example of collaboration can be witnessed on the table in front of us – a visual storybook about migration created by participants from the western Ukrainian city of Lutsk and the eastern city of Sievierodonetsk.

"Five years ago I didn't know socially active people from other cities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. I had no contact with Ukraine's west at all," Dubrovin admits. What prevented him from getting to know people from other parts of the country? And what changed? "People are united by working on common issues. The war has motivated people."

## Disconnected and atomised

Indeed, the war gave many Ukrainians a sense of responsibility for their communities, cities, and even country. Yet, at the local level, activists are often met with a lack of understanding from city officials. Many of the people I spoke with in Sievierodonetsk acknowledged the low level of support from local authorities.

"The city administration does not want to work with international funds," says Oleh Nevenytsia, the co-founder of Siversky Donets. Even worse, its staff calls active citizens "grant-eaters". Olha Lishyk, the deputy head of the Luhansk regional administration at an interview with me, explains that: "The city's administration is hostile to civil society that understands the law and that writes projects in order to monitor the authorities."

Research shows that there is still a low level of institutional support for NGOs from state and local officials. While this is true of many cities, the situation in Sievierodonetsk is peculiar. The mayor has been dismissed from his duties by the city council several times, but he then was reinstated by the court. That is one of the main reasons why it is challenging for the NGOs to build relationships with the local authorities.

"You write a letter to the city mayor, but when the letter reaches the office, this person doesn't hold the position anymore," Dubrovin says, describing his experience. He indicates that the "eternal" problem is that "city officials think about personal enrichment and how to increase their influence".

Along with the issue of communication with city officials, both Nevenytsia and Dubrovin mention the lack of trust that exists across society. Nevenytsia admits that civil society actors are atomised: "We all have friendly relations, but, at the same time, we compete for the resources."

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Another reason for this atomisation is the lack of local media that is independent of political influence and that is willing to cover challenging stories and the various developments taking place within social life. However, there is opportunity for change that comes from both the city's origins and its 21st century developments.

## Migration as a chance

Sievierodonetsk as a town began with migration. It was founded in the 1930s when people from near and distant parts of the Soviet Union came to work and live there. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the industry decayed and migration stopped. Instead, many began to leave Sievierodonetsk in search of education, employment and a better way of life. In fact, this is how I remember Sievierodonetsk in the early 2000s.

However by 2014 this trend reversed and a new wave of migration, due to the nearby conflict, hit the city. By January of this year, there were almost 48,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) officially registered in Sievierodonetsk (there are around 1.5 million IPDs from the occupied Donbas and Crimea regions currently present in Ukraine). Although not all of them constantly live in the city, its population has nevertheless substantially increased. However, the locals were not fully prepared for the influx. Some were afraid that the newcomers would take their jobs, while others feared they would be a drain on the economy.

"There was a division in society at the beginning: the locals vs. the newcomers," says Tetiana Prytula, from Luhansk, who has lived in Sievierodonetsk since 2016. It has settled down now and my interlocutors see the arrival of new people as something positive.

"I believe it has helped the city a lot," Nevenytsia says seeing the exchange between the locals and the newcomers as a chance to build a more cosmopolitan community. Today, Sievierodonetsk is culturally monotonous, he admits. Although it will never "be like Barcelona," Nevenytsia is sure the city can find its way and define itself. It only needs a strategy to follow, for instance, to become a city of science or education. "Why do people come to Sievierodonetsk today? There are only two reasons: either the water supply to Lysychansk was cut off, or power is out in Rubizhne," he says with bitter sarcasm.

"If I were a mayor, I would say: 'let's build a synagogue, a mosque and other temples here, so people of different denominations would come to the city bringing money. Each temple would have a cultural centre as well.'" Nevenytsia's ideas of diversity correspond with that of Hiroaki Kuromiya, an American historian who specialised in research on the 19th century Donbas. Kuromiya wrote that

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Donbas has its own understanding of democracy: an inclusive one, unlike exclusive nationalism.

## A new space for trust

Nevenytsia's image of religious diversity is not the first big idea for the city. Sievierodonetsk's builders in the early Soviet times dreamt about "a town of the sun" erected next to the chemical plant with parks in every quarter. The structure of the model Soviet town is still visible today. Druzhby Narodiv, or the People's Friendship Boulevard, connects the industrial plant with a large square where Lenin's monument stood until 2014. The brightest building on this street is the Luhansk music and drama theatre. It was renovated after the theatre was relocated from Luhansk. Other cultural institutions also moved to Sievierodonetsk: universities, the philharmonic, etc. As Olha Lishyk, says: "The city became full of people with diverse skills". And these skills can be a resource to transform it.

Sievierodonetsk is more open and diverse thanks to the new institutions and people who have migrated here since 2014.

Sievierodonetsk is more open and diverse now thanks to the new institutions and the people who have migrated here since 2014. Now that civic initiatives have started to flourish, it is time for them – along with local businesses, politicians and residents – to cooperate. As the 2018 USAID/ENGAGE Civic Engagement Poll shows, the level of trust in civil society organisations within Ukrainian society is quite high, and Donbas is ranked the second highest region in the country. The new-born culture in Sievierodonetsk, like Siversky Donets and Hochu Budu, could become spaces for strengthening this trust.

Sievierodonetsk was founded in the midst of a sand field and entered the 21st century almost like a desert lacking modern and independent forms of civic and cultural life. Similar to those who strove to transform this place into a liveable and green oasis at the outset of its history, the residents of today now have an opportunity to transform it into a lively urban centre. The space for dreams is still open here. "I want our city to develop, use the opportunities available and to have wise rulers," Lishyk says. I have no doubt other residents would stand by these words. NEE

Svitlana Oslavska is an independent journalist from Ukraine and the book review editor at *Krytyka* magazine.

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# From Piața Universității to #rezist

RUXANDRA CESEREANU

The true goal of the 2107 protests was the fight against passivity. Many of the protesters would not have bothered to vote in the last general elections, but through their presence on the streets, they cast their vote in their own way. It was a fiesta in the truest sense.

*In 2017 the Romanian government changed legal provisions which allowed for the pardoning of corrupt officials and changed the law to be more relaxed towards the abuse of power. Since they were announced, frequent anti-government demonstrations in many cities in Romania broke out as thousands voiced their concern that the country was moving away from the values of the EU. The poet, novelist and academic Ruxandra Cesereanu was involved with these protests from the very beginning, documenting them in a journal which will be published in Romania. Here are some excerpts from her writings.*

In a recent article, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger stated: "There is, at this moment, an epidemic of moralism on the planet, it is a fair compensation for the totalitarian and despotic abuses of the oligarchy. But morality is not a form of politics either." My journal was born out of an urge to be a *raisonneur* and witness to the events that were unfolding around me in Romania. My country is not in a worse state than any of the other of former Soviet bloc counties, but all the current developments here (the poison of corruption, the officially sanctioned infractions, the mercenary politicians, the institutionalised theft, the dictatorial tendencies of the ruling party, and the boorishness of certain leaders) could lead to it becoming the real "sick man" of this part of Europe, especially if these tenden-

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cies are allowed to continue and become leitmotifs. On the other hand, the vibrant civil movements in Romania represent the other face of the country. I belong to that Romania and that is why I try to speak for it and gather together a testimonial about how my country might be cured of its socio-political and cultural maladies. I feel like a doctor trying to resuscitate my country's dignity. It is only a metaphor, of course. My only remedy is the power of words.

## Awakening

One day in May 1990, I went to see the marathon of anti-government demonstrations that were taking place in Piața Universității (University Square) in Bucharest. I travelled to Bucharest to attend some literary events but also because I wanted to see, with my own eyes, what was happening in there. It sounds sentimental now, but I felt deeply moved and disturbed by the experience. I will never forget the image of almost 100,000 people, who had made their pilgrimage there, protesting against a government who christened them as "a band of hooligans". It was, for me, a moment of revelation, an unburdening of my conscience and a step towards assuming civic responsibility.

In December 1989, although I was elated at the fall of communism, I was horrified by the number of people who had died or were wounded in the uprising. It was as if I felt so shaken, so stunned by that collective mourning, that I experienced a kind of spiritual paralysis. Yet after I witnessed the demonstration at Piața Universității and listened to the speeches delivered from the balconies, something awakened inside me. That "something" I would define as a moral conscience. It was a new energy – the energy of the lucid, impassioned observer, feeling engaged, once again, with what was happening in my country. From that moment in 1990, that "something" moulded me into the civil rights activist that I see myself as today, even though I still hold on to the attitude of the observer. In my social-political life, I have taken on the role of the *raisonneur*, an analyst of attitudes and revolutionary mentality. Piața Universității 1990 was my moment of conception as an activist, and it undeniably shaped my identity as a social commentator.

In 2004 Humanitas published a Romanian translation of the British political scientist Tom Gallagher's *Theft of a nation: Romania since communism*, a book, in today's political climate, which still speaks to us today. The most interesting part is the introduction, as it poses several pertinent and timely questions. One of the core ideas is that Romania was not destroyed by outside forces, but that its internal corruption led to implosion. According to Gallagher, communism merely intensified the ills that were already present in society, as opposed to creating them. The

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Romanian "tumour" was not even the result of the long history of autocratic oppression, but of a deep seated cultural disposition. Gallagher implies, rather than lists, the following vices that characterise this disposition: suspicion, fear, instability, chronic corruption, and internal rivalries.

The British academic further noted an alarming trend: that, at various points in history, Romanians have been abused by their leaders and have accepted this without protest; and that any tremor of civic revolt has always been somewhat subdued, even though there had been some remarkable moments of revolt. Romania, according to Gallagher, was and still is a crippled country. The recent crisis, and the protests I have witnessed since 2017, bring to my mind, again and again, Gallagher's conclusion.

## Witness

*February 4th 2017*

On Friday night, in Cluj, I spotted a lot of my old journalism and literature students at the demonstration taking place. There were probably many of my current students there too, but in a gathering of over 30,000 protestors it is difficult to distinguish one face from another in that playful, subversive intermingling of bodies. I was surprised to recognise the other ones, the ones I knew from long ago and I felt great warmth towards them. Just like the protests from 1990, the solemnity of the occasion was undercut with playfulness. It spoke of the exhilaration of the crowd of young people (75 per cent of the protestors were very young) who took delight in their togetherness, their common plea for change, uttered for the first time in this moment. What united all the placards and slogans was the spirit of parody. I saw many placards with epigrammatic slogans – I won't mention them now as social media is already awash with these mischievous provocations. The image that has stayed with me since that Friday night was of a girl, around 18 years old, dressed in jeans and a jacket, wearing a crocheted hat with a pompom; she was earnest yet boisterous, and swayed through the crowd through some kind of dance, holding a placard she had written, in shaky letters: "We want a normal Romania, not a criminal country!" For her and others like her on the streets of Cluj demanding change seemed like the only solution.

*February 5th 2017*

Saturday night in Cluj. First of all the exuberant complicity on the tram: there was a family with a small child holding a flag, two schoolgirls (one was telling the other that her mother complained she would catch a cold but the other told her the crowd would warm her up). There was an elderly couple in a prankish mood

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Protesters in Bucharest in January 2017.

wearing thick sportswear, well prepared to take on the night's chill. We were all wearing sensible marching shoes. It was easy for us to recognise each other and occasionally exchange complicit smiles. In the centre of town everyone was moving towards the same destination – Piața Unirii (Union Square). The crowd were singing, chanting, dancing, chatting and joking. I liked wandering around, anonymous, through the multitude, feeling myself swept up in its genuine tenderness. I do not think I have ever heard so many people say "Sorry", "Excuse me", "Pardon me" – as everyone stamped on each other's feet in the congestion of bodies.

There was a particular impulse for everyone to care for one another, to uphold a certain standard of decency and civilised behaviour. The protestors were impetuous and intransigent, but always jovial, witty, and playful. That evening, the crowd seemed more diverse in terms of age, there were as many older people as young ones. The endless march of people snaking through the middle of the road fascinated those watching from the pavements: their gaze seemed captivated and empathetic. Plenty more encouraging eyes followed us from the balconies of blocks of flats. There was a palpable vitality, a spectacle that resembled a kind of communion between all those present. Just like in Piața Universității in 1990, the protestors came to the march as part of groups bound by specific aims, and, despite their differences, everyone was united by a feeling of solidarity. The public square felt like it was restored to its true purpose. The chant most commonly heard that evening was: 'United, we will save THE WHOLE of Romania!'

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*February 6th 2017*

The evening's protest on Sunday became a topic of conversation when I was having lunch with my 82-year-old father, Dominițian, who told me that going out and protesting, in order to declare yourself against the law that pardoned certain crimes committed by politicians, was a matter of dignity and a necessary stand against a government that sanctioned corruption and incompetence. That night the streets were transformed into an outdoor theatre – half protest, half carnival. That evening, even more than the two previous nights, reminded me a lot of the 1990 demonstrations in Piața Universității for the way it made me feel that I was a part of the carnival.

What do I mean by carnival? First of all it was the improvised nature of the occasion, the people I spoke to and everyone expressing themselves in their own particular revolutionary idiom: from the 88-year-old man (a former political prisoner from Balta Brăilei), to the veteran of the 1989 revolution; the lady that reminded us all of Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance and the chorus of student voices, each trying to find their way. And then there were the tiny tots perched on their parents' shoulders (tiny tots that didn't whine, didn't demand anything, because the spectacle in the streets fascinated them and was enough), the silent protestors, disabled protestors in their wheelchairs sheltered by the crowd with tactful respect, the countless slogans on placards (from the solemn to the satirical to the downright filthy), drummers banging their makeshift instruments (including pots, pans and wooden spoons), accompanied by others who shook their Coca Cola bottles to the rhythm of the chants. There were others wearing satirical masks and young people channelling hippies in bandanas – reminding me of the ones the young people wore in 1990 as they, in turn, paid homage to those who sacrificed their lives in Tiananmen Square.

That night the streets were transformed into an outdoor theatre – half protest, half carnival.

Romanian, Moldovan, French and EU flags all rose up together above the procession. The most potent, heartfelt cry that resounded through the streets that night was: "Wake up, Romania! Bucharest, don't forget, Cluj is on your side!" A national anthem, simplified into a direct message, was understood by everyone. The true goal of the protest was the fight against passivity. Many of those amongst the crowd would not have bothered to vote in the last general election (disheartened, no doubt, by the range of options available), but through their presence on the streets, they cast their vote in their own way. It was a fiesta in the truest sense when we could see, on the television screens, the crowds in Bucharest, Timișoara, Sibiu, Iași and many other places. The public squares around the country seemed

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to have been transformed into swarms of fireflies, lit up with the screens of mobile phones where people once would have waved candles.

Seeing it all warmed my heart. There is something very powerful about half a million people out on the streets, something intense and irrefutable. Something infrangible. A heart, a reawakening to life.

*Translated by Gabi Reigh*

*Translator's addendum: On May 26th 2019, a record number of Romanians voted in the European parliamentary elections. Across Europe, the Romania diaspora hit the news headlines as queues of hundreds of people stretched from morning till night so that they could cast their vote in the elections as well as in a referendum about the prohibition of certain pardons and amnesties for corruption offences proposed by the government. Some waited for more than eight hours in line, only to be turned away when the polling stations closed at 9:00 pm in the evening. However, as a result of the people's determination to make their voices heard, the plan of the Social Democrats (PSD) to change anti-corruption legislation were rejected by a large majority and the party also made significant losses in the European parliament. The day after the election, Liviu Dragnea, the head of the PSD, was given a three and a half year prison sentence after being convicted on charges of corruption.*

Ruxandra Cesereanu is a professor at the Faculty of Letters (Department of Comparative Literature) in Cluj, a member of the staff of the Center for Imagination Studies (Phantasma) and director of the Creative Writing Workshops on poetry, prose and movie scripts. She is well known for producing major research and critical monographs, with eight books of non-fiction. She has also published eight books of poetry and seven books of fiction, several of which have been translated in English, Italian, Hungarian and Bulgarian.

*Gabi Reigh's translations include* Poems of Light *by Lucian Blaga and two novels by Mihail Sebastian. The 2019 PEN Translates winner* The Town with Acacia Trees *by Mihail Sebastian will be published in October by Aurora Metro.*

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# The risks and rewards of investigative journalism in Central Eastern Europe

LORENZO BERARDI

Between October 2017 and April 2019 four reporters doing investigative journalism were killed in Europe: Daphne Caruana Galizia from Malta, Ján Kuciak from Slovakia, Victoria Marinova from Bulgaria, and Lyra McKee from Northern Ireland. Their deaths happened in different circumstances, but they were always related to their profession. Given that investigative reporting is public interest journalism, it should be safeguarded by governments. However this is not always the case in Central and Eastern Europe.

The independent NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF) warns that in Europe "hatred of journalists has degenerated into violence, contributing to an increase in fear." Whereas the EU is no longer a safe haven for journalists, the media environment in Central and Eastern Europe has been deteriorating. The Visegrad Four countries have been plummeting in the Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press* and the RSF's *Press Freedom Index* rankings since 2015. Hungary dropped from 67th to 87th place on the Press Freedom Index between 2016 and 2019, while *Freedom of the Press* changed the status of Hungarian media from "free" to "partly free" in 2012. Warsaw, Prague and Bratislava fare better than Budapest, but follow a similar trend. Over the last four years, Poland spiralled down on the Press Freedom

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Index from 47th to 59th place, the Czech Republic went from 21st to 40th place, and Slovakia from 12th to 35th.

Investigative journalism is particularly affected by this worsening situation since it requires long, in-depth research and access to data, archives and reliable sources. Reporters working on investigative stories are due to chart dangerous waters and may experience personal threats. These might come from organised crime or from political power, but also from a deadly combination of the two. Between October 2017 and April 2019 four journalists doing or promoting investigative reporting were killed in Europe: Daphne Caruana Galizia from Malta, Ján Kuciak from Slovakia, Victoria Marinova from Bulgaria, and Lyra McKee from Northern Ireland. Their deaths happened in different circumstances, but they were always related to their profession.

Given that investigative reporting is public interest journalism, it should be safeguarded by governments. However this is not always the case in Central and Eastern Europe. As Australian reporter John Pilger wrote: "Secretive power loathes journalists who do their job, who push back screens, peer behind façades, lift rocks". Today, there are many reporters who work that way in the region and they have become a nuisance for some of those who hold the power. Investigative journalists in the region might not be arrested, as happened to Ivan Golunov in Russia, but the recent case of Polish reporter Anna Wilk who, in June 2019, was banned by a court from practicing journalism for three years due to a story she published shows how freedom of expression in the press is endangered.

Today, there are many reporters who work in the region and have become a nuisance for some of those who hold the power.

## Shrinking space

The headquarters of the biggest media conglomerate in the region are located in a one-storey cottage along Bethlen Street in the small Hungarian town of Balatonföldvár, near Lake Balaton. A passer-by looking at the low-profile property with its maroon shutters would never guess that KESMA, a foundation including about 80 per cent of Hungarian media, is registered here. The house belongs to Gábor Liszkay, director of KESMA and friend of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

KESMA was created when the Hungarian owners of 476 media outlets donated them to the foundation in September 2018. Its aim is "to promote those activities of print, radio, TV and online sections of the Hungarian mass media which serve to build values and strengthen national consciousness". In December 2018 the

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government exempted it from media-competition regulations due to its "national strategic importance". In fact, stresses Hungarian investigative reporter András Pethő, "They hardly ever run investigative stories. What they do is not even journalism, but they function more like a political weapon."

Orbán sees things differently. "The freedom of conscience, expression and the press is more colourful, broad and profound in Hungary than it is to our West," he said in December 2015 during a congress of Fidesz, the party that rules Hungary and got 52.6 per cent of the votes at the latest European Parliament election. In fact, the introduction of a controversial media law in 2011, the distortion of the advertising market and media concentration have left little room for independent outlets and have curbed press freedom. Orbán understands the importance of media and has used them effectively to strengthen his power.

Hungarian investigative reporters have been fighting back thanks to a handful of independent media, such as *Atlatszo*, *Index*, and *444*.

Pethő started focusing on investigative journalism about ten years ago. "The situation back then wasn't ideal either, but there were more Hungarian media where you could do this kind of reporting. Since 2011 the space for independent journalism has shrunk a lot. Several independent media or media critical towards Orbán have been shut down or taken over by allies of the government," he says. In 2015 his former employer, the news site *Origo*, changed ownership and the political pressure exerted on Pethő forced him to leave his job. Today *Origo* joins KESMA and publishes pro-government propaganda.

Hungarian investigative reporters have been fighting back thanks to a handful of independent media, such as *Atlatszo*, *Index*, and *444*. Pethő co-founded Direkt36, a non-profit investigative journalism centre, focusing on important stories ignored by KESMA outlets as well as by government-friendly public television channels. He admits that "for investigative reporters it's difficult to develop institutional sources and hard to get stories to the public as the government controls an ever-increasing share of the media." Pethő maintains that the laws are fairly protective of journalists in Hungary, but warns that independent media can still become targets as "the government-controlled propaganda machine attacks them by spreading false accusations".

## The legacy of Ján Kuciak

When the bodies of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kunírová were found at their home shot dead on February 26th 2018, their murder shocked and shook

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Slovakia. Kuciak was 27 years old and the first journalist killed in Slovakia since 1993. He worked as an investigative reporter for the news website *Aktuality* and had been co-operating with foreign journalists on international stories. Kuciak's talent for digging key information out of data and archives was legendary among his fellow reporters, but his name was less well known to his compatriots as investigative journalism found little room in Slovak traditional media.

Eighteen months later, the Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK) is operating in Bratislava. It was founded in January this year by Peter Bárdy, the editor-in-chief of *Aktuality*, Zuzana Petková, director of the Stop Corruption Foundation, Pavla Holcová of the Czech Center for Investigative Journalism in Prague, and Arpád Soltész, a political commentator and former reporter. "The idea to create the centre was mine, triggered by the frustration following Ján's murder, but its final shape is a result of the many long discussions with Peter, Pavla and Zuzana," Soltész says. "There was no other subject focusing on investigative journalism in Slovakia before our centre was established." Today, thanks to a small but dedicated team, the ICJK is building a network of investigative reporters in Slovakia and beyond. "We want to publish our own investigations, but our main purpose is international cooperation as Ján was the first Slovak journalist who realised its importance and potential working on cross-border stories," Soltész adds.

Slovaks were deeply moved by Kuciak's assassination and demonstrated against Prime Minister Robert Fico's government. He eventually resigned in March 2018 and Peter Pellegrini took over. The presidential elections in March this year were won by Zuzana Čaputová who ran for an emerging social-liberal party called Progressive Slovakia. The first thing the new president did was pay tribute to Kuciak and Kušnírová's memorial. It is still too early to tell whether things have changed. However Soltész feels "considerably more support and trust from the public than the one we had before Ján's murder". The Slovak public might be aware of the important role of these reporters, but some institutions have not changed their attitude yet. As Soltész highlights, on March 14th 2019 the prosecutor's office denied the ICJK access to a press conference about the investigation of Ján's murder, as it didn't consider us journalists".

## Fighting corruption

At first glance, the situation for investigative journalism in the Czech Republic looks better than elsewhere in the region. "There is demand for quality investigative reporting here as it's considered one of the most efficient tools to fight corruption," says Pavla Holcová, director of the Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism

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(CCIJ), established in 2013 to bring international journalistic projects to the region. "No one else was doing it, so we saw the need to join the international investigative journalism community. We do important cross-border stories and bring important data home so that everyone can reach them," she explains. She is also one of the co-founders of the centre and had worked with Kuciak on the Panama Papers and the presence of the ´Ndrangheta (an organised crime group based in Italy – editor's note) in Slovakia. Among the Czech media doing quality investigative journalism, she lists the daily *Denník N*, the weekly *Respekt*, the monthly *Reportér*, the portal *Hlidacipes* and the public broadcasters.

However, the respect investigative journalists have gained among the Czech public is not enough to protect them from political power. President Miloš Zeman has called reporters "dung, faeces and cesspits, hyenas and stupid people who try to brainwash us and should be liquidated," and Holcová points out that "the ongoing political climate and financing are the two major issues we face". The country has been going through political turmoil with Prime Minister Andrej Babiš facing fraud charges over alleged misuse of EU funds. His decision of installing a close ally as the new minister of justice prompted up to 250,000 people to gather in Prague on June 23rd to demand his resignation in the biggest political protest the country has seen since 1989.

Czech investigative reporters have helped unfold the Agrofert scandal which Babiš was involved in, but they had many hurdles to overcome. In April, three journalists claimed the police had summoned them multiple times for questioning over their reporting on the prime minister. "We are convinced that these investigations are to confuse and intimidate us and our sources and discourage us from further work," the journalists stated. This episode is a warning sign that what can happen in a relatively safe environment with no recent or forthcoming legislation aimed at curbing investigative journalism.

## A profession in transition

What investigative journalism in Poland shares with Hungary is that it is published by independent outlets "even though there are no Polish equivalents to investigative Hungarian media such as *Atlatszo* or *Index* as we cannot compare our situation to the Hungarian one. However, we are aware that we should be prepared for worse times," stresses Wojciech Cieśla, director and co-founder of Fundacja Reporterów (FR), a Warsaw-based foundation, established in 2010, by a group of Polish reporters coming from leading dailies and magazines such as *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita* and *Newsweek Polska*.

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Cieśla reports that investigative journalism in Poland is not paid enough and has been disappearing from newspapers and from the internet while finding limited room on television. However, challenges could be turned into opportunities. As Cieśla puts it: "On the one hand, the scene for investigative journalists is getting smaller and smaller and we see more people leaving the profession than joining it. On the other hand, investigative journalism is in transition and we look at it optimistically as there are going to be more chances around for investigative reporters and for us as mentors."

The profession is still attractive to many in a country where investigative reporting has a long and worthy tradition. Yet the main problem is the lack of space for publishing stories. FR wants to tackle the problem by launching a platform for Polish reporters by 2020. On top of this, they have been expanding their network that includes people from the private broadcaster TVN, as well as from the online news portal *Onet*, and they co-operate with the University of Warsaw to attract students for internships. The lack of financing remains a key issue as the foundation only has a single donor and steers clear from private wealthy sponsors in order to stay independent. What Cieśla and his colleagues do, instead, is to try and get international grants.

Investigative journalism is still attractive to many in Poland where the profession has a long tradition. The main problem is a lack of space for publishing stories.

In its early years, FR collaborated with Ukrainian reporters and established an annual award for the best investigative journalistic works, thanks to grants from the Polish foreign ministry. Since 2015 it moved towards Central Europe by creating a network and platform called Vsquare – a cross-border project focusing on investigative journalism and involving people from Fundacja Reporterów in Poland, *Atlatszo* and Direkt36 in Hungary, the Czech CCIJ, and *Aktuality* in Slovakia. It started publishing content on its website in 2017 and joined the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) as well as the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN).

"We're neither a news agency nor an investigative watchdog controlling those who hold the power, but we try to know and explain what's happening," Cieśla says, adding that "investigative journalism needs special attention and in Vsquare we can delve in-depth, focusing on a story for as long as it needs." All the people involved on the project work for a living in other media outlets because the budget allocated is just enough to pay reporters for their stories and to cover editing, fact-checking and English translation costs. The topics they focus on are discussed online every day and a first plenary meeting took place in Slovakia in March this year.

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Working on cross-border stories encompassing the CEE region has helped Polish, Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak reporters to get a better understanding of the ongoing social, economic, and political situation in each of the Visegrad states. "There are differences among our countries, but I believe we should group them together as they share a common pattern. For example, in Poland the ruling party, PiS, has been copying and pasting some Hungarian policies such as the media laws. Hence, knowing what happens there can help predict what might happen here," Cieśla argues. "Our role is to make Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, and Slovaks more interested in what happens in each Visegrad state and abroad. Vsquare is not that big yet, but it is energy consuming and needs constant attention. It means additional work, but we have fun doing it," he insists. As András Pethő confirms: "I believe there are important stories to tell together as we face similar challenges."

Lorenzo Berardi is a freelance journalist based in Warsaw. He is a contributor for several media outlets and co-founded the Italian journalistic project *Centrum Report* covering Central Eastern Europe.

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# When the state turns against its own citizens, resistance becomes duty?

ALEKSANDRA ZDEB

In 2018 civic resistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina acquired a new symbol – the raised fist of Davor Dragičević who, in quiet desperation, demanded justice for his dead son, David. The situation triggered a significant public outrage and the politicisation of David's death. Since March 2018, mass protests were organised demanding justice. By the end of the year, the authorities started to violently block them and, eventually, banned any further gatherings.

As Thomas Jefferson once said: "When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty". Even in "stabilocracies" like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia, whenever any form of government becomes destructive, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it. It was visible in 2014 when first the workers and later regular citizens paralyzed a number of Bosnian cities during events titled the "Bosnian spring". Yet despite few governmental alterations, nothing has really changed – Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a captured state that protects its elites while citizens' rights and control over the authorities are limited.

The same can be said about Serbia. The first outburst of protests against the president Aleksandar Vučić took place in April and May 2017 after his election as the new president. Similarly, they did not bring any alteration of power. Peoples of the Western Balkans are getting more and more tired and angry, so it was only a matter of time before a situation like the case of misconduct during an investigation in Banja Luka (the seat of the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina)

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or another unsolved murder in Belgrade turned into a fight against the authority's incompetence and indifference.

## A death that meant nothing?

On March 18th 2018, 21-year-old David Dragičević went out with his friends and never returned home. Declared missing the same day, he was found dead in Crkvena creek six days later. Although the police first said he probably drowned, his parents have continued to insist that their son was murdered and have alleged a police cover-up. On July 4th of that year it was confirmed that an order had been issued to carry out an investigation into unknown persons for murder, but the failure of the police to fully resolve the case has been at the centre of public attention and triggered public protests. David's father, Davor, also announced a list of demands which included the resignation of police and prosecution officials over their alleged involvement in covering up evidence in his son's murder, and the arrest of individuals he claimed were involved.

A Facebook group called Justice for David, which now has more than 300,000 members, was created the day the murder was announced.

A Facebook group called Justice for David (Pravda za Davida), which now has more than 300,000 members, was created the day the murder was announced; it was also the first day of demonstrations at Krajina Square in Banja Luka, now known as "David's Square". Soon, the protests spread beyond the city: in May large protests were organised in Zenica, Tuzla and Sarajevo. In Sarajevo, several hundred people demanded justice for Dragičević and Dženan Memić, who died in February 2017 (while the prosecutor's office said he was injured in a traffic accident, his family do not accept the explanation, pointing to a number of irregularities.) Massive protests were held in April and then again in July and October – on the eve of Bosnia's parliamentary election, 40,000 demonstrated. What is important is that they all had the form of unauthorised public gatherings and, as such, were held until December 25th – when they were stopped by the violent intervention of the police of Republika Srpska.

Perceiving the protests as illegal, the police arrested, detained and later released, Davor Dragičević and several opposition politicians – thus triggering even more clashes with the police. Dragičević was arrested for failing to respond to a summons to a court hearing over charges of "endangering security" during a protest in front of the parliament of Republika Srpska. They also filed a report to the prosecutor's office against persons under the suspicion of posing a security threat since, unofficially, he has gone into hiding. What is more, police removed the improvised

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shrine set up in the square and announced that they would not tolerate any more gatherings in the location. Despite those developments, people kept demonstrating after New Year's Eve, but it did not last long after the local authorities ended it. While David's body was reburied in Wiener Neustadt in Austria, those who still believe in the fight keep lighting candles at the cathedral in the centre of Banja Luka.

## Does one make a difference?

In the current political climate, the elites-citizens clash seems to be inevitable and Bosnia is not the only hotspot in the Western Balkans. Since December last year, tens of thousands of protesters have been marching through the streets of Belgrade in Serbia. The "one of five million" protests, which is a reference to Vučić's quote that he would not talk to those demonstrating even if five million of them came out on the streets, organised by the Protest Against Dictatorship group, were triggered by the murder of a Kosovo Serb politician, Oliver Ivanović, who, having expressed growing opposition to the policies of the Belgrade government, was shot dead in Mitrovica. The public mood was also shaped by the attacks on journalist Milan Jovanović and opposition politician Borko Stefanović.

Consequently, on Saturdays, thousands of protesters have been gathering in Belgrade, marching against, what they call, the political violence of the ruling party and its officials. Expressing cross-border solidarity, protesters also raise their fists in a sign of support for Davor Dragičević. They are pressuring Vučić and the government led by his Serbian Progressive Party to resolve the murder and bring back free media. Their specific demands include: air time for protest representatives in the mainstream news; a regular presence of opposition politicians on the public broadcaster, RTS; the resignation of the interior minister due to his alleged role in the criminalisation of society and insulting protesters; and a proper supervision of the electoral process. Those calls are supported not only by ordinary citizens, but also several hundred professors, actors, artists and other public figures – not only in Belgrade, but also Novi Sad and Kragujevac. Moreover, other cities joined the capital in hosting protests, including Novi Sad, Zrenjanin and Pančevo. In places like Zaječar and Kruševac, demonstrators emphasised local problems, blaming the ruling Progressive Party.

As in Bosnia, the demonstrations in Belgrade escalated into violence. On March 16th, protesters stormed the building of the Serbian national broadcaster, RTS, and were violently thrown out by police. While some of the protesters were injured in the process, clashes broke out between protesters and police on the street outside – the authorities used tear gas to disperse the crowd. The following day, while Vučić

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was holding a press conference inside the Serbian presidency building, protesters gathered outside and again clashed with the police. Several were arrested, some were kept in custody, while others were handed misdemeanour charges. However, after a public outcry caused by the arrest of an 18-year-old student, Vučić offered a pardon to all those facing charges and appealed to the court to drop the charges. Yet, while the demonstrations are losing their velocity, their participants have not stopped.

## The political vacuum of a captured state

It has been staggering to see how similar the reactions of the authorities were in both countries; they were more than eager to pretend there was nothing unusual going on and blamed the protesters for destabilising the situation. Milorad Dodik, leader of the ruling SNSD party in Republika Srpska and the Serb member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, labelled the protests as political and claimed their aim was to topple the government and accused the opposition of politicising the demonstrations. Yet, in contrast to Banja Luka and Dodik, Vučić claimed he was ready to listen to the protesters and change what is not right. While the people of Bosnia are used to the discourse of victimhood, Vučić's empty promises designed to calm down the situation clearly show how secure and untouchable this former hard-line nationalist and born again pro-European reformer feels. Despite the presence of international organisations and the ongoing EU accession process, threats and promises serve the same goal – to remove people from the streets and leave power in the same hands. Interestingly enough, in parallel to the unrest, he is running his own campaign called "The Future of Serbia", which promotes his "achievements" in his years in power.

The truth is that in the Republika Srpska – a unit of Bosnia and Herzegovina ruled by Dodik and his cronies in a quasi-authoritarian way – the opposition does not have much to say. In Serbia, a role model for the Dodik, the situation is similar, but the opposition tries to react to Vučić's "one man rule". On February 6th opposition parties from different backgrounds, but who are members of the "Alliance of Serbia", presented their plan. The so-called "Agreement with the People" expresses their commitment to protect press freedom and to ensure free and fair elections. They promised not to participate in any elections or in the work of the current parliament until the proposed criteria are met. They agreed on the need to form a joint election list and to work on forming a transitional "expert" government with a one-year mandate.

Despite all of this, the opposition in Serbia has not used the opportunity to create a strong and unanimous message – instead the stage has been taken over by an

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extreme-right party, Dveri, and its leader, Boško Obradović, who is consequently replacing civic dialog with one built around the narrative of "Kosovo betrayal". During the march on April 13th, opposition leaders for the first time took the leadership of the rally instead of the organisers. Despite the fact they marched carrying a banner with the slogan "All as one", for many people that means the protests have turned into a political tool of pushing Vučić's administration out instead of changing the system towards the direction of freedom and democracy.

## A long race

In countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, democracy and the rule of law are victims of the delusive notion of political stability. Massive protests and riots do not belong to this picture. What is more, all those problems are symptoms of the same sickness – state capture. Private interests visibly influence the state's decision-making processes to their own advantage while the population remains deeply sceptical of a political class ruling in the interest of the elite, not the people. In February 2014 Bosnia and Herzegovina, struck by political battles and deadlocks between the elites, saw demonstrations that arose out of long-simmering anger at mismanagement, slow economic growth, unemployment and corruption which united people of different nationalities and led to the resignations of four regional prime ministers in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, by April 2014 the protests faded away. The same happened with the 2017 anti-Vučić demonstrations in Serbia.

It is already well-known that Pravda za Davida, the group set up on Facebook, is not going to change anything. The momentum has passed. In Serbia, the scale and manoeuvres of the organisers are similar to the demonstrations of 1996–97 and 2000 (which brought down Milošević's regime), but the activity of right-wing politicians questions the civic character of the current protests. The fact that both countries have been captured by the elite and function in a climate of political violence, their monopolising power means that citizens are forced to be passive and subjected to populist and nationalist propaganda. They have been threatened and arrested – and some have been charged. What is now at stake is not only the rule of law, but also the public's right to resist. If they are going to win back their own states, they need to get ready for a marathon – as it is going to be long race.

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# Biological weapons resurface in disinformation campaigns

NURLAN ALIYEV

Since the poisoning of Sergei Skripal by Russian intelligence officers as well as the chemical attack by Assad forces in Douma, Moscow has ratcheted up its rhetoric about American biological weapons laboratories in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. By employing such allegations, Russia is sending dangerous signals to the US as a part of its ongoing confrontation with the West.

During a press briefing in Moscow on October 4th 2018, General Major Igor Kirillov, commander of Russia's radiological, chemical and biological defence troops, stated that as a result of medical experimentation on people, which were conducted by a company belonging to the former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, 73 Georgian citizens have been killed. Kirillov claimed that the US has financed biological laboratories in Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan and is continuing to develop biological weapons "under the guise of peaceful research". Kirillov also pointed to the Richard Lugar Centre for Public Health Research in Georgia. According to him, "the Lugar Centre is only a small element of the extensive US military-biological programme in the territory of states adjacent to Russia".

A month before Kirillov's press conference, Igor Giorgadze, a former KGB agent and former Georgian state security minister, launched a campaign against the Public Health Research Center in the Russian media. He asserted that he obtained thousands of pages of documents from "Georgian friends" and that they contain

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very "strange facts". It should be noted that Kirillov's claims were also based on Giorgadze's report. Moreover, the accusations were made around the same time the United Kingdom and the Netherlands were accusing Russian spies of being behind an attempted attack on the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague.

## Soviet legacy

Using biological weapons as a narrative is not something new for Russian security institutions. In the Soviet period, biological weapons were a constant component in the information war against the West. Even before taking power in Russia, the Bolsheviks used disinformation as a tool of political struggle. In 1923 the government created a specific structure to be responsible for deception operations on the state level. In the same year, the Politburo of the central committee decided that, in order to organise the struggle against enemy propaganda, it would set up a special disinformation bureau for conducting active intelligence. The Politburo's new disinformation bureau was given specific tasks: accounting for information received by military intelligence; consideration of the nature of information of interest to the enemy; a clarification of the degree of awareness of the enemy; a compilation and technical production of false information; supplying the enemy with materials and documents; and preparing a number of articles and notes for the media with fictitious materials, as approved by one of the secretaries of the central committee.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union actively used biological weapons narratives in its information operations against the West.

After the Second World War and during the Cold War, the Soviet Union began actively using biological weapons narratives in its information operations against the West. In the 1960s, Soviet propaganda spread fake news about how "the United States intentionally infected Eastern Europe with the Colorado potato beetle". According to Tamara Eidelman's recent book, *How Propaganda Works*, one of their most complex fabrications was the massive influx of Colorado potato beetles across the Baltic Sea. The Colorado potato beetle is a very dangerous insect which mainly feeds on potatoes and is widespread throughout North America, Asia and Europe. In 1871 one American entomologist warned Europeans about the danger of the Colorado potato beetle, and in 1875, France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland, fearing the insect, banned the import of American potatoes. It is possible that the potato beetle existed in Europe before the Second World War, but during the war

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American troops most likely brought the insect with them as American potatoes were widely used on American bases throughout Europe.

After the Second World War, the Colorado potato beetle ravaged Europe, in particular in Central and Eastern Europe. The Soviets found the spread of these beetles a perfect narrative to hit against the US in its information war. The Soviets spread disinformation throughout the whole Soviet bloc (and beyond) that the mass reproduction of the Colorado potato beetle was a direct result of Americans purposefully dropping the beetle in mass quantities from planes over several areas of the German Democratic Republic and in the Baltic Sea region in order to infect the Polish People's Republic.

Eidelman outlines the measures the Soviets made to fight the beetle. They were, however, not scientific in nature, but ideological. The central committee directed its disinformation bureau and other agencies to publish in newspapers like *Pravda*, *Izvestiya* and *Sovetskaya Zemledelie* articles on the dangers relating to the rise of the Colorado potato beetle, and especially the villainous spread of the insect by the Americans. They also instructed that these articles be published via press agencies in all the Soviet republics and the states of the Soviet bloc. Finally, the Soviet authorities published brochures and colourful posters about the Colorado potato beetle.

The Soviets found the spread of the Colorado potato beetle a perfect narrative to hit against the US in its information war.

A similar strategy was utilised by the Soviets in North Korea and China. In the 1950s, for example, a Soviet disinformation campaign claimed that "the United States was using rodents and insects to infect the North Korean people with diseases". For the campaign they cited the groundless facts that were promoted by an international commission of scientists which was established under Soviet control. The conclusions were also picked up by left-wing media in Western Europe. The method applied was the simplest and most effective: Soviet security organisations generously paid "experts" who produced predetermined conclusions which were then used to spread fake information in North Korea and China.

## Today's parallel

In April 2018, Maria Zakharova, the Russian foreign ministry's press secretary, stated that "the very fact of large-scale medical-biological activities of the Pentagon at the borders of Russia" is of particular concern for Moscow. On April 12th, the eve of the US strikes on Syria in response to alleged chemical attacks, Zakharova

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stated that the United States, through its programmes financed by the Pentagon, is creating a network of microbiological laboratories in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This was a direct reference to the Lugar Public Health Centre, among others.

Interestingly, since the Skripal case (the intentional poisoning of the former Russian officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom by Russian intelligence officers) and the chemical attack by Assad forces in Douma, Moscow has ratcheted up the rhetoric about US laboratories in the Caucasus and Central Asia. By employing such allegations, Russia is sending certain signals to the US as part of its ongoing confrontation with the West. Several months after Zakharova's statement, the Russian minister of foreign affairs repeated similar accusations regarding Kazakhstan. The reason for Moscow's recent grievances were amendments made (signed in May 2018) to a 2010 agreement between Kazakhstan and the US which allowed commercial rail transit of special cargo through the territory of Kazakhstan to Afghanistan. The amendments allow the US to use the territory of Kazakhstan for supplying American and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The laboratories that Russian officials point to are part of an ongoing project that was established by the US in the Nunn-Lugar Biological Threat Reduction programme. The programme seeks to dismantle former biological research, development and production infrastructure that is present in post-Soviet states. According to official documents, the project aims to further prevent the proliferation of expertise, materials, equipment and technologies that could contribute to the development of biological weapons. The programme has conducted bio-threat reduction projects in countries like Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine. But it was only recently that false claims, like what Igor Giorgadze claimed above, have started to appear in Russian media – spreading the conspiracy of American advancement of biological warfare, instead of the dismantling of it. The methods of disinformation used to spread conspiracy theories are similar to those the Soviet's spread about the potato bug.

Vladimir Putin himself has expressed concerns, which has fuelled the level of disinformation spread. He has said that "these developments – if they are actually taking place – are very dangerous and related to the latest achievements in genetics". Although he stopped short of stating whether he believed the allegations are true or not, he added that "it is about finding agents that can selectively affect people depending on their ethnic group and over two or three generations, allegedly, they have used animals to conduct such experiments". Putin also warned the West, saying: "If someone is developing this technology, they have to understand that others will be doing so as well. So it is better to sit at the negotiating table beforehand and develop unified rules of conduct in this very sensitive area."

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These facts also show how Moscow's target against the "Lugar laboratories" is not Georgia or other post-Soviet republics, but the West – in particular, the accusations over Skripal and its air strikes in Syria. The Kremlin may also try to paint itself as a defender of the former Soviet republics against the American "evil biochemical weapons programme".

## To what end?

In creating a negative account of the co-operation between the US and former Soviet states and accusing them of violating the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, Moscow may be using this tactic in order to justify its own chemical and biological weapons programme. Russia, in recent years, has already used arguments of bacterial or biological threats as cause for imposing economic sanctions on several former Soviet states. Moreover, it uses offensive measures under the guise of defensive efforts – as can be seen in Ukraine. In the face of an intensifying confrontation with the West, the Kremlin's rhetoric can be interpreted as a signal to western states that it may consider action in response to the "threat" of biological warfare in former Soviet states.

Nevertheless, it is very difficult to exactly explain Russia's intention in using biological weapons as its most recent anti-West narratives. This is mainly due to the fact that Russia has several aims, which could include the following: geopolitical (increasing the confrontation with the West); preventing closer co-operation between the West and former Soviet states; creating public mistrust against the West and local authorities; and creating panic among certain populations. Clearly, the Soviet legacy of using biological threats has not completely disappeared. In the end, Russia may try to position itself a defender, to save those most threatened by these so-called threats. NEE

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# Promises and challenges

## Internationalisation of the transition economies

KIRIL KOSSEV

Since 1989 internationalisation has profoundly influenced the former communist countries, primarily economically but also politically. The unfinished transition process has put into perspective the vast differences between the countries that emerged from the deep shadow of the Soviet Union and the enormous difficulties they had in constructing functioning political and economic structures. Three decades on, the future of the entire region is inexorably linked to the West and the ideas of open markets.

Internationalisation has been one of the critical dimensions of the economic transformation undergone by the former command economies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since 1989. Openness and global interactions have had profound direct effects on their growth and development, and entry into international institutions has significantly shaped both domestic policies and institutions. During the past three decades of transition, all former socialist economies have moved decisively towards market-oriented ones. Economic openness, overwhelmingly to the West, has been translated into an economic success by those countries which were able to internationalise their economic and political institutions and integrate with institutions of the West. Such openness has in turn influenced

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politics and societies as to make any economic reversal very costly. There is still a long path of development ahead, however, which may be undermined by the greater difficulty in establishing competitive political systems across the entire region.

## Dimensions of transformation

Some 30 years ago the former centrally-planned economies of the Soviet bloc embarked on a road to openness, often from a very high degree of political and economic autarky. Economic internationalisation was an essential component of the post-communist transition and was seen as such from the very beginning, even if countries varied somewhat in the speed with which they progressed. The transition badly needed access to foreign technology and know-how as technological backwardness was widely recognised as one of the weakest points of the old system. They also desperately needed access to capital. In most countries, the domestic market size was relatively small. Without international trade they could not benefit from the gains that narrower specialisation and larger-scale production could generate. Moreover, while pre-transition trade was limited, the breakdown of the old system in many places served to disrupt important production chains that had to be reconnected or replaced. This was particularly true in the former Soviet Union and ex-Yugoslavia, where a great deal of domestic trade became foreign trade almost overnight.

International integration reinforced other reforms – or at least raised the political costs of backsliding on them.

International integration reinforced other reforms – or at least raised the political costs of backsliding on them. Foreign direct investment, for example, created new constituencies concerned with clear, secure property rights and efficient institutions, while foreign trade quickly created new production links and flows that would be costly to disrupt. Entry into international institutions, like the World Trade Organisation and the European Union, likewise served to entrench various strands of domestic institutional and policy reforms. However, such openness came at a price, as many of the new market economies experienced balance-of-payments crises, persistent challenges with respect to questions like exchange-rate policy and exposure to western financial volatility. Progress differed across countries and this has necessarily led to disparate outcomes in terms of depth of integration, economic openness and political institution building. Often the facets of internationalisation had identifiable institutional and political preconditions, thus how fast and how far any of the countries transitioned was not a result of a simple choice by their policymakers.

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In most Eastern European states, the liberalisation of trade in goods and some (non-financial) services tended to proceed fastest, often with radical distributional – and, in some cases, political economy – consequences. The initial phase of often a partial opening (subject to a number of exceptions, such as export quotas, restrictions and taxes) often helped insiders to amass fortunes and capture political and economic space, however in the longer term the countries that were more successful in adopting export-driven growth models achieved better GDP growth. The economies of Central Europe, particularly the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, benefitted enormously from becoming part of western (chiefly German) supply chains. The export performance of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which succeeded the Soviet Union, on the other hand, was driven more by energy and primary commodities exports as well as trade between themselves rather than a genuine integration into the supply chains of the developed western economies.

## Success and failure

Despite the difficulties of macroeconomic stabilisation in the 1990s and the economic specifics of the liberalisation process, the transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe never really considered slowing down or reversing the process of financial integration with the West. Together with trade integration, it has been one of the great successes of the post-communist period. It happened, hand-in-hand, with institutional integration as investors gained confidence in the credibility of newly established financial markets. In the post-2008 crisis era, with more volatile capital flows and more pervasive bank regulation, countries that lack such an institutional "seal of approval" (e.g. non-EU countries) may find it harder to attract foreign investment.

The large-scale post-1989 movement of people, while controversial politically in the West and contributing to the poor demographic trends of the East, has been central to the economic modernisation of post-communist societies through flows of remittances, knowledge and experience gained and transmitted by migrant workers, and the networks created. To further this process, accession to international economic institutions like the IMF, World Bank, WTO and the OECD – and especially an economic and political union like the EU – was often a period of intense growth-inducing policy reform. Even membership to NATO, a political and military-security organisation, played a role in the transition, insofar as the requirements for new members included the settlement of territorial disputes with neighbours, stable democratic institutions and democratic control over its armed

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forces. Institutional integration with the West, comprehensive in its directionality has been a true success of the post-1989 transition.

While the direction has overwhelmingly been towards open market economies, the integration paths have varied. The commodity-rich countries of the former Soviet Union had perhaps the least difficulty in identifying their immediate export opportunities – the USSR had already been well established as an exporter of hydrocarbons, in particular, but also metals. Even as oil and metals production in these countries fell sharply for a time in the early 1990s, exports held up relatively well since domestic consumption fell even faster. Broadly speaking, exports of primary products were critical for Russia (hydrocarbons and metals), Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (hydrocarbons), Ukraine (metals) and Belarus (petroleum products refined from Russian crude). This development path has generated substantial wealth for some groups within these societies but has not allowed for the creation of complex and redistributive domestic economies.

The Central European economies, benefiting from proximity to Germany and Austria, moved quickly to reorient their economies towards Western Europe, attracting considerable foreign direct investment and gradually integrating into larger value chains as suppliers of relatively complex goods. This was especially the case for the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. Physical proximity to the heart of the European Union's single market brought other benefits, as it ensured that these countries were a relatively high priority for western governments seeking to support the transition. These have become the key economic success stories of transition.

## Choices

In other countries within easy reach of Western Europe, trade focused initially on less complex products. The Balkan countries started in a less promising position than the Central Europeans or even the Baltic states in terms of economic and political conditions, as well as location. The series of wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, as well as political instability in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania, impeded both domestic reforms and internationalisation throughout the 1990s. As a result, exports from this group of countries were dominated by less sophisticated goods and some primary commodities. In many cases, exports were insufficient to cover the cost of imports and they depended heavily on remittances and access to foreign (often debt) financing. Eventually, a reform push towards integration with the EU led to the creation of budding modern knowledge and information technology industries, exceptionally successful in the Baltic countries.

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A large number of economies, particularly in the former Soviet states, were heavily reliant on remittances, exporting labour rather than raw commodities or processed goods. In the case of labour-exporters in the Caucasus and Central Asia, this implied a high degree of sensitivity to the performance of the receiving economies, particularly Russia and Kazakhstan. This was true, albeit to a lesser degree, of Central European countries sending workers to Western Europe.

Yet even within these groupings, and sometimes at the margin between them, the choices and trajectories of different countries have varied, reflecting in particular the different incentives and constraints that sometimes uncertain elites faced at the outset. Much also depended on progress (or the lack thereof) made with respect to other reforms, such as financial-sector development or privatisation. For example, oil producers in the former Soviet Union chose very different strategies for realising that potential. While Russia consistently emphasised domestic control over sensitive sectors like oil and gas and carefully limited foreign participation, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan badly needed both foreign capital and foreign expertise in their oil and gas sectors. For both political and commercial reasons, they were initially inclined to prefer western partners to Russian ones, and they consequently became extremely eager to attract large inflows of investment. Turkmenistan followed a third path, emphasising both state ownership and limited foreign involvement.

Three decades on, the future of the entire region is inexorably linked to the West and the ideas of open markets.

## Challenges ahead

Internationalisation since 1989 has profoundly influenced the former communist countries primarily economically but also politically. The unfinished transition process has put into perspective the vast differences between the countries that emerged from the deep shadow of the Soviet Union and the enormous difficulties they had in constructing functioning political and economic structures. Three decades on, the future of the entire region is inexorably linked to the West and the ideas of open markets and (some form of) political democracy have taken roots across (almost) the entire post-Soviet space. These roots are, of course, deeper in some countries than in others.

Integration into western markets and institutions has resulted in the spread of market mechanisms, knowledge and technology acquisition, albeit to varying degrees across countries. For the majority, this road has led to integration into new regional

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production networks and West European value chains. The transition countries that achieved deeper international integration, despite some pitfalls, also achieved greater domestic welfare gains. The transition economies of Central Europe, the Baltics and, to a lesser extent, Southeast Europe can look towards deeper integration and an economic future associated with that of developed Western Europe, whether or not they join the EU.

While "re-joining Europe" has clearly been of great benefit over the last quarter-century, these countries are now increasingly affected by the challenges facing "Old Europe", and their future prospects will depend on how well the continent does in reviving growth and tackling the rise in social and economic inequality that has been observed in recent years. Furthermore, the perceived slowdown – and in some cases partial reversal – of domestic institutional reforms in some of the new member states is creating tensions within the EU. This may mean that integration between the new members and the old European core slows down or even stalls for a period.

For countries less advanced in their integration, this path carries a similar promise and challenge. They face uncertain economic futures as they will have to adopt potentially painful and politically difficult packages of reforms that include simultaneously completing the opening of the current and capital accounts, together with pro-competition policies to boost the competitiveness of domestic tradeable sectors and structural reforms aimed at flexible labour markets. As the political capital of early transition has been spent, citizens of former communist states may exhibit reform fatigue. At the same time, geopolitical tensions to the East and South, as well as a backlash against globalisation in many countries of the West create a much more difficult environment for further integration. This means that the transition economies in the Western Balkans and CIS may experience a longer and more gradual integration in an environment in which the economic benefits of internationalisation do not appear as immediate or appealing as they did in the 1990s and early 2000s. NEE

*This essay draws heavily from a chapter co-authored together with William Tompson in the forthcoming edited volume titled Economic History of Central, East and South-East Europe, published by Routledge.*

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# With one foot in the Soviet past and the other in Europe

A conversation with Zhanna Maksymenko-Dovhych, a film director and writer from Ukraine. Interviewer: Lucian Tion

LUCIAN TION: In a somewhat aggressive scene from your film *Holiday*, a conflict arises between participants of the May 9th Parade wearing the poppy flower symbol on their collar and others wearing a black and orange ribbon. In order to appropriately discuss your film, we need to first explain what the tacit confrontation in *Holiday* is all about. So first, what does the poppy symbol represent?

ZHANNA MAKSYMENKO-DOVHYCH: The poppy is a European symbol representing the memory of the Second World War. It is made of red and black colours, of course. The other side has an orange and black insignia.

What is the other side?

It's people… how should I say it? Those with pro-Soviet inclinations. The orange/black insignia, the Ribbon of Saint George, is used by Moscow and by pro-Russian separatists, such as those in Donetsk. This symbol has been forbidden in Ukraine for two years. This is why the policeman in the film asked those wearing this badge to remove it. That said, I definitely don't think that one "side" is better than the other. My film is about the people who came to the May 9th victory parade to lay flowers at the monument built in the centre of Mikolayiv in memory of the war. There were very different people there. Some came to the main street of this southern Ukrainian city as part of the pro-Soviet and pro-Russian Immortal Regiment marches, while others came to create their own pro-Ukrainian march. This included very different people, right and left, liberals and conservatives. But all these people had the Ukrainian flag, and they spoke both Ukrainian and Russian. The idea of my film was to show one day in the life

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of a southern Ukrainian city that was a part of the Russian and Soviet empires in the past and now is seeking a new identity.

You have a detailed knowledge of history. What is your personal background and what is your relationship with documentary?

I was educated as a journalist but I moved into documentary filmmaking. I made a few short films and am working on a feature film at the moment, which is supported by the Ukrainian Film State Agency*. History is a very important part of our lives but it is very complicated. However, it is vital to understand what happened in the 20th century. Ukraine was a part of the Soviet Union and is now independent. As I show in my film, I believe it is important that the country fights for its independence – because that is what is going on in Ukraine at the moment, a continuing war of independence. We have been a colony of Russia for three centuries and they don't want us to be independent. It wasn't easy for Russia to give independence to Poland or to Finland, and it is even harder for them to give it to the Ukraine.

Poland and Finland were never part of the Soviet Union…

No, but they were part of the Russian Empire.

Parts of them.

Like Karelia. Karelia was Finnish territory that became part of the Soviet Union. When that happened, all the Finns left the region and moved to Finland.

These territories, and I mean the whole of Eastern Europe here, were always changing hands over the centuries. The eastern part of Poland and Bessarabia, for instance, were both part of the Russian Empire and Prussia/Greater Romania, respectively. It seems to me history is always a contested topic in these territories and there is always more than just one point of view to look at it. To me this is in fact an advantage, because western views on the history of Eastern Europe tend to be more one-sided. During the "GoEast" film festival, you said that you want to live in a European country. What does that mean and how do you see the future of this region?

The future for me is democracy and liberalism. Ukraine is not a mono-national country, we have many nationalities living there, and therefore it is important to come to a decision on how to live with one another. Due to the variety of peoples present in Ukraine there are many difficult topics. We have to learn how to speak with one another. The history of the 20th century up to Brezhnev's time in power is neglected in the current historical discourse. We have been living with too much propaganda and many topics are taboo because of this.

Aren't we going from one extreme to another, though? Aren't we going from

* The speaker is referring to *Peace for Nina*, a film documenting a mother's journey in coming to terms with the death of her son after the latter was killed in the war in Donetsk.

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Soviet propaganda to a particular western reading of history?

We do need to find our own way, that is true. All countries bordering each other have to find their own way to deal with history, as they will have the same conflicts: Ukrainian villages in Romania and Romanian villages in Ukraine, for instance. But Romanians aren't coming to Ukraine to claim it for themselves.

Like the Russians?

Yes! In the last war the Russians wrote on their tanks "To Berlin!" Now they are writing "To Kyiv!" They want to create a "New Russia" as they did in Georgia, for example. In the Georgian War they came and took a part of Georgia; and in Transnistria it is the same. The Russian empire is alive and well. The Russians need to control territories that don't belong to them any more. And now we are at war: the people in military uniforms in my film are the ones fighting it.

Is it Russia that's doing this, or is it the people living in these territories that have split allegiances? After all, this is what your film is about: the generational conflict. On the one hand, you have the babushkas, such as the ones wearing the orange/black ribbon together with the veterans wearing their decorations on their chests; and on the other hand, you have the pro-European population. Are the former, the babushkas and the veterans, plainly wrong?

No, I do not think that some people are wrong and others are right. The pro-Soviet people believe in the past; the others believe in the future. You can see this from our elections, too. My film is not about the elections, it is about our identity as a nation. How do people identify themselves? With the country that won the Second World War? My grandfather was also part of this war. Once I asked him to tell me something about the war, but he didn't want to talk about it. Others love to talk about it. Probably some of the veterans in my film belong to this group. The question is: Are they really veterans? You see, some of them could not have been in the war. How old would they have to be to be veterans of the Second World War? Most veterans are already dead. Some of them (in the parade depicted in my film) cannot be veterans. They are simply a part of the propaganda.

I was a Soviet child myself and I believed in the mottos celebrating the Soviet state since kindergarten. Today I am 41, but when I was nine, I was made a pioneer and wore a tie emblazoned with the insignia of Brest.* I realise now, of course, that all this was pure ideology. Beforehand, ideology was an integral part of my life, and this included the May Day parades. Since then, however, a lot of things have changed. We had Gorbachev, *perestroika*, etc. A lot changed, but some people did not. Some people continued to believe in what Stalin

* The same as Brest-Litvosk, where the treaty that ended the First World War was signed, but also a site where the Red Army, in one of the first battles of the Second World War, put up a heroic resistance against the Germans.

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Photo courtesy of Zhanna Maksymenko-Dovych.

achieved – building a strong country, etc. For these people it does not matter how many died in the Gulags, nor the Ukrainian famine. It is very complicated, but I think we have to discuss this with each other and find a way to understand.

My feeling is that your film, indeed, shows this conflict without commentary. On the other hand, when I hear you talking about it, I feel as though you want to comment on it. As such, I get two contradictory messages: One that says "there is hope; let's talk about this conflict", and the other one that is very pessimistic, as shown in your film.

We should be thinking about the future, but do so with an eye on the past. That is why we have to learn the real history, one that's not been tainted by the propaganda of school books. If we want to be a democratic country, we need to become more open. And people who only watch Russian TV, for example, don't have enough information to do so.

Okay, let's accept that. But do you think the Russians (although this is making a generalisation) are not aware of what you call "real" history? Haven't they already learnt this history 30 years after the collapse of communism?

Have you seen the images from Moscow where people are laying flowers on Stalin's grave?

This is not exactly proof that people don't know about it, is it? It may also show they are proud of the victory in the war.

I'm sure many people are proud of the victory in the Second World War. It was a very hard war (to win). But the Soviets had a motto: Nobody should judge winners! That means we didn't know for many years about the victims of Stalinism. Also, the newly declassified data of the real number of deaths in that war in the Soviet Union is more than 40 million. It is a huge number.

But I have to insist, have all people, both Soviet and post-Soviet, been one hundred per cent indoctrinated by propaganda? Many books, for example, have been written in Russia itself during the 1990s about the crimes of Stalin and Beria…

People ignore them, unfortunately. My mom is from Bessarabia and sometimes I go there to visit relatives. Some

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of them are living in the Bulgarian village just near the Moldovan border. Here villagers go to church on Sundays (the Russian Orthodox church) and have very clear-cut opinions regarding in the Soviet Union – they know the state destroyed almost all the churches, but life in Soviet Union was otherwise fine. There were no problems with Soviet tanks in Prague, nor with the war in Afghanistan. Also it is no problem to them that their children do not study nor know their native Bulgarian language, nor Ukrainian, only Russian was taught in Soviet schools. And I have arguments with members of my own family who come from there. They tell me we cannot know everything about the past, while I tell them that we could know more if we opened a book, and looked things up. But they do not. For them it's okay that Transnistria is not a part of Moldova; and for me that is not okay.

Since we're on the subject of western Ukraine and Moldova, let me give you Romania's example. With 30 years of democracy, Romania veered from extreme socialism to extreme anti-communism. The result is that the country has very little proprietary industry left, and that from a mainly agricultural country for the better part of the 20th century, it got into a position where it imports potatoes from Egypt and tomatoes from Spain…

You don't protect your market; Ukraine does. Not that it makes a difference. Ukraine has a moratorium on land – you cannot buy or sell land. However, the downside is that there is a lot of wheeling and dealing on the black market. The problem is that Ukraine is an oligarchic country. And I am not saying we should copy everything from the West. We are not a western country, but we are no longer a Soviet one.

However, you do say that you want to live in a "western" Ukraine.

No, I said I want to live in Europe, that is, in a Ukraine that belongs to Europe. I'm talking mostly about the rule of law, courts and the basics of European civilisation. Everything is destroyed at the moment and Ukraine is a very corrupt place. It began during Soviet times and with Gorbachev it got to be more and more corrupt. The elites today are the same as during the Soviet times. The former communists became capitalists.

Isn't the adoption of western laws to a post-socialist environment something that allowed this to happen?

Is there an alternative? We have to revise our history and watch less state propaganda and not only Russian propaganda, but also Ukrainian. The programming on independent TV channels, which are mostly owned by Ukrainian oligarchs, only favours the owners and no one else. People don't want to think with their own heads. I mean, just look at our election!

Do you see yourself as belonging to a certain movement of artists or activists trying to promote change?

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A couple of my friends who were journalists became deputies in the parliament, but not all of us are heading in that direction. I'm politically active and try to take part in movements against corrupted courts, for example, or in meetings that are paying attention to Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia, like film director Oleg Sentsov or journalist Roman Sushchenko, but mostly I'm focusing on documentary filmmaking. At some point, however, wherever you are in life, you have to make a decision – whether to focus on your personal life or to try and promote change. The situation in Ukraine is difficult. It is very important that people have access to information and it is up to us to make it available. At some point we will have to understand that some things about our past are uncomfortable. Yet regardless of how it feels, we will have to face the past. This can only be done through discussion. In my film, for instance, there are some shots of groups of people parading with the accompaniment of a song about the Nachtigall and the Roland divisions. These were SS divisions of the German army in which Ukrainians fought.

**Are you talking about Bandera?***

No, Bandera was imprisoned in a German camp while this was going on. And look, it is a bit easy, a bit of a cliché to blame Ukrainian nationalism on Bandera. And this is also Soviet propaganda. In Soviet times, they needed an enemy and Bandera fitted the bill. I remember seeing Soviet propaganda films about the Banderites…

**So they are not one hundred per cent true? Was their fascism exaggerated?**

I am only trying to say that in Western Ukraine there were groups within the Ukrainian army who fought against the Soviets until the 1950s. These were Ukrainian partisans and the Soviets didn't want to talk about them. They equally didn't want to talk about the Nachtigall and the Roland divisions that fought for Hitler. In fact, there were almost a million Russians who fought on Hitler's side as the Russian Liberation Army and that's something the Soviets kept silent about. This is the neglected history that I am talking about. Of course, there are many history books about these facts, but who reads them? Only intellectuals. In the meantime, Crimean Tatars are being put into prison as we speak and this is beginning to look like a new genocide. The Tatars returned to Crimea during Gorbachev's time in power after being deported by Stalin in 1943. But now they are being imprisoned again. Just like Russian historian and rights activist Yuri Dmitriev is currently in prison for revealing some of the repressions of the past.

That said, I understand why people still have different interpretations

* Stepan Bandera was a controversial Ukrainian nationalist who was associated with Nazism, but also vied for an independent Ukraine. His controversial figure is currently being used by right-wing groups to stir nationalist, and sometimes even fascist, sentiments.

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of the past. When I showed this film in Mykolaiv the nationalists didn't like it because they thought I didn't portray them in the right way, while people from the other "side" didn't like it either because they didn't think I portrayed them correctly. I told them both that I was happy. And what's more, I didn't know of some of the things that were happening in the frames I shot myself. However, friends pointed out to me one decorated general who is not real veteran, or others with red flags were carrying portraits of very strange and suspicious people.

Such as?

Some of the faces in the portraits belonged to members of the Party of Regions (the former party of the ousted Viktor Yanukovych), yet were made to look like they were war veterans. It's like being in a psychiatric ward, really! That's why this film, for me, is a cake with many layers.

I agree with you about the need to revise history for the region. However, I also believe the most neutral historical accounts will always have some level of bias…

There are different views, each claiming that their account is true, of course. For instance, I have a friend in Canada who, after seeing my film, told me: "I agree with the older woman [wearing the black/orange ribbon] who said that we [the Soviets] were the only ones who resisted when the whole of Europe came to destroy us." And I agree with my friend. I am not against the older woman. But things are complicated. The least I wanted to achieve by making this film is to get people talking. That is why I am very happy if my film is able to start a genuine conversation about history, especially inside Ukraine.

This interview took place during the 19th edition of the "GoEast" film festival, dedicated to Central and Eastern European film held annually in Wiesbaden, Germany.

Zhanna Maksymenko-Dovhych is an award-winning film director and writer from Ukraine. Her films include *The Unbreakable Ihor Branovytsky* (2016), *Under the bridge* (2014), *House with Chimeras* (2013), *One Day of Euro* (2012) *Holiday* (2017), and, most recently, *Mykolaiv. Chronicle of Protests* (2019).

Lucian Tion is an independent journalist, film director and international teacher. He has worked in the US, Cameroon, Tajikistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and China. He writes for *Senses of Cinema*, *East European Film Bulletin*, *Studies in Eastern European Cinemas* and other journals and magazines.

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# Striving for the good of all, but not himself

A conversation with Tetiana Mykhailova, an expert on the poetry of Vasyl Stus at the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv. Interviewer: Tomasz Lachowski

TOMASZ LACHOWSKI: We met a few days before the premiere of a new Ukrainian film called *The Forbidden* (*Zaboronenyi*) describing the story of Vasyl Stus – one of Ukraine's most prominent poets. Undoubtedly, *The Forbidden* aroused a lot of controversies even a year before its premier, mostly because of its political nature. You have conducted research on Stus's works and were invited by the film's director, Roman Brovko, as one of the few specialists to consult with. Did the final version of meet your expectations?

TETIANA MYKHAILOVA: Indeed, I interpret Vasyl Stus not only through this film but also through other artistic activities where the poet appears – music, theatre and painting – and, of course, my academic research. That is why my vision of Stus is probably different than the average Ukrainian. I have no doubt that *The Forbidden* is great news for Ukrainian viewers and it shall force us to rethink Stus's role in the development of Ukrainian culture. Nonetheless, I have to admit that during the first screening, while still in the working phase, I had a slight dissonance between how I view the poet and how Stus was portrayed on the screen. It is necessary to point out how the filmmakers chose the actor, Dmytro Yaroshenko, to play Stus, largely based on his physical similarities to Vasyl Stus. However I am not sure whether Yaroshenko has managed to get the job done when it comes to the interpretation of Stus's uneasy personality. Brovko also had the difficult task of depicting crucial moments in Stus's life, starting from his PhD Studies at the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature in Kyiv in the early 1960s (with some flashbacks to earlier memories) through his mysterious death in Perm-36, a Soviet forced-labour camp for political prisoners in the mid-1980s.

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Together with your colleagues from the Shevchenko Institute of Literature at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, you were asked to consult on earlier versions of the film. Are you satisfied with the co-operation?

We were invited by the film crew to present our comments during its prescreening. I had a strong impression that they managed to avoid some unnecessary suffering, since Stus's story raises a lot of questions concerning contemporary Ukraine and our national identity, which is always associated with current day politics

From the very beginning, public discussion mainly concentrated on one particular scene, showing the trial of Stus and the role played by Viktor Medvedchuk, who was his defence lawyer. It seems that Medvedchuk showed no interest in defending the poet by openly agreeing with the court's conviction. It is no secret that, today, Medvedchuk is a pro-Russian politician, regarded as Vladimir Putin's voice in Ukraine. There was even a moment when Brovko decided to cut the scene with Medvedchuk from the script, although it eventually appeared in the film.

The scandal concerning Medvedchuk's participation in the trial erupted in August 2018 when Brovko spoke about the necessity of cutting the scene because of its length. This caused a wave of public criticism. So when my colleagues and I were invited to consult in November 2018, this scene was already put back into the script. I would say that since the scene was reinserted, it should be assessed positively because the judicial proceedings determined the rest of Stus's life. Let us remember that this particular scene actually shows the second trial against Stus in 1980 (the first arrest and proceedings took place in 1972). Therefore he already knew what to expect from Soviet justice… Although you cannot tell this from the film – an oversight by the director.

In the end, however, Medvedchuk's name was not mentioned in the film. Do you think that this is a mistake, especially considering Medvedchuk's involvement in Ukrainian politics over the last several years? Not only is he Putin's man in Ukraine, he was also closely connected with Viktor Yanukovych, who was ousted in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity. Most recently he was appointed the chairman of the pro-Russian "For life" party…

Let me start by saying that *The Forbidden* is a movie about Vasyl Stus, not Viktor Medvedchuk. There is no doubt that during the trial Medvedchuk was just a puppet, nothing really depended on him. However, at the same time, it is also true that he did not even try to defend Stus; he simply agreed with the court's verdict, that Stus deserved to be punished. In my opinion, it is not really essential to hear Viktor Medvedchuk's name on the screen since almost everyone knows perfectly well who the shameful lawyer was. But I do believe that a film shouldn't become an instrument in politics – first and foremost they are works of art.

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In the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity, we can observe a renaissance in Ukrainian culture. Stus is undoubtedly an important factor in Ukrainian national identity. Would you agree that without the EuroMaidan it would be difficult to imagine this process of Ukrainisation?

Culture is often interrelated with politics, which is not always a positive thing for culture itself. Indeed, since the EuroMaidan we are witnessing a new (but not the first) outbreak of Ukrainian culture, sometimes manifesting in small symbolic matters like the Vyshyvanka Day where people freely wear the embroidered shirts in public spaces. Other times it manifests itself in more concrete ways, like cinema, theatre or music.

During the protests an interest in Stus and his poems (re)appeared, although I am convinced that his works are universal and can be read and interpreted at any time. However, it is true that Stus was always seen more as a citizen, freedom fighter or human rights activist than a poet. Once Yuriy Shevelov, a Ukrainian linguist and literary critic, rightly remarked that "Stus's heroic biography is an obstacle to understanding him as a poet". Today, we are facing a time when, as a state and a nation, we are fighting for our independence – in a political and cultural sense. Moreover, art can be used as a therapeutic agent in overcoming very strong emotions, sometimes even extreme ones – which corresponds with the tragic moments of the Maidan, like the massacre of the Heavenly Hundred or the five years of the ongoing war in Donbas. Musicians and poets were present during the Revolution of Dignity, and they are still going to the frontlines in the east in order to support our soldiers. Culture can respond to events faster and more honestly than political tools. I am pretty sure that even without the Maidan, films about significant figures in our history would eventually appear.

Yet, the impact of politics on culture is undeniable. Today, a key concern is the potential re-emergence of openly pro-Russian forces in Ukraine; and if they do come back, how would that affect Ukrainian culture? Last June, for example, Medvedchuk acquired two Ukrainian TV channels…

The successful re-emergence of pro-Russian fractions, especially after the Maidan and the ongoing war in the east is, at least in my mind, generally not possible. The return of Russification or Sovietisation would not be accepted by Ukrainians. Despite all the current difficulties, Ukraine is aware of being an independent state. It has its own path and it has a very strong and unique culture.

Let us return to Vasyl Stus. You have written that he freely chose his path of suffering. How do you assess that kind of choice? He put the fate of his family at stake by deciding to fight against totalitarianism and stand for his rights and dignity…

During my academic work, I have come to the conclusion that Stus's choice was taken fully consciously. A lot of stereotypes do exist concerning him, however; that he repeated the same fate as

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Photo by Tomasz Lachowski.

Taras Shevchenko or that poets always suffer for the sake of the nation. In his hierarchy of values, family (including his own life and health) was less important than the dignity of man, freedom, justice or Ukraine. He thought about the rights and dignity of everyone, striving for the good of all, not just himself and his family. In one letter to his son in 1978, when Stus was serving his conviction in exile in Magadan oblast, we can find a famous quote: "Dear son … grow as a good, honest and true Cossack, try not to be overcome by evil and know that your dad gave his whole life away to make people live better – everyone and all over the world". Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that this caused a lot of hurt to Stus, being aware of his family's suffering due to his choices and values.

**Stus was one of the participants of the *Shistdesiatnyky* (Sixtiers) dissident movement. How can you describe their influence on his life?**

In the 1960s, the Ukrainian intelligentsia commenced its struggle for dignity of the individual, human rights and the right of self-determination of the Ukrainian nation. It was sort of a cultural revolution – without violence and weapons – but with the open manifestation of discontent against the conduct of the totalitarian government. Everything began with Ivan Dziuba's essay, "Internationalism or Russification?" which was denounced as anti-Soviet by the authorities. Stus shared Dziuba's feelings and the lack of opportunity for the development of Ukrainian culture. One of the other representatives of the

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Sixtiers, Ivan Svitlychny, a charismatic poet and political prisoner, positively affected the younger generation of Ukrainian writers, including Stus. That is why Stus identified himself with the *Shistdesiatnyky* movement.

After his conviction in September 1980 Stus was transferred to a Soviet forced labour camp where he stayed until his death in 1985. Even during those terrible days, Stus did not stop writing. Can we say that Stus's poems changed in the course of his time at the Soviet camp?

This is a good question because not everyone can see that, even when Stus was free we can find in his poems evidence of him feeling captive. One could say he always felt "out of place"; he was very sensitive and he experienced the injustice that occurred in Soviet Ukraine. Needless to say, his first books, like *Circulation* or *Winter Trees*, were rejected for publication by the Soviet authorities.

After Stus's first arrest for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" in 1972, he became a translator. Having no conditions to work as a poet, Stus immersed himself in the works of other poets and writers. What is more, he started to learn other languages, mostly on his own. He translated a lot from German – for example, his favourite Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke and others like Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Bertold Brecht. He learnt and translated other languages, like English, French, Italian, Spanish and even Hebrew. Obviously, he translated from Slavic languages: Russian (Ivan Bunin or Marina Tsvetaeva), Polish (Tadeusz Różewicz and Tadeusz Kubiak), Slovak, Czech and Belarusian. Unfortunately, some valuable Stus translations (like that of Boris Pasternak and Aleksander Blok) could not have been preserved. Talking about his work as a translator, we cannot forget his own writings, especially the collection called *Palimpsests*, treated as the most sophisticated of his poetry. And due to the conditions of the Perm-36 Soviet camp, it was not possible to preserve the last collection of his poems, *The Bird of Soul*. Brovko's film manages to depict an attempt to smuggle the collection out of the camp, however, in the end, *The Bird of Soul* could not escape its cage.

In the film we see a scene depicting the moment of Stus's mysterious death. Brovko's creation suggests that the Soviet camp chiefs are directly responsible.

Stus's death is still an open question. He died on September 4th 1985, but we still do not know the real cause. During his stay at Perm-36 – where conditions were really horrible – Stus had serious problems with his health. He also went on hunger strikes. Nonetheless, I would say that the lack of possibility to work depressed him.

Throughout the last years of his life in custody, some renowned international writers formed a special committee in order to nominate Stus for the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature. Was it one of the last attempts

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**to internationalise his case as a political prisoner in the Soviet Union?**

To respond to this question I would recall the article written by the famous Ukrainian historian and journalist, Vakhtang Kipiani – "Stus and Nobel: Demystification of the Myth," where he concentrated on the activity of the International Committee for Awarding the Literary Nobel Prize to Vasyl Stus in 1986 – formed in 1984 in Toronto. Kipiani, in a very detailed manner, invoked the requirements that would have to be met to effectively apply for the Nobel Prize – in the case of Stus, there was definitely too few valuable translations of his poetry. We used to think that Heinrich Böll, a German writer awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972, asked to honour Vasyl Stus. But there are doubts as to whether he knew Stus's poetry well. Undoubtedly, the appearance of Stus's surname as a Soviet Union political prisoner in the western media was an important factor for his potential release from the camp. That is why we should treat the activities of the International Committee more as a chance to rescue Stus, although in my opinion his poetry deserves to be recognised.

**Brovko's film will definitely draw attention to Stus's life and poetry. What other ways are his works being popularised?**

It has to be stressed that this kind of popularisation is really necessary, since a lot of Ukrainians still do not know who Stus actually was. It was also shown by a poll conducted by the film crew in Kyiv. The results surprised me because Stus's poetry is included in the compulsory programme of Ukrainian literature in schools. Vasyl Stus's son, Dmytro, who is a director of the Taras Shevchenko National Museum, does his best to commemorate his father's name. His last project was about the creation of a virtual Vasyl Stus museum. On the margins, from time to time, Dmytro Stus is accused of co-operating with politicians (including Medvedchuk) whom Stus clearly stood against. Nonetheless, we cannot forget about the strong trauma experienced by people like Dmytro Stus, who lost his father long before his death due to Stus's life choices.

Tetiana Mykhailova is a Ukrainian literary scholar and translator. She has a PhD in literature and conducts research on Vasyl Stus's poetry. She is a junior research fellow at the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv.

Tomasz Lachowski is a lawyer and journalist. He has a PhD in international law from the University of Łódź and is the editor in chief of the Polish online magazine, *Obserwator Międzynarodowy* (*International Observer*).

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# There will be no singing revolution in Russia

WOJCIECH SIEGIEŃ

The Russian authorities are wiser after the occurrence of numerous colour revolutions in post-Soviet states. They have been working on a new arsenal of measures capable of halting events that could lead to social protests. The independent music scene is a perfect illustration of this.

Analyses of revolutions in post-communist countries have neglected the role that culture has played. Even the fact that the main social protests in the post-Soviet states were named after colours, or flowers, is quite telling. In Ukraine there was the Orange Revolution in the winter of 2004/2005, while in Belarus, in 2005, there was the denim protest, which was also known as the Cornflower Revolution. In the same year, there was the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, while in Georgia there was the revolution of roses two years prior.

It is quite likely that an inspiration to name protests after flowers, or other symbols, came from the Carnation Revolution which took place in 1974 in Portugal. Linking these facts together we should also notice that the protest against the Estado Novo regime started with the song *Grândola, Vila Morena*. This shows another similarity between the coup against Marcello Caetano and the revolutionary experiences of Eastern Europe. That is to say, they were not only colour revolutions, but also musical ones.

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## Collective singing

The role that music has played in social protests in post-communist states was most visible in the Baltics and Ukraine. The former – a region of countries with deep folk music traditions – had a four-year long resistance movement which was called the Singing Revolution and took place between 1987 and 1991. Ukraine's Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity were also known for their music. In 2003 the protesters at the Maidan were energised by the song *Razom nas bohato, nas ne podolaty* (*Together we are plenty, we will not be defeated*), performed by Greenjolly. During the cold winter of 2013/2014, activists were listening to *Plyve kacha* (*A duckling is swimming*), a folk song dramatically performed by Pikardiyska Tertsya at the funeral of the Heavenly Hundred. Popular among the protesters were the powerful riffs of the Belarusian band, Brutto, with their recording of *Voiny sveta* (*Warriors of Light*).

Anti-authoritarian protests need more than just a community of likeminded people, defined tasks and clear leadership.

These experiences show that anti-authoritarian protests need more than a community of likeminded people, defined tasks and clear leadership. They also have to include cultural elements, with emblems and symbols that unite people. In the process of mobilisation and resistance, the creation of music is not just in the background, it also carries great potential for action. The power of music is obviously well known to authoritarian regimes. To neutralise it they start with taking control over its distribution. Putin's Russia is not different in this regard. With the deteriorating economy in the last few years, the threat coming from youth sub-cultures has become a real challenge to the authorities. Now the government's priority is to get any unsubordinated segments of society under its grabs.

## Rapper number one

Overall the Russian music scene has a quite clear picture. On the one hand, there are the so-called dinosaurs of the stage. These are artists who are omnipresent on state television. Through this medium they feed viewers with an inconceivable amount of musical kitsch – presented as sophisticated art. The last presidential elections demonstrated how valuable these "government-sanctioned" artists are to the regime and how much they are willing to pay it back for some air time. As a result of the alliance with authorities, some famous artists were even "spontaneously" posting pro-Putin content during the campaign and used social media to

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encourage people to vote. There were some overly enthusiastic singers who made virile music videos, praising the regime.

On the other hand, there is a new independent music scene which has emerged a bit unexpectedly for the Kremlin. This scene is made up of artists who combine hip-hop and experimental electronic music. The majority of them do not openly criticise the regime, nor do they encourage protests or support opposition leader Alexei Navalny. They either focus on conceptualised art or real problems of the Russian youth. Nevertheless, the authorities have become interested in their activities and many concerts have been cancelled. This was the case with Husky, a popular rapper whose concerts were cancelled throughout Russia in 2018. Eventually, the singer was arrested for destroying property and not following police instructions. The avalanche of repression started soon afterwards.

A new independent music scene has emerged unexpectedly for the Kremlin. This scene is made up of artists who combine hip-hop and experimental electronic music.

An alternative electronic group, IC3PEAK, was also banned from performing. As was the pop-punk group, Frendzona, and the hip-hop performers, Face and LJ. In addition to the arrests, local authorities set up expert commissions and counsels which claimed that the music of the arrested artists had a negative influence on the youth and was leading to drug use and suicides.

As expected, information about the repression reached the federal level. The regime panicked and initiated a series of ridiculous responses to quell the "crisis". Typically for top-down authoritarian structures, a decision was made to include independent culture within the centralised system that would offer grants to hip-hop artists. With such support they could rap about the positive things in life. The level of absurdity worsened when Dmitry Kiselyov, the main propagandist of the Kremlin, rapped the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky in an attempt to show that he is the number one Russian rapper.

## Propagandists and victims

Yet the picture of Russia's polarised music scene is far from the truth. To think that there is a clear division between the mainstream and independent scene is a simplification. The difference between the two worlds is not only blurred but also controlled by the authorities. The rapper Husky is the best example of this semantic confusion. Not many people remember that even though today repressed by the authorities, Husky supported Russian mercenaries in Ukraine's Donbas and

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held concerts in the occupied territories. He was accompanied by Zakhar Prilepin, another Russian artist who joined the Kremlin's propaganda war against Kyiv.

The changing of roles – from propagandist to victim (or the other way around) – is one example of the chaos orchestrated by the Kremlin. The Russian authorities are not only in charge within the official media, they also control the protest sphere. Think again about Husky and the fact that after his arrest several big names within the Russian hip-hop scene supported him, including Basta, Oxxxymiron and Noize MC. They were allowed to organise a spontaneous concert in Husky's support, which was broadcast by the TV channel Dozhd. The artists who participated in the concert shouted slogans from the stage such as: "I will sing my music". The authorities, by allowing them to do this, have showed they have come to terms with the fact that the audience, especially the youth, have reached a high level of pressure that needed to be released. For this reason, a group of pop stars were used to hinder a large protest action.

The rapper Basta (Vasili Vakulenko), who is the true godfather of Russian hip-hop and hailing from Rostov, was until recently viewed as the embodiment of Russian alternative music. However, in an authoritarian state, the commercial success of a music genre usually results in its monopolisation by the authorities. Even though Vakulenko was respected by the Russian youth not so long ago for his melodic protest songs, where he criticised the state structures, he could not remain an independent artist. First he was offered the position as a juror in a musical talent show, naturally one that is aired by the state TV channel. Not long afterwards in an interview he supported the unpopular pension reforms. After he received a massive wave of criticism, including accusations of being a sell-out, he backtracked and apologised to his fans. Basta's example shows how someone who was once considered a voice of the youth resistance can yield to the pressure of Kremlin officials. Basta is one of Russia's many corrupted artists. He is, to some extent, now broken, fighting to retain the image of an independent artist.

## Death no more

As mentioned above, the Russian authorities fully control protests. Therefore, the regime also determines who has no right to oppose and in whose defence a concert can be organised. This was the case with IC3PEAK. When Basta and Oxxxymiron were defending Husky, IC3PEAK was pulled off the stage and its group members were detained by the police. Only because of their massive popularity, they would not have received any support from their musical elders. The fact that IC3PEAK still performs is thanks to their own effort and their many fans: IC3PEAK has a

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record with over 28 million online listens. Recent protests against the government's efforts to limit online freedom have also shown how the opposition is trying to win the voice of the musicians. IC3PEAK performed during the demonstrations where they played their hit song *Smerti bolshe nyet* ("Death no more").

IC3PEAK shows the qualitative difference between today's protest culture in Russia and the colour revolutions in other post-Soviet states. While protesters of the Orange Maidan in Kyiv were collectively chanting "Together we are many, we cannot be defeated", IC3PEAK's lyrics are put to the backdrop of synth sounds: "Let it all burn. Death is no more." Singing about revolutions formed a symbolic community that made references to brotherhood and togetherness, even if it was togetherness in grief – as was the case with the Revolution of Dignity. Yet such promises are not found among the voices of young Russian artists. Their songs are rather empty, without the power that unifying symbols have. If they were to become songs of a revolution, it would be a nihilistic revolution – probably similar to the Bolshevik one.

## Shortparis

Despite all this, there are still unique artists in Russia who have great protest potential. This includes a group from St Petersburg called Shortparis. They have been around for only a few years, yet their music videos have recently gained huge popularity on the internet. Just two days after Shortparis's hit songs, *Strashno* (*Dreadful*) and *Styd* (*Shame*), were released online, almost three million views were recorded.

The music video for *Strashno* shows a group of young people with shaved heads entering a school and passing horrified students in the hallway. They enter the gymnasium where a group of terrified people with "migrant features" – as they say in today's Russia – have gathered on the floor. The sweatshirts of the intruders have what seems to be Arabic writing. Quite unexpectedly, the whole scene turns into some kind of musical. Scenography changes and theatre curtains, carpets and choreographed dances appear. The last scene is probably the most powerful: a group of people trudging through the mud and tall grass towards an unknown destination. They are carrying a boy with a Russian flag on a procession float. Grey blocks of flats are in the background to Shortparis singing "eternal and honest".

The lyrics of the song, combined with the story of the music video, are, in my view, one of the more interesting diagnoses of the social situation in Russia. Together, they could be regarded as portraits of the symbols of the Russian collective imagination which could be interpreted as the triggers of hidden, traumatic content.

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In the lyrics, you can hear words like "school", "immigrants", "gymnasium", "major", "Kalashnikov", "ice", and "housing estate". There is a child with a flag, an image of Arabic letters and a young man with a bag in front of a school. This all releases a sequence of pictures linked with suppressed traumas: the terror attacks in Bieslan and Kerch, the Chechen war, the Caucasus, state violence, militarisation, futility of resistance, conformism and indifference. The song title *Strashno* is also a key word, according to the artists themselves. It defines the atmosphere in today's Russia. It is a feeling of endangerment, an undefined fear that hangs over Russia. The musicians admit that the track is based on what they have captured from pieces of conversation around them.

Shortparis's work is troublesome for the authorities because their ingenious combination of images resonates with the collective imagination.

Shortparis's work is troublesome for the authorities because their ingenious combination of images resonates with the collective imagination. It is also difficult to censor because what they present has more to do with a sense of feeling than what can be explained with words. It might turn out to be the best template as how to create a strategy for resisting the growing authoritarianism of Putin.

## Change in choreography

The example of Shortparis also suggests something else. The Kremlin has an ability to quickly and efficiently change strategy in order to neutralise what it regards as a threat. Early this year after their huge online success, Shortparis was invited to a popular late night talk show called *Vecherniy Urgant* ("Evening Urgant"). They performed a live version of *Strashno*. Interpreting the fan reaction we have the impression that an underground band, critical of the regime, broke into the mainstream via federal television. The host, Ivan Urgant, showed great bravery by inviting them to the programme.

Yet taking a closer look at the choreography, this may not actually be the case. Towards the end of the performance, when the band was dramatically repeating the phrase "That's why it's dreadful!", a group of younger extras entered the front of the stage. They are perfectly styled to look like the lead singer. They were bald and dressed in reflective yellow vests, moving around, making terrifying faces and repeating the word "dreadful". This small change in the choreography changed the meaning of the whole song.

The programme's YouTube channel has 3.2 million subscribers, and for online viewers *Strashno* became a song warning about the chaos of the French Yellow

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Vest (Gilets jaunes) protests. As a result, a song that was critical of Russia, in the final moments of Urgant's programme, blended with the Kremlin's narrative of the rotten West. Millions of Russian viewers from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok understood the performance as a version of Putin's warnings: "Do you want it to be like Paris over here?"

The Russian authorities are wiser after numerous colour revolutions in the post-Soviet states. They have long been working on a new arsenal of measures capable of halting events that could lead to widespread social protests. The amount of measures they could use against critical artists, with a potential to mobilise crowds, is impressive. Apart from an apparatus directed at repressing disloyal artists, they also use systems based on clientelism, corruption and allow fake protests. The most subtle form of confrontation is in the sphere of symbols. The example of Shortparis shows that the Kremlin has the potential to redefine the context of artistic creation. Like a magical fairytale where white becomes black and the enemy turns into an ally, the oppressor becomes the liberator. If a revolution happens in Russia, it will not be a singing one.

*Translated by Daniel Gleichgewicht*

Wojciech Siegień works at the Department of Social Sciences in the University of Gdańsk. He has researched the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. He is currently doing research in Donbas in Ukraine. His main interests are educational ideologies and the different processes of militarisation in post-Soviet countries.

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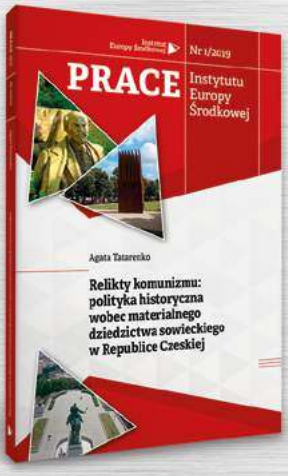

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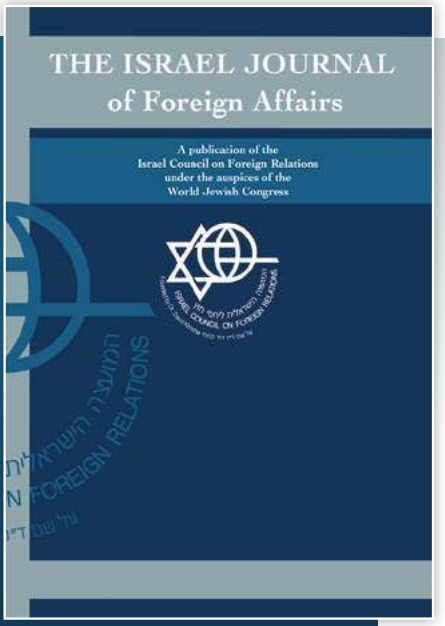


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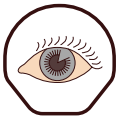
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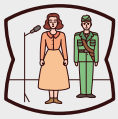
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# Covering up cross-border co-operation between Lithuania and Kaliningrad

GIL SKORWID

On the Eastern border of the European Union, a new stage of cross-border co-operation with Russia has begun. Yet, new joint initiatives are unravelling in a tense atmosphere.

On January 23rd this year a particularly cold morning breaks on the border between the European Union and the Russian oblast of Kaliningrad. At 8 am, Lithuanian anti-corruption officers wrapped in thick coats are conducting a search at the Jurbarkas District Municipality building. Their heavy steps wake up the provincial bureaucracy. The gossip that the search is related to Russia spreads rapidly through the building's dark corridors and soon reaches local and national media. In the meantime, the officers from the special investigative service collect documents about a cross-border project and disappear without comment. This is just one episode in a growing atmosphere of tension where a series of well-intentioned EU-Russia cross-border projects are beginning to unravel.

## Cross-border attitude

Between 2007 and 2013, the EU implemented 13 Cross-border co-operation programmes in the framework of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument. The total amount allocated for these projects was 947.2 million euros. Russia participated in five of the programmes, making it the most active participant among all EU and non-EU countries involved. There is little doubt that cross-bor-

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der co-operation with Russia invoked mixed feelings throughout the EU. However, most of the problems occurred on the eastern EU border which included hostile economic competition in the form of discriminating border-crossing regimes, malicious energy policies and bans on food products. This peaked in 2014 during Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, which led to many new security measures put in place on the eastern EU border. The Baltic states also erected new border fences, while Poland assembled a number of watchtowers overlooking Kaliningrad. After the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO announced the deployment of its Enhanced Forward Presence battalion. This was disclosed just a few months before the final conference of the 2007–2013 EU cross-border co-operation funding period.

The second-most expensive project during the 2007–2013 funding period was a trilateral project involving Lithuania, Poland and Russia. Warsaw was in charge, with Olzstyn, Vilnius and the Kaliningrad hosting branch offices. Kaliningrad and the neighbouring border regions of Lithuania and Poland received 62 million euros from combined EU and Russian budgets. In the final report, carried out on behalf of the European Commission, the cross-border co-operation with Russia was considered an extremely important tool in helping promote EU values within the region. However that was not the case, at least not in and around Kaliningrad. Growing international tension created new insecurities and most funding recipients soon lost any motivation to continue.

## Nemunas River treatment project

As early as 2017, the then vice-mayor of the Jurbarkas District, Saulius Lapėnas, was the first to blow the whistle on the Russian partners in the Nemunas River treatment project. The Nemunas River separates Russia from the EU. In 2010, two municipalities on its banks, the Lithuanian District of Jurbarkas and the Kaliningrad town of Neman, agreed to invest in a wastewater collection and treatment project. During the period 2007–2013, Poland, Lithuania and Russia contributed a total of eight million euros to the project, whilst a further 4.3 million was allocated from the EU.

In August 2018 the programme's manager, the Polish Ministry of Investment and Economic Development, requested that the project leader, the Jurbakas Municipality, return nearly one million euros due to financial discrepancies. Even though the discrepancies were found to come from the Russian side, it became Lithuania's problem since the municipality was officially in charge of the project. In response, and closely watching the implementation of the project, the now former vice-mayor Lapėnas stirred up the mud. On his blog, Lapėnas described a story

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about travelling around Kaliningrad and asking "Why do Lithuanians have to suffer for what happened in Russia," claiming that he did what he could "to make the Russians give back the money". Just before the end of Lapėnas' term, a reply to his question unexpectedly arrived.

On January 15th this year Anton Alikhanov, the governor of Kaliningrad, announced: "We will cover the debt. The mistake in the Neman financial report will cost Kaliningrad's central administration almost one million euros." At first, this seemed like the proper solution, but the governor then added: "We are doing it to prevent international stories from coming out." Yet at the time of writing this (July 2019), half of the debt remains unpaid.

The problems can be traced back to the end of 2016 when the contractor of the EU-funded river treatment plant, Baltlitstroj, a Kaliningrad-based company, began bankruptcy procedures. Baltlitstroj constructed the water treatment plant-related infrastructure in Kaliningrad with a total value of 7.7 million euros. So far, the Neman municipality transferred 6.3 million for the project. Yet, Baltlitstroj accounts are still short almost 1.5 million euros and the Russian municipality does not show any interest in paying the rest. Anna Kudashkina, a tireless Kaliningrad-based lawyer representing Baltlitstroj, explains that "The Neman [Kaliningrad] Municipality simply lied in the report to the EU that it had settled its accounts with Baltlitstroj." According to her, the funding administrator in Warsaw asked the project leader, Jurbarkas District Municipality in Lithuania to refund the above mentioned one million euros immediately after it was realised.

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However, the Kaliningrad region's prosecutor proposed his own version of events. In a response to Baltlitstroj last October, the senior investigator of the prosecutor's office wrote: "The EU did not transfer the whole sum, and it is still indebted to the Neman Municipality for around 1.3 million euros." Kudashkina explains that the prosecutor and now the Neman municipality are trying to tie the debt to fluctuating currency rates, which she suggests not to take seriously: "I am trying to prove that the Neman Municipality intentionally avoided making payments for five years. It established another separate company, The Neman Centre for Capital Construction (NCCC), and illegally transferred the wastewater plant construction to it. And the NCCC spent the money on something else."

Skamaročius used to regularly visit Kaliningrad, but doing his job has now become nearly impossible.

By the end of 2016, Kaliningrad's court of arbitration ruled that the NCCC does not have any funds to pay the debt and that the municipality is not legally responsible. In January this year, shortly after the Kaliningrad governor's announcement that he would pay the Neman debt, Lithuania's special investigation service also took notice. Whilst they were discretely researching their first document samples relating to one infamous failure, the Russian courts announced rulings in two similar cases. At least three Kaliningrad municipalities, Svetlogorsk, Sovetsk and Neman, are refusing to pay Baltlitstroj for the 2007–2013 programme-funded construction. These include the Nemunas treatment infrastructure in Neman, a physical education centre called *Druzhba* (Russian for Friendship) in Sovetsk, and the Yantar theatre hall in Svetlogorsk. The total debt is around seven million euros. The key to the story is simple: Baltlitstroj, once the largest contractor in Kaliningrad, is owned by a construction business conglomerate called Panevezio Statybos Trestas – a Lithuanian company.

Kudashkina does not believe the company will receive any of the money. Even the one million that Kaliningrad's governor promised to pay is to be transferred back to the funding administrator in Warsaw, not to Baltlitstroj, because the project funds were misused. The special investigative services in Lithuania have conducted pre-trial investigations of this misuse for more than six months.

## Casualties of cultural diplomacy

Andzelika Shpiljova often takes long walks along the Russian side of the Nemunas River, which separates Russia from the EU. During these walks, she prepares an application for the European Court of Human Rights about her dismissal as director of the Sovetsk Museum of History. The Russian border town of Sovetsk

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appropriated around three million euros from the 2007–2013 cross-border co-operation programme. In 2018 the town authorities tried to close down the programme's beneficiary – the town's only museum.

"We saved the museum, we won the fight, but every fight claims its victims. I was the one here," Shpiljova tells me. She is accused of organising exhibitions with representatives of a hostile state, namely Lithuania. The court in Russia did not accept her complaint.

Officially, the museum closed due to a lack of funding, but this clearly does not correspond with Shpiljova's side of the story, and its success with European-supported projects. A museum employee, who did not want to give her name, listed the results of the co-operation to me: the town opened a new tourist information centre, there was a renovated park, some key tourist routes were transformed, and even a monument to Louise of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the former Queen of Prussia, was erected.

Back on the other side of the Nemunas, one fate has already been sealed. In October 2018, Gintaras Skamaročius, the chairman of the Nemunas Euroregion (the cross-border region connecting Russia, Poland, Belarus and Lithuania), was declared *persona non-grata* in Russia. Skamaročius is also the head the Donelaitis Society – a Lithuanian cultural association which lobbies to safeguard the heritage of Kristijonas Donelaitis, an 18th-century Lithuanian writer; some of it being in the territory of Kaliningrad.

An 18th-century church where the writer worked and lived received 500,000 euros for renovation from the 2014–2020 cross-border programme. However, Skamaročius, the initiator of the renovation, has been banned from entering Russia for five years. Moreover, the ban cites article 27.1 of the Russian law on border crossing, describing it as a threat to state security. Skamaročius used to regularly visit Kaliningrad, but doing his job has now become nearly impossible. Holding his tense lips tight, he explains to me: "On the border I refused to collaborate with an unidentified officer, who I believe was an agent of the Russian Federal Security Service."

## Risk prevention

On February 1st this year, on the 24th floor of a Vilnius high-rise office building called "Europe", preparations for a new stage of cross-border co-operation with Russia are running at full speed. Aistė Žukauskė, head of the Lithuania-Russia co-operation programme division of this secretariat, receives visitors in a transparent glass room. After the Russian annexation of Crimea, the European Commission

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cast doubt on the future of cross-border co-operation programmes. By the end of 2016, however, it was decided that the project should continue.

During the 2007–2013 period there were major disagreements among the Lithuanian, Polish and Russian counterparts, and some projects had to be reassessed as many as four times. In 2012, after a meeting initiated by the European Commission and the gathering of all national authorities, a clear and binding decision that the projects selected by the evaluation committee and previously hotly disputed were approved for contracting and implementation. In the end the planned second call for proposals never took place because it was already too late.

The new European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) document suggests a reduction in the number of trilateral border programmes and an adjustment in their implementation in order to prevent further risks. This is why the Lithuania-Russia programme has been separated from the trilateral Warsaw-led one. A new joint technical secretariat was also established in Vilnius (in the "Europe" building).

Today, as part of the secretariat under the Lithuanian interior ministry, Žukauskė is responsible for allocating 27 million euros to joint Russian-Lithuanian projects. Excited about the next round of applications, she says she cannot say anything about the 2007–2014 programme and blatantly admits: "I have no one to learn from, because we are all new. None of us has experience with the previous funding period."

"Preserving institutional memory is equally important as a continuation of the co-operation," writes a European Commission spokesperson in a long-awaited email to me. The EU representatives obviously could not have predicted how the new modalities of the Lithuania-Russia programme will develop. At the same time, the ENI documents also state that the main risk for cross-border co-operation is Russia's role in Ukraine, which could lead to new sanctions. According to the documents, new sanctions could affect the programme's success. Indeed, Lithuania's Baltlitstroj representatives agree that bankrupting them is Russia's revenge for EU sanctions. They are thinking of dismantling reusable parts of the water treatment plant, and see the deconstruction of the recreational and sport centres that they have built as the only way out. However, none of the institutions – in the EU or Russia – seem to care.

Lithuania's Baltlitstroj representatives agree that bankrupting them is Russia's revenge for EU sanctions.

Alla Ivanova, head of Kaliningrad's ministry of interregional co-operation, is evidently familiar with the whole picture. Yet, she consistently presents the Neman debt as a one-off mistake. Replying to my question, and without giving a direct answer, she writes: "One problem may not affect the overall co-operation" and suggests solving the debt issue at the re-launched Lithuanian-Russian interregional

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co-operation board. Since the board has not met since 2012, and the tension between the two states continues to grow, she has no doubt that the board will not be meeting anytime soon.

Marius Laurinavičius, a senior expert at the Vilnius Policy Analysis Institute, believes that Vladimir Putin's regime should not be seen as a partner for Europe and claims that co-operation is possible only with those who do not support the Kremlin or its policies. Laurinavičius notes that "If Brussels doesn't understand that we should take the choice of partners into our hands, we should transfer the responsibility for cross-border co-operation to European institutions. People there have more power, so they should be mitigating corruption and combating fraud. Let them deal with it."

Saulius Lapėnas, the former vice-mayor of Jurbarkas, is now free of his representative duties and is open to making his own interpretation. He elaborates: "Not one of the sides, neither the programme administrator in Poland, nor Lithuania nor Kaliningrad want to investigate the abuse of EU funds. They want to cover it up because the negative publicity would stop any new projects."

In the meantime, ordinary residents on both sides of the border are paralysed by the security threats. They cannot agree on the history, about everyday life, and now about unpaid bills. On the top of the failed project and superficial visions, officials are trying to build new ones. This is how the EU and Russia invest in their cross-border animosity. NEE

Gil Skorwid is a freelance journalist based in Kaunas, Lithuania. He covers international relations, media policies, social movements, and educational and cultural developments in the Baltic region. In 2017, he was awarded the Philippe-Chaffanjon Prize for the best multimedia report in France.

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# Inside Kyiv's co-living community

DOMINIC CULVERWELL

The Vilnyy co-living space in Kyiv is an example of a creative innovative space for Ukraine's young people to commune together. It is entirely self-sufficient, not reliant on grants or support from outsider sources. Instead, it is built and designed by the community living there, adapting over time with each change of resident.

As expanding western and Asian cities face a growing housing crisis, there has been an outcry from frustrated young people to remodel the housing sector. An idea has recently emerged to fill this void: "Co-living". It is currently making a mark in high-cost cities such as London, New York and Singapore, but surprisingly a bourgeoning market has recently sprung up in Kyiv. However, Ukraine's adoption to the co-living model is far away from the polished-for-profit western trend, but could offer a genuine affordable alternative.

For those unfamiliar with the contemporary co-living model, it emerged in the middle of this decade, targeting a cosmopolitan audience, in the 18–35 age bracket, who are struggling with high living costs and loneliness. One of the key aspects of co-living spaces is the inclusion of social and work areas within a complex, designed to heighten community and encourage residents to pursue projects together. A quick internet search reveals prospectus-style photographs of well-groomed millennials grinning happily as they work away on their laptops whilst drinking coffee in a large room that looks like it could be either a fancy café or a hotel lobby. It all feels a little artificial, especially when most of the major co-living companies charge over 850 euros per month for a room, with some even exceeding 2,000 euros. This certainly diminishes the affordability facet, making them unavailable to most students and workers on minimum wage who arguably require these spaces the most.

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## New ideas, new opportunities

When the opportunity arose to stay at one of Kyiv's co-living spaces, part of a project called Vilnyy, I was curious to see how Ukraine's youth would appropriate the concept. As it opens up to the European Union, current trends encouraging community have become more prevalent in the country, such as co-living and co-working spaces. Ideas are often appropriated and reiterated from neighbouring countries, such as Poland and Hungary, which in turn have been utilised from western states. Ever since visa-free travel to the Schengen area was introduced in 2017, Ukrainians have had the opportunity for convenient, low-cost travel, and the opportunity to learn new ideas from elsewhere. In contrast to their western counterparts, the spaces tend to have a grassroots feel in Kyiv. This is partly a result of more empty and affordable space to experiment with, as well as cheaper resources and a lack of funding from organisations or government.

The interest in co-living and co-working spaces developed over the past few years as Kyiv experienced a boom in freelancing work. The city's electronic-music scene has reached worldwide fame, creating a tourist industry of its own, run predominantly by young people. Meanwhile, its reputation as one of Europe's tech hotspots is growing, with many graduates looking towards programming as a viable career option, and thus creating a successful start-up culture that has caught the eye of western investors desperate to counteract Russian intervention. The growth of these sectors, which is largely made up of freelancers and independents, offers bounty of opportunity for collectives like Vilnyy to provide people with affordable spaces where they can live, work and meet like-minded people.

I stayed in Vilnyy's first Kyiv based co-living space, currently one of five in the capital, whilst it has other spaces in Lviv, Chernivtsi and Odesa – cities with sizeable student populations. Arriving at a moderately weathered, yellowing 1990s-style apartment block, the image of London's sleek, co-living spaces immediately vanished. Nonetheless, the apartment was clean and modern inside, spread over two floors with large spacious rooms and a balcony overlooking Kyiv's trendy Podil district, home to students and creatives, situated a few kilometres from the city centre. Fourteen people live here, mostly in their twenties and either studying at the nearby Mohyla Academy or working in IT.

The head of this apartment is a web developer named Alex who is in charge of operating the space, organising events as well as the awkward job of collecting everyone's 2,600 hryvnia (90 euro) rent every month. The free second-hand furniture that Alex successfully scouted, as well as the makeshift beds in the large living room and bunk-beds in the upstairs bedrooms, provides an improvised, organic feel – halfway between a squat and a hostel. It is entirely self-sufficient, not

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reliant on grants or support from external sources. It is built and designed by the community living there, adapting with each change of resident.

## Instantaneous community

It is impossible to not mention the EuroMaidan revolution when talking about Vilnyy. Indeed, one of the hard hats, a symbol of the movement, is proudly displayed above the fireplace. The Vilnyy initiative began when a protestor, inspired by the system of communication that the Maidan generated, dedicated his time to creating a communal society. Realising that individuals were capable of making serious change when dialogue and community were encouraged, he wanted to build a space for like-minded people to come together and discuss ways of improving civic society. Embracing the co-living concept, which has developed across Western Europe and the United States, he embarked on the challenge to bring something similar to Ukraine; although he adapted the concept towards a European-orientated youth movement rather than a capitalist by-product of a competitive housing market.

Over the weekly communal meal on Mondays, in which all residents of the apartment are invited to share a large dinner, I got to know the people and their reasons for living here. For most the low cost rent was a big attraction, only costing around a third of Kyiv's average rate price. The overarching factor, however, was the instantaneous community that Vilnyy provided. The capital attracts thousands of young people from villages, towns and smaller cities that offer little in the way of opportunity and exploration. The slow post-Soviet way of life pushes ambitious people away, and many opt for the metropolitan Kyiv instead. However, new arrivals can find Kyiv an isolating and lonely experience.

For most living at Vilnyy, the low rent was a big attraction, only costing around a third of Kyiv's average rate price.

For people like Maria, a 20-year-old journalism student who came to Kyiv to finance her studies and make industry connections, Vilnyy was a welcoming haven. It offered her the time and security to find a job and make friends, something that is hard to achieve when your university is 300 kilometres away and you only have the chance to commute a handful of times every semester. She quickly made friends with the residents and carries the optimism of Kyiv's youth.

However, the space is less overtly political than some of the other initiatives that emerged from the Maidan; rather the focus is on keeping the Maidan's channels of communication open. That is not to say that politics is entirely absent: though

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some of the residents are involved in the activist community, it is still possible to be entirely apolitical and live in Vilnyy. Curiously, it is those within the 18–27 age group – those who were still in high school or university during the 2014 revolution – who are less political. Perhaps this is because they feel the political outcome was a disaster or were too young to enjoy the brief success of the 2004 Orange Revolution. Yet they still hold views close to the Maidan's vision of European values. Instead of entering politics, they have worked towards developing the country on a civic level, clutching on to Kyiv's wave of revolutionary optimism. There is a breeze of excitement and possibility previously thought impossible, as young people are now confident that many others share their values and ambitions.

## Fighting the temptation to emigrate

Within Vilnyy itself, there is the option of utilising a diverse, spread out community, which totals around 100 people. Parties, workshops and other social events take place in the apartment's sizeable living room. As Alex explains to me, if you are looking for a programmer or graphic designer, you merely have to dip into Vilnyy's talent pool and take your pick.

The encouragement of youth mobility is another way the spirit of the Maidan is being continued. All of Vilnyy's co-living apartments are in contact with each other, via social media and hosting residents from other co-living apartments. During my stay, one young woman from the Lviv collective hitchhiked to Kyiv and spent a couple of nights on a sofa in the living room, free of charge. And should anyone wish to move to a Vilnyy co-living apartment in a different city, they would be able to do so simply by finding out if a bed is available, and then moving when they wish, as long as the other residents democratically agree. No need for deposits, contracts, or estate agents – decisions are made primarily through resident voting.

In the long run, projects like Vilnyy aim to encourage Ukraine's young workforce to stay in the country. If Ukrainians feel there are more economic and social opportunities at home then those temptations to emigrate may fade away. The emphasis is on enhancing Ukraine's standards from within so they can match the rest of Europe, albeit with the help from foreign investors hoping to capitalise on Ukraine's bourgeoning creative-tech economy. However as options are limited, opportunities are concentrated to a small number of cities: mostly notably Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa and Kharkiv. As their populations swell, there will be more and more incentives for Vilnyy to expand its project. Yet communication with Europe remains vital in order to develop new ideas and increase Ukraine's impact on the continent. The country's youth are manoeuvring through life despite the political

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instability bestowed upon them, unwilling to let obstacles get in their way. I can imagine similar foundations being set up across Europe, expanding the channels of communication and connecting Ukraine with the rest of Europe.

## Political turbulence

There is still concern over the recent election of the new president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose close associate Ihor Kolomoisky controls various airline companies. This may sound trivial, but the recent arrival of the low-cost flights into and out of Kyiv, such as Ryanair, has been crucial for Ukrainian travellers. Some fear Kolomoisky's return to aviation, by using his newly-elected friend to discourage competitors and to ensure that his own interests are put first. The result could be the end of low-cost European flights in Ukraine.

Moreover, the uncertainty of Zelenskyy, with his lack of political experience and clear policy, may deter people from remaining in the country. The more resilient, understanding citizens have come to terms with the Maidan's anti-climax, accepting the failures but still pushing forward its aims. However, if things take another turn for the worse, then the veil of optimism may just slide off, discouraging young people from staying in the country. Innovative, civil projects like Vilnyy will start to die out. They do not rely on money, but on enthusiasm and a Spartan-like mentality by those putting in the effort. But if there does not appear to be any positive outcome, many will be left wondering, what is the point?

Either way, Vilnyy has arrived at a much-needed time, acting as a uniting force in an otherwise turbulent environment. It is an example of the way Ukraine's youth are adapting to relentless obstacles thrown their way. This is perhaps why Ukraine's co-living spaces are so much more organic than those in London or New York. It is rooted in a desperate need for community. And in the post-Soviet, post-Maidan landscape, community could be Ukraine's key to successfully restoring a fractured country.

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# Prides of the former socialist bloc

KATARINA NOVIKOVA AND WIKTOR TRYBUS

Under communism, the Romanian village of Vama Veche was a unique place of freedom, even if it was somewhat limited. It was a destination for students, artists and intellectuals, as well as a place of work for secret agents who were trying to monitor liberated minds. After the transformation the resort remained the "capital of Romania's youth" and continues to be popular. Thus, as is often the case with such places, the natural desire to keep things as they were competes with the desire to make profit.

The train from Bucharest, which at this time of the year is heated by the sun, slowly makes its way towards the Black Sea. Outside the window, the landscape is quite monotonous – a vast and flawless flat area, which looks like it was run over by a gigantic bulldozer, is dusty and spreads out under the intensive blue sky. Endless sunflower and corn fields are only decorated with occasional poplar copses. From time to time the train passes a forgotten railway station located either beside a small depopulated town or near a post-communist industrial plant.

## Black Sea flank

Our train approaches the Danube – the largest river in this part of Europe. After having crossed a series of its tributaries it leaves Wallachia, a region south of the Southern Carpathians, to enter Dobruja. The latter is a historical area that, since the 19th century, has been divided between the territories of Bulgaria and

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Romania. It is located between the Danube Delta and the steep hills at the Black Sea near Varna, a popular Bulgarian resort town. Over the course of its history the Dobruja region was ruled by the Scythians, the Sarmatians, the Romans, the Bulgarians, the Vlachs, the Tatars and the Turks. Thus, its residents were witness to changes in borders, languages, regimes and alliances. Today, both Romania and Bulgaria are the Black Sea flank of NATO. However, it was not that long ago that they were part of the Warsaw Pact.

For centuries Dobruja's hilly steppe was used by nomads and shepherds bringing their herds for grazing. It is also a marine area; a land of fishermen, sailors and shipyard workers. Not surprisingly, the region's emblem presents two dolphins against a blue background. Far away from Europe's business and cultural centres, this land is dusty and, at the same time, sleepy.

To get to the Romanian sea port of Mangalia we first caught a train in Constanța. Waiting for our connection, we grab a bite to eat at the railway station's restaurant. Given the location, this place is quite unusual. Aspiring to be luxurious, it offers cheap entertainment in the form of pinball machines and a play area for kids. It is full of sweaty customers who drink cold beer while waiting for their kids to get bored of diving in ball pits. Behind the window a monument-ship lurks over the customers, drawing attention to its large sign with the name of the city spelled out.

Constanța has been a harbour town since ancient times, established by Greek colonists a century before the famous battle at Marathon.

Constanța has been a harbour town since ancient times. It was established by Greek colonists over one hundred years before the famous battle at Marathon in 490 BC. At that time it was called Tomoi, to be later renamed Tomis by the Romans. The place served as the empire's borderland and was thus a constant victim of plundering by nomadic tribes. It was probably the reason why the Roman poet Ovid was banished here by Augustus and where he spent the remaining eight years of his life.

Over time Constanța belonged to many different states. Eventually in 1878 it was incorporated into the united Romania and became its main harbour. It still plays this role today and is also a "window to the world" for landlocked countries like Austria, Hungary and Serbia. A majority of the goods that travel through the Danube are transferred here onto boats. They later travel onward, mainly through the Danube-Black Sea channel, a flagship construction of Romanian socialism. Unofficially, it was called the "channel of death" but it was also referred to as the "channel of Romania's bourgeoisie". Reportedly, its building took the lives of tens of thousands of people. Construction work was halted after Stalin's death in 1953, but resumed again in 1973 upon the order of Romania's communist leader, Nicolae

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Ceaușescu. In 1987 the entire waterway was open to ships and sail boats. Two years later, when the Fall of Nations swept the socialist regimes across Eastern Europe, the Romanian dictator was toppled. He was executed together with his wife, Elena, on December 25th 1989. The channel continues operations today and the cost of its construction is expected to be paid off in the coming decade.

## Local multiculturalism

The train to Mangalia is awfully slow. On route, it passes limans which are enlarged estuaries found at the widening mouth of a river. From the window, one can also see sandy beaches and small railway stations hidden among the sunflowers and bulrush. When we reach our destination we are taken by a jolly taxi driver to a small village called Doi Mai. In English it means Second of May. The locality was established at the end of the 19th century, after Dobruja become part of Romania. Even today the village is an example of local multiculturalism. It is inhabited by Eastern Orthodox Romanians and the descendants of Russian settlers as well as the Lipovans – Old Believers, mostly of Russian ethnic origin, who escaped from prosecution in the Ottoman Empire. It is also home to a Tatar community.

The bed and breakfast where we plan to overnight is on the other side of the village next to the shipyard and the harbour where the Romania Naval Fleet is stationed. Seemingly, the shipyard has managed to survive the harsh period of the system transformation. Today it employs a large number of people who are working on three shifts, building at least two ships at the same time.

Despite Romania's economic growth, time seems to be passing slower in Doi Mai. The street colours resemble those of a Ukrainian village or a small town. Like Ukrainian villages, the houses are hidden in a greenery of small gardens and fruit orchards. Local life is centred on tiny shops where neighbours sit together and chat. They witness carriages pulled by donkeys pass by, as well as children playing games on the street. Today, however, Doi Mai's economy is mostly supported by it beaches. Its surroundings are full of hotels which were built for the employees of state enterprises during the communist period. Their names refer to Greek and Roman mythology – there is a Saturn, a Venus, a Jupiter and an Aurora hotel. Evidently, Ceaușescu loved references to antiquity. In addition, the old fishermen and shepherds' houses have been turned into commercial entities. Operating as popular bed and breakfasts, they promote agro-tourism; while the area near the beach is full of stylish cafés and restaurants.

The beach is long and sandy. On the one side it is protected by the breakwater, while on the other it is guarded by cliffs. At the foot of the beach is a concrete bun-

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ker which was moved here during one of the winter storms. It divides the beach into two parts: the "ordinary" and a "nude" beach. So far, neither the local Muslim community nor the conservative Old Believers have seemed to care much about the latter. Ironically the bunker that was there to protect communist Romania from a potential attack is now used to separate the nudists from the clothed beachgoers.

During the Cold War, a potential Warsaw Pact attack against Romania was not something completely unthinkable. The Romanian communist state, ruled by Ceaușescu from 1965 to 1989, was an unusual mixture of neo-Stalinism and strong nationalism. He liked to emphasise that Romania had a special alliance with Moscow, which was not a form of dependence by any means. Thus Bucharest did not listen to Moscow all the time. There were even moments when it openly showed its claws. For these gestures it was admired by other socialist states and praised by the United States and the United Kingdom.

## Save Vama Veche

A few kilometres from Doi Mai along the Bulgarian border is the village of Vama Veche. During communist times it was a unique place of freedom, even if limited. It was the destination of many students, artists and intellectuals, as well as a place of work for secret agents who were trying to monitor the liberated minds. After the transformation, Vama Veche remained the "capital of Romania's youth" and continues to be popular for its nude beaches where hippie-looking youth chant mantras at sunrise, organise night parties and spend time in clubs and discos. Over time, however, Vama Veche has turned into a very commercial village. As is often the case with such places, the natural desire to keep things as they were competes with the natural desire to make profit.

And the profits from tourism can be quite large. Young people come here in search for summer parties and fun, while older visitors come to relive old memories from their youth. It is also a popular destination for international travellers. They stop here en route to Istanbul, Mount Ararat, and sometime even Kathmandu. In response to the massive inflow of tourists, a group of local activists launched a "Save Vama Veche" campaign. They lobby for the area's environmental conservation and to halt the growing tourism in the village area. Despite these efforts, the resort remains a place for luxurious holidays and is a popular destination for well-off travellers from around the world.

Mangalia, meanwhile, is a typical post-socialist city on the Black Sea. Most of its architecture is made of light colour socialist blocks. Like Constanța, it was established by Greek settlers. At that time it was called Callastis, which today is

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Photo by Katarina Novikova.

One can find almost anything in the city of Bucharest – including Ceaușescu himself, whose face can be found on the gaudily pink banner advertising the Romanian Kitsch Museum.

the name of the city's archaeological museum. The museum is host to items from antiquity, dating back to ancient Greece, Thracia, Rome and Byzantium. Unfortunately they are all cluttered in one tiny room and their descriptions are not the most informative. The second room in the museum is more like a warehouse where various vases and the remains of ancient columns and chapiters are thrown into piles without any descriptions. The impression of chaos is completed by poor lightening.

Under the Ottomans the city was known as Mankalya. Today the remnants of Turkish rule is evidenced by the Esmahan Sultan Mosque which was built here in the 17th century. It is located in a cemetery-garden, where it stands in the shadow of old trees. Recently the temple has been renovated, mainly thanks to financial

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support from the Turkish government. The part of the mosque that is available to tourists is separated from the part where prayers are said. There we could see a young Tatar uttering his prayers. His casual clothes (t-shirt and shorts) were covered with a black shawl so that he could be dressed respectfully in the house of prayer. In front of the entrance, an old Tatar speaks to Romanian tourists about Allah, Mohamed, Aristoteles and Plato.

Today, only a few hundred Muslims live in Mangalia – there are around 20,000 Muslims living in Romania and the majority of them live along the seashore. Thus, in Dobruja the skyline is not only marked by the domes of Orthodox churches but also minarets. This region's Muslim community are mainly Tatars who came here with the so-called Nogai Horde tribe in the 15th century. Centuries ago Muslims were dependent on the Crimean Khanate as they were living on the territories between Crimea and Bulgaria. Today, just like their kinsmen in other parts of Eastern Europe, they are an integral part of the society in which they live.

## Between Dracula and vampires

Competition for Romanian resorts comes from neighbouring Bulgaria. Varna, popular among tourists, is just over 100 kilometres away from Doi Mai. You can get there by bus or taxi. The road navigates through agricultural steppe with the Black Sea in the background. At the end the mountains, or hills to be more precise, arise. These hilly areas are green and steeply lean over the Black Sea beaches.

As we leave Dobruja behind, we see Varna approach on the horizon. The founders of the city, who of course were Greek colonists, called it Odessos. The similarity in name to Odesa, established in the 17th century, is clearly not an accident. Varna was, for a short time, also called Stalin. This now popular tourist destination is often referred to as the summer capital of Bulgaria. It is associated with carefree fun. However, its long history is full of stories about brutal attacks, battles and sieges.

On our way back to Bucharest, we catch a Romanian bus that arrived via Constanța. The passengers include a group of British retirees who are returning to their hotels around Varna. Closer to the border, Romanian tourists start to join us after their one day outings by the sea. Once we approach what used to be the border they all rush to the duty free shop. They fill up bags with all sorts of Bulgarian wine, juice, sausages and sweets.

Finally we arrive back in Bucharest – a city where all styles and architectural periods can be found. This mixture of styles is a result of both change in trends and it complex history. During the Second World War, Bucharest was largely destroyed. It might not have been as badly damaged as Budapest or Warsaw, but

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there was a lot of destruction nonetheless. The city again suffered in 1977 when it was hit by an earthquake. Unfortunately, most of the city centre was rebuilt by Ceaușescu's initiative, which reflects his megalomania and sick aspirations rather than any historical accuracy.

The touristy area is near Unirei square. It was built in a Parisian style, with many cafés and small places. Their advertisements are often quite scary looking with images of Dracula, wolves or Carpathian vampires. Interestingly next to these old-fashioned monsters, a new one has emerged – Ceaușescu himself, whose face can be found on the gaudily pink banner advertising the Romanian Kitsch Museum. This "genius of the Carpathian", as Ceaușescu was once called – who was probably the most brutal, and unusual ruler out of all the communist leaders of the former Soviet bloc – is now reduced to a grotesque quasi-vampire. His image can be found somewhere between Dracula and devils from Romania's murky forests. For Ceaușescu that could have been an even worse punishment than the one that brought his end. Death by execution is nonetheless an act that is well known in regional history. It was used to kill ancient Romanian or Moldovan leaders as well as revolutionary fighters. Yet to be a face of the Kitsch Museum, that is a whole different story…

Romania's capital also greets tourists with its gigantic Palace of the Parliament. It is a pearl in the crown of Ceaușescu's urban dreams. Some people love it, while others are terrified with its size, yet others are simply amused by it.

On route back to Poland, we fly over the magnificent South Carpathians, which – justifiably so – are sometimes called the Transylvanian Alps. They disappear from our view under the cover of thick clouds, which get dispersed only when we arrive in Warsaw. Waiting for our bus, we check the schedule to discover that the city bus can take us all the way to… Mangalia (the name of a bus stop in Warsaw). Along the line, there are other stops named after Black Sea resorts. Clearly these places were once the pride of the socialist bloc. Now they are trying to attract visitors from all over the world.

*Translated by Iwona Reichardt*

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# Forgotten tales of Germany and Ukraine's past

ADAM BALCER

Ukraine and Germany are linked together by a long and complicated history, one with Poland in the background. Unfortunately, knowledge of this shared heritage is still not well known, particularly in Germany.

No other nation brought as much damage to Ukraine as Germany in the 20th century. During the First World War, and especially the Second World War, millions of people who then lived in Ukraine were murdered by the Germans or died because of famine, disease and exhaustion caused by the German invasions. Ukrainians and Jews were those who primarily perished. However, it is also true that not many other nations had such a positive impact on Ukraine's civilisational progress as the Germans. Their contribution to Ukraine's urbanisation, science, architecture and technological development was indeed impressive. One of the most famous symbols of these achievements is the oldest monument in Kyiv, which stands by the Dnieper River. It commemorates the 1492 granting of the city rights under German Magdeburg Law. The monument is the only one of its kind in the world.

## Dynastic ties

Early contacts between Germany and Kievan Rus' date back to the second half of the 10th century. At that time Poland was emerging as a new state while the other two were already key powers on the European continent. In 962 when the Kingdom of Germany became the core of the Holy Roman Empire, Kievan Rus', in the East, was already one of the largest and most populous European states. It

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wanted to serve as a balancing intermediary between the Byzantine and German empires. Illustrative of that argument is the fact that, in 959, the regent of Kyiv, Olga, who had been Christianised in Constantinople two years prior, sent delegates to Germany with a mission to establish the first diocese in Rus'.

Answering her request, Otto the Great sent Father Adalbert, a bishop from Magdeburg and future saint, to Kyiv. However his mission failed, mainly due to the opposition to Christianity by Olga's son, Sviatoslav I – the Grand Prince of Kyiv. In the 11th century, relations between Germany and Rus' intensified. This was due to Poland's destabilisation. As chronicled, the German-Rus' alliance played a key role in taking down the pagan uprising in Poland and thus hindered its collapse. Overall, this German-Rus' involvement in Polish affairs was a result of the dynastic ties that yoked the two states and Poland together. It was the Grand Prince of Rus', Yaroslav the Wise, who supported his brother-in-law, the Polish Duke Casimir I the Restorer, who, in turn, was the great grandson of the German emperor – Otto II. What is more, Casimir's sister, Gertruda, married Yaroslav's oldest son, who was a grand duke of Rus'. Throughout her life Gertruda spent many years in all three states: Poland, Rus' and Germany. In Poland, she is actually known, first and foremost, for her literary writings and contributions which became the part (a codex of prayers) of a beautifully illuminated manuscript called *Egbert Psalter*. The codex includes Latin prayers written by Gertruda as well as Bizantyne-Rus' style miniatures. It is very likely that the duchess was educated in monasteries near Cologne where her mother, Richeza of Lotharingia, queen of Poland, lived. Richeza was the daughter of a German palatine and the granddaughter of Theophanu that is the Byzantine duchess and Empress Consort of the Holy Roman Empire. Therefore, it was no accident that both Richeza and Gertruda spoke Greek fluently. The dynastic relations between Germany and Rus' continued for the years to follow, as evidenced by the granddaughter of Yaroslav the Wise marrying the German Emperor, Henry IV.

The German-Rus' alliance played a key role in taking down the pagan uprising in Poland and thus hindered its collapse.

## Eastwards from the Holy Roman Empire

Geographically speaking, Kievan Rus' was located on the main Eurasian trade routes, including those linking the East with the West and one of the offshoots of the Silk Road linking Europe with China. Located on this route were such urban centres as the Bavarian city of Regensburg and Kyiv. On the Silk Road, trade was

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mainly within the domain of the Ashkenazi Jews who had migrated eastwards from the lands of the Holy Roman Empire. They spoke Yiddish – a language which, in many ways, was similar to German. Their role as traders can even be explained by their name – Ashkenazi. It derives from the ancient Iranian nomadic peoples – namely the Scythians, who lived in the Great Steppe.

First as merchants, the Ashkenazi Jews in the Middle Ages started to emigrate from Germany to Central and Eastern Europe. They settled both in Poland and Rus'. There they were joined by German settlers who, around the same time, also started to move eastwards. In the 13th century Halych, which was one of the largest towns in Rus' and one that gave name to the whole region of Galicia, had a German quarter and a so-called German gate. The number of German settlers increased in Rus' significantly during the mid-14th century after its lands were taken over by Poland and Lithuania who had established a union state together.

Following the arrival of German settlers, Magdeburg Law was introduced in Rus' while in many urban areas the German population constituted a large part of the city residents for the next 200 years. This also explains why the first Polish-language documents of the Lviv City Council only date back to the mid-16th century. Clearly, Polish did not replace German as the official language straight away. With time, however, the majority of German city dwellers became Polonised, while others became Ukrainian. This assimilation of Germans living in Ukraine can be illustrated by the case of Innokenty Gizel, who for quite some time ran the Pechersk Lavra Monastery in Kyiv. Gizel was born in Prussia in 1600. He converted from Protestantism to Orthodoxy and was probably the author, or a co-author, of the *Synopsis*, a chronicle published in 1674 in the then-Russian Kyiv. The chronicle played a very important role in building the identity narrative unifying all Slavs, especially eastern Slavs, under one Russian leadership. Without this work, it would be hard to imagine, even today, the concept of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world).

## Architecture and university

In the 18th century German artists played a key role in developing the Rococo style in Lviv. Among others, they were the architects of Greek and Roman Catholic churches, bringing architectural styles from Bavaria, Silesia and Austria to western Ukraine. The most prominent representatives of this school were Johann Georg Pinzel and Sebastian Fesinger. The latter was married to a Ukrainian woman born in Lviv.

Bernard Meretyn was also an important German architect whose works can be found in today's Ukraine. He designed the famous Greek Catholic St George's Ca-

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thedral in Lviv and the magnificent city council building in Buchach, which was commissioned by Nikolaus Basilius Potocki, a Polish magnate who lived with his Cossacks wearing their costumes and speaking mostly Ukrainian. Potocki was a legendary figure known for his cruelty, lechery and drunkenness, but he was also a patron of the arts. He died as a Greek Catholic monk in a gigantic Rococo-style monastery, which he funded, in Pochaiv located in Volhynia. The monastery was designed in its original version by a German architect named Gottfried Hoffmann.

Despite the assimilation processes that had been underway, by the start of the 20th century German settlers constituted still over two per cent of the inhabitants of the area that makes up today's Ukraine.

The next wave of German migration to the territories of today's Ukraine took place at the turn of the 19th century after the Russian conquest of the Crimean Khanate which had ruled over the Ukrainian steppes. As a result, Russia's borders radically moved to the west while Eastern Galicia, together with Lviv, became part of the Habsburg Empire. Austria also took over Bukovina, which had earlier belonged to Moldavia. Today, the northern part of this historical area, with the capital in Chernivtsi, finds itself in Ukraine. For a few dozen years German was the official language (and the language of instruction) in both Habsburg Galicia and Bukovina. Gradually, Polish started to dominate in administration and education in Galicia. As a result of this shift, the majority of Germans who were Roman Catholic in Eastern Galicia, became Polonised. Some, however, became Ukrainian. Such was the case of the father of Ivan Franko – one of Ukraine's most distinguished writers.

Despite the assimilation processes that had been underway, by the start of the 20th century German settlers constituted still over two per cent of the inhabitants of the area that makes up today's Ukraine. After Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish and Polish settlers, they were the fifth largest ethnic group. Among larger cities, the one with the largest German population was Chernivtsi, where the German community was over 10 per cent. For comparison, Ukrainians made up around 20 per cent, Poles and Romanians around 15 per cent and Jews around 35 per cent.

In 1875 the university in Chernivtsi became the easternmost German-language university ever established. Among its lecturers were Joseph Alois Schumpeter, one of the most distinguished economists of the 20th century, and Eugen Ehrlich, who is known as the father of the sociology of law. Chernivtsi University also became an influential centre for Ukrainian language studies. It was there where Ukrainian grammar and phonetics were first examined. Chernivtsi is also a great example how German culture merged into Ukrainian society. It happened through the

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Ashkenazi Jews who made up close to 10 per cent of Ukraine's population and were largely German speakers. Not surprisingly, Paul Celan, one the great German poets of the 20th century, came from a Jewish family that lived in Chernivtsi.

## From Livonia to Ukraine

The German-speaking farmers who were settling in the Ukrainian steppe throughout tsarist Russia contributed to the transformation of the territories to the breadbasket of the Russian Empire. From there wheat, sugar and other agricultural products were sent on to European markets. The agricultural boom in southern Ukraine stimulated the development of the Black Sea harbour cities, such as Odesa (which at the time was the fourth largest city the Russian Empire). In addition to wealthy German peasants, German aristocrats from Livonia, who were the elite of the Russian Empire, were obtaining land in Ukraine and employing the local population. The great poet Taras Shevchenko, in his youth, worked on a large village farm owned by a Baltic German magnate, Paul Engelhardt (his family was one of the richest in Ukraine).

German settlers did not only migrate to villages, but also to the towns and cities of Russian Ukraine. By the end of the 19th century, they contributed to developing Kyiv's architecture (as they did in a century earlier in Lviv). As early as the 18th century, a well-known German architect, named Gottfried Johann Schädel, had already lived in Kyiv. He designed, or rebuilt, the bells of the Pechersk Lavra and St Sophia's Cathedral. His works also included the buildings of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy – the most important institution of education in the Russian Empire – and the Klovskiy Palace which, today, is the seat of the Supreme Court of Ukraine.

Georg Schleifer, in turn, designed the main Kyiv synagogue and the Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre – the first stationary theatre in Kyiv. The Kyiv opera house, known for having the largest stage in the Russian Empire, was built by Victor Schröter, a Baltic German. It was in this building where Pyotr Stolypin, Russia's prime minister at the time, was murdered in 1911. In 1898–1915 the post of Kyiv's main architect was held by Eduard Ferdinand Bradtman who designed numerous buildings in the city, including the one that was transformed into the official residence of Ukraine's president in 1991. In the 19th century, German residents also played an important role in Kyiv's academic development. They were the rectors of Kyiv University. With one short break from 1847 to 1887, this position was held by Ernst Rudolf von Trautfetter, Nikolai Bunge and Nikolai Rennenkampf, respectively. Bunge later became Russia's prime minister, while Rennenkampf would become Kyiv's mayor. Moreover, Robert Pfenning was the first director of the Kyiv

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Music School. His compositions made clear references to Ukrainian culture. Today, the school is called the Kyiv Institute of Music and is named after Reinhold Glière, another famous composer of German descent. He was the school's director between 1914 and 1920.

## Mitteleuropa and Lebensraum

During the First World War, Berlin became the main supporter of Ukrainian independence. After Germany defeated Tsarist Russia in early 1918, the Ukrainian People's Republic was established. It was the first modern nation state in the history of Ukraine. The new republic received international recognition mainly thanks to the support of Germany. The concept of *Mitteleuropa* assumed that, after the war, Ukraine would become Germany's client-state – its economic hinterland, and a buffer zone separating across Eastern and Central Europe – to be transformed into a German sphere of influence. These plans failed as Germany won in the East, but lost in the West.

During the short period of Ukraine's independence (1918–1920) Ukrainian Germans held important positions in public administration. Sergei Mering was the minister of trade and industry, Alexander Lignau was the minister of defence, while Rudolf Schteingel became the first Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany. During Ukraine's autonomy from 1917 to 1918, Nikolai Porsch was its secretary of labour, and later military affairs.

> The concept of *Mitteleuropa* assumed that, after the First World War, Ukraine would become Germany's client-state.

Interestingly, Ukrainian Germans also held key positions on the Bolshevik side. In 1917–1918 Yevgenia Bosch, the daughter of a German colonist from Ochakiv, was minister of the interior in communist Ukraine. Bosch was also the acting head of the cabinet and is often regarded as the world's first female prime minister. Germans from Eastern Galicia also took an active role, mainly on the Ukrainian side, in the fight against Poland. Ukrainian Germans were clearly over-represented in the ranks of the officers of the Ukrainian Galician Army, which was created by the West Ukrainian People's Republic – a Ukrainian state that emerged from the ruins of the Habsburg Empire. Alfred Schamanek, a German from Lviv was twice the head of the Ukrainian Galician Army. For some time he was also its main commander.

In the interwar period, Germany became a key protector of the Ukrainian nationalist movement fighting for the establishment of independent Ukraine. How-

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ever during the Second World War, after a period of co-operation, the majority of Ukrainian nationalists entered into conflict with Germany. This change took place largely due to the Nazi concept of Lebensraum, which had no role for an independent Ukraine. It was to become one of the Third Reich's colonies – a gem in the crown of the German global empire. Georg Leibbrandt, who was the right hand of Alfred Rosenberg the head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, was one of the main theorists of the idea of German expansion to the Ural mountains. Leibbrandt was born in a village of German colonists which is located on the Ukrainian steppe near Odesa. His idea of Ukraine's colonisation at the hands of the "Germanic Aryan race" was based on his sense of superiority over the Slavs and his hatred towards Jews.

## Memory

Ukraine's key place in the Nazi criminal ideology explains why it paid such a high price during the Second World War. Today, the awareness of German responsibility for the Second World War, and the death of tens of millions of people, is the basis of Germany's historical memory. In addition to the Holocaust of the Jews, it includes the remembrance of the genocide committed by the Nazis on Soviet civilians and soldiers on the Eastern front. However in the latter case, knowledge of the past is quite selective, as many Germans associate the Soviet Union with Russia and therefore all victims of Nazism in the East are perceived simply as Russians. Yet the truth is that during the Second World War, the death toll of ethnic Ukrainians, especially among civilians, was proportionally much higher than that of ethnic Russians. From all the Soviet republics, only Belarus suffered proportionally more during the war than Ukraine did.

Overall, it would indeed be beneficial if the knowledge about the abovementioned facts was greater in Germany. However, it would be equally desirable for Germans and Ukrainians to understand that the relations between the two nations have a long history and that Germans have made a significant contribution to the development of Ukraine and its ties with Western Europe.

*Translated by Iwona Reichardt*

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# EASTERN CAFÉ

157 **Kinga Gajda** examines the recent memory of the Yugoslav wars through her review of Faruk Šehić's *Under Pressure*.

162 **Taras Kuzio** scrutinises Craig Unger's arguments in *House of Trump, House of Putin. The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia*.

168 The latest developments in Kazakhstan are given greater context with **Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska**'s review of *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*.

172 **Kamil Jarończyk** discusses Houri Berberian's latest book *Roving Revolutionaries. Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds*.


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# Attempting to escape the unescapable

KINGA ANNA GAJDA

*Under Pressure*. By: Faruk Šehić.
Publisher: Istros Books, London, 2019.

Walking down the streets of Sarajevo, Mostar, or Banja Luka it is hard to believe that almost a quarter century has passed since the end of the bloodiest conflict in post-war Europe. As a result of the war, thousands of people from the former Yugoslavia lost their lives, and close to two million became refugees. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who was the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of Former Yugoslavia, reported on grave human rights violations during the conflict. His report emphasised the plundering, ethnic cleansing and rape committed against civilians, including children. The rapes, defined as genocidal rape, were treated like a form of punishment for belonging to another ethnic group, or as a war tactic. The International Criminal Court has described the scale of the atrocities against civilians in the former Yugoslavia as immense.

Such a picture is also painted by Bosnian writer Faruk Šehić in his book, *Under Pressure*. It has recently been published in English (originally published in 2004) thanks to a crowdfunding campaign organised by Istros Books, which specialises in South-eastern European literature. Kudos for the success.

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## No return

Šehić is a former soldier of the Bosnian army. At the age of 22 he fought on the frontlines, commanding a unit of 130 men for four years. While reflecting on this period, Šehić shows that the war and its tactics changed the nature of the Balkans in a matter of seconds. The atrocities affected people's appearances, their values and worldviews. "In the beginning there was Eden, whence we were expelled," he writes. It soon turned out that from this exile there was no return.

Nothing was the same after the war. Even if it might have seemed the exile had a temporary purpose, the future proved to be more like what a Roma lady foresaw when she said: "Your life line is broken in two places. You'll be wounded twice … A journey abroad is in your future, and glad tidings from afar." After the time of combat, injuries, and humiliation, a time of peace ensues with a new reality, a new socio-political order. Yet peace of mind never arrives.

The traumatic experiences and memories accompany witnesses forever. This is why the generation born in the 1970s, tainted by the depravity of the Yugoslav wars, is known as the "mangled generation". Šehić's book explains why this term is accurate. "If I saw myself in the mirror now, the shock would kill me. I change cover every now and then. I hop into a small depression, I get scratched in the wild brambles," he writes.

Although the narrative is formed by one person, there are several stories from a few other soldiers. Šehić wrote these fragmented stories after he returned home in order to show the physical and mental challenges that his brothers-in-arms had to face during the war.

The book is a compilation of experiences which reflects real events, yet it is full of emotion. The writer allows his characters to reveal themselves. Their voices are poignant, but it can be distressing, like this case: "When I go back to the frontline, I'll shoot cows, horses, sheep, chickens, dogs, grasshoppers, hay. Everything that breathes and slithers. … Let houses burn like candles on birthday cakes. I will shoot the sky above their line, the clouds will ooze the proletariat's colours. I will shoot at my own rear. Let all sides feel the pain".

This and other quotes show that the publication is clearly not a historical account. Its narrative is rather built on a stream of consciousness which combines reality with perception. Thus on the pages of the book we can read: "I forgot to describe my feelings … No range, no sorrow, no despair, no numbness, no melancholia, no love, no fear, no optimism, no heroism, no patriotism, no homesickness, no fucksickness, no boredom, no resignation, no weariness, nothing. Such is my state of mind, and there is some turbulence in my head."

Šehić's book will not revive any positive memories. On the contrary, it displays the war's filth, brutality and stench. He describes everything that people

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would prefer to forget. This is true for both the direct witnesses of the war and their descendants. They all want to put everything into oblivion that made this period of history so brutal. That said, Šehić's characters are both murderers and victims. There are people who can plunder both the living and the dead, other people and their houses. They rape too. In order to get through this hell on earth, they numb themselves with alcohol and drugs.

## Illusions and hallucinations

As already mentioned, Šehić does not hide the brutality of war. He presents events in a descriptive and uncompromising way, showing how life can change in a matter of moments. Consequently, *Under Pressure* is full of horrifying scenes depicting corpses, injured bodies, physical and mental pain. And yet, being the work of a poet, it includes poetic descriptions of emotion, fear and horror, as well as the alcoholic and narcotic highs which were supposed to be a form of escape.

Reading Šehić one starts to understand that the greatest challenge for those who live in a combat zone is the uncertainty of daily encounters – in other words, the acute awareness of mortality. This feeling is especially present where "everything's a lottery … you can catch death whenever". Everyone is scared while panic, as we read in the book, is an "army general". Accompanied by rage. "I have fired in anger, though. Everything happens so quickly. In an instant."

One may ask if these descriptions are a way for Šehić to justify things that occurred during the war. The answer is surely not. Šehić rather shows his helplessness and desperation in an attempt to escape. He falls into the world of illusion and hallucination. "Better drunk than dead" are the words we hear from him. This method of an escape, in a way, helps build a sense of community among comrades. "Alcohol has brought us together; we've finally attained ethnic homogeneity!" says the protagonist. It also helps them run away from the evils of war and from what they did to others. It is as much an escape from oneself as it is from the ability to commit despicable acts.

Šehić does not hide the brutality of war. He presents events in a descriptive and uncompromising way, showing how life can change in a matter of moments.

The road chosen by those who ran away says something to those who ac-

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cuse soldiers of cowardice and having a tendency to look for shortcuts. Intoxication is indeed the easiest way to forget. Maybe it is also the only option when you are on the battlefield as it is very hard to come by anything else. Other options seem pointless, as a war zone is a place where you often cannot pray or trust in God. "In fear dwelleth God. I don't pray to him, as the war has rendered his existence pointless. He is now certainly in another galaxy. Snivelling in safety and solitude. Missing not a hair off his head. He's stacked himself up a breastwork of mental planets. Repeating his creation experiment, because solitude is nasty and he wants to socialize. He has failed. Appalled, he has given up on the earthlings. Shabby artist, that lad. Still, he did invent evil. If he ever existed," writes Šehić. All that the soldiers are left with is the option of suicide and thereby take a leap of faith into emptiness. Šehić admits: "In my Kalashnikov I've got some five or six rounds. Enough to blow my brains out and end the war forever."

## Message

For those who took part in the war, the experiences are impossible to erase. Others can forget, including subsequent generations. But not the witnesses. Forgetting is not a way to deal with a painful past. "My head is full of dead people, friends and acquaintances. I would often find myself overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and shame when I met their parents and relatives. At times it seemed as though I was trying to explain how come I was alive. When somebody you don't know gets killed, you're sorry pro-forma. Besides, there is no time for mourning… What will you do if you survive the war? …I'll try to live. The prospect of peace scares me a bit. It's hard to imagine a world without war. That just sounds like sci-fi to me."

Post-war trauma led many soldiers to psychiatric institutions. However, during combat these were the places where they could escape from the everyday troubles. One of the characters proclaims: "Follow up in twenty-one days, therapy of pills with a strange name. Twenty-one days of leave! What bloody leave! It's gonna be pure suicide by alcohol and supplemental substances. Living life to the fullest." Yet there were also soldiers who were turning to the psychiatric clinics, exacerbating their fears, pretending to be depressed so the doctors would give them more prescription drugs. Or so they could drink and space out without any punishment. After the war, these habits became an everyday reality.

Some of the book reviews said that Šehić offers no grand message or moral judgement. He only reports on particular events. Others accuse Šehić of avoiding metaphors and hyperbole. I would argue against these lines of criticism, as metaphors and an underlying message can

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be found in the book. The easiest thing to say is that the intention of the book was to remember the Yugoslav wars – so that brutality of this kind does not get repeated. The book is not only a description of the turmoil, or something that was solely written for those interested in the Yugoslav wars, it also resembles a play of morality whose recipients discover how unstable things are.

## The unescapable

*Under Pressure* is also a good illustration of how the period can resemble our present time. During both there are human rights violations as well as moments when people's dignity is tarnished, or their identity symbolically ravaged. Šehić's work is thus a story about all kinds of war. That is to say, it is a parable of when all rules that govern human relations are broken and all values are decimated. It is a story about how human beings become predatory animals unable to control rage, pain, exhaustion and fear. Finally, it is a book about the will to escape the unescapable. Namely, the memory of the past, but also the consequences of one's actions. Even if some forms of escape seem easy, it soon becomes clear that, in the end, one has to face reality.

It does not matter how this book is read – as a story about war or humanity, a memoir of combat participants, or of those who were scared and desperate – it always terrifies. This feeling of despair one gets from reading Šehić does not come from the dispassionate accounts of those killed, but from the message it conveys. It is a message that sadly confirms the Latin proverb that "a man is a wolf to another man". As painful as these words are, there are times when we need to be reminded about them.

Today, the physical remains of the Yugoslav wars are mainly to be found in the shelled out façades on the buildings and cemeteries across different parts of the region. Šehić makes it clear that those times are still alive in our memory. His book tells us that people do not change so fast and that peace is not here forever. Rather it is something to work towards.

*Translated by Daniel Gleichgewicht*

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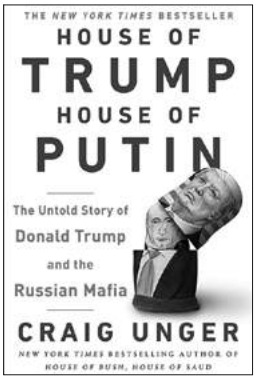
# Corrupt yes, Russian spy unlikely

TARAS KUZIO

*House of Trump, House of Putin. The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia*. By: Craig Unger. Publisher: Transworld Publishers, London, 2018.




Craig Unger's book portrays Donald Trump as corrupt and a long-time Russian agent, but he really only succeeds in providing evidence for the former claim. Unger is convincing in showing that Trump was unscrupulous in his business dealings, never caring who he sold his properties to – whether they were Italian-American mobsters, Soviet Russian-Jewish émigrés with ties to organised crime groups in the USSR, or post-Soviet Russian Mafiosi and oligarchs. Unger's portrayal of Trump as someone that communist and post-communist intelligence services sought to recruit is not convincing, however, writing that Trump "has been a person of interest to Soviet and Russian intelligence for more than 40 years". It is a rather thin thread of evidence tying Trump to the Czech intelligence services through his first Czech wife, Ivana Trump.

Although Trump surrounded himself with pro-Russian realists in the 2016 election campaign, this does not make him a Russian agent – just as it would be wrong to define prominent realists like Henry Kissinger and John Mearsheimer as Russian agents. Meanwhile, political consultants, like Paul Manafort, with whom Trump had a connection since 1980, are extreme cynics without any ideology and are willing to work for anybody who pays well. Trump and Manafort are alike because they believe the end justify the means.

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## No questions asked

The first purchasers of Trump's condominiums were Italian-American mobsters who used them as a means to launder their ill-gotten gains. In the 1980s, 600,000 Soviet Jews, with a good dose of members of organised crime back in the homeland they had left, emigrated from the USSR to the United States and many settled in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach – which came to be known as "Little Odesa". The third group of oligarchs and mobsters arrived after the collapse of the Soviet Union and continued to invest their corrupt gains in Trump's properties. Most of Trump's purchases were made through offshore shell companies which were a means whereby corrupt individuals could hide their identities and the sources of their ill-gotten gains. The US, United Kingdom and many other western countries still permit the use of anonymous shell company purchases and Unger estimates that 300 billion US dollars of Russian dirty cash is laundered through the US every year. Since the 1980s, a fifth of Trump's condos were purchased through opaque cash purchases with no due diligence by his companies. Unger writes: "In Trump, the Soviets had discovered a man who was so intoxicated by a huge new clientele with boatloads of cash that he engaged in dubious transactions without asking questions".

Trump's partner in the Russia mafia was Felix Sater who helped cement the lucrative criminal ties between the Italian-American Mafiosi and Soviet Russian-Jewish immigrants from the 1980s onwards. Unger credits Sater, who emigrated from the USSR to the US in the early 1970s and settled in Brighton Beach, with expanding the use of Caribbean shell companies and Israeli banks. Sater was eventually recruited by a number of US intelligence agencies because of his insider ties to the murky world of Russian politics and crime.

Unger estimates that 300 billion US dollars of Russian dirty cash is laundered through the US every year.

Sater was involved with the well-known Soviet and Russian mobster Semyon Mogilevich and his criminal organisation, as well as Russian oligarchs and President Vladimir Putin. Bayrock, one of Mogilevich's companies used for money laundering, had an office on the 24th floor of Trump Tower in New York, providing a "cozy family of billion oligarchs from the former Soviet Union"; Vyacheslav Ivankov ran Mogilevych's crooked operations from the Trump Tower; a total of 65 condos in various Trump properties were sold through off-

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shore shell companies to Italian-American Mafiosi and Russian oligarchs.

Putin's ties to this criminal world in general, and the Tambov organised crime group in particular, were cemented in the 1990s when he worked in the mayor's office in St Petersburg. Unger writes that Putin and Mogilevich had a "common cause" which was a "criminal cause". After he came to power in 2000, Putin cemented this nexus between organised crime, Chekists (former KGB and GRU [Soviet and Russian military intelligence] officers) and high-level bureaucrats in an "era of unimaginable corruption and greed".

The Mogilevich connection included the lucrative gas trade from Russia and Central Asia through to Ukraine and Europe. Ukrainian gas mogul Dmytro Firtash, whom the US department of justice has sought to extradite since 2014, admitted to US Ambassador William Taylor that Mogilevich had blessed his entry into this "business". Another early associate was Vadym Rabinovych who attended Mogilevich meetings in Russia and Israel.

Firtash was the Ukrainian connection in this nexus, while Austrian Raiffesen Bank was the favourite European bank for gas intermediaries that Russian and Ukrainian officials and oligarchs used to steal billions from their governments. Firtash, born in the Galician region of western Ukraine, was Putin's agent in Ukraine, making huge profits from discounted gas which was used to buy up strategic branches of the Ukrainian economy for the Russian state. In recent years, Rabinovich became politically active in the pro-Putin Opposition Platform – For Life headed by another gas oligarch, Yuriy Boyko. This latest pro-Putin and pro-Russian political project in Ukraine is supported by Viktor Medvedchuk whose daughter, Darina, has none other than Putin for her godfather. The Opposition Platform-For Life came second in the July 2019 snap parliamentary elections.

## Geopolitical weapon

Unger describes the laundering of Russian dirty money as "a geopolitical weapon against the West" which "serves [Putin's] political agenda that they act as intelligence operatives, that they recruit assets, that they collect intelligence on persons of interest". This is probably the case, but the fault surely lies at the feet of many European and US governments who are willing to accept dirty money from Russia and the former Soviet Union. For example, 2,000 shell companies and hundreds of bank accounts in the US state of Delaware were created by Irakly Kaveladze through which 1.46 billion dollars was laundered between 1991 and 2000. Western willingness to accept dirty money from Russia, Ukraine and the former communist world is a self-inflicted wound. Unger

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describes the intimate connections between Russian intelligence training and dirty money which overlaps with crime, assassinations, surveillance and money laundering.

The author also provides a good deal of information about corruption on Washington's K Street – the infamous road that houses many lobbyists and political consultants. This form of business that he describes as "sanitised corruption" became institutionalised and "part of the white-collar professional world". It was legal, professional, corrupt and cynical catering to any government irrespective of their authoritarianism or human rights record. While Manafort has become a household name, there was also Jack Abramoff (nicknamed "Casino Jack") who was jailed. Manafort, Abramoff and other lobbyists and consultants represented and cleaned up the world's tyrants in Washington helping them to penetrate the highest levels of the US government. Most, like Manafort, never bothered to register with the FARA (Foreign Agent Registration Act), managed by the department of justice, until rules became tighter during the recent Robert Mueller investigation.

These lobbyists and consultants hired high-ranking names which included former FBI Director William Sessions, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and former European heads of state from Poland, Austria and Germany. Sessions worked for Mogilevich, who the FBI put on its most wanted list. His successor at the FBI, Louis French, also worked as a consultant for Russian oligarchs and government bodies.

Besides stretching the claim of Trump being a Russian agent, a second problem in Unger's book is the one-sided nature of the argument that only the Republican Party is corrupt through its work as lobbyists and consultants. He writes that leaders of the Republican Party (i.e. Mitch McConnell, Lindsey Graham, John Kasich, John McCain, Marco Rubio, and others) were "on the payroll of the Kremlin" and "serving the interests of Vladimir Putin". Unger writes that Putin's lobby poured money into K Street and influential law firms to "help legitimise and promote the agendas of Russian oligarchs whose billions effectively represented the theft of Russia's patrimony". Ukrainian oligarchs were no different; a major Washington law firm working for Rinat Akhmetov sought to suppress western writing (including my 2015 book, *Ukraine. Democratization, Corruption and Russian Imperialism*) about his early criminal background.

Unger raises the issue of the millions of dollars the Russians paid for Republican-connected lobbyists and consultants. Yet the lobbyists and consultants with links to the Democratic Party have been just as willing to take dirty money from Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere. It is also wrong for Unger to write that Hillary Clinton did not view Putin in the same favourable way as Republicans. Her views only became more critical in 2011–2012, but prior to that she pursued President Barack Obama's

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reset policy with Russia which came immediately after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. As Bill Browder shows in his excellent book *Red Notice*, President Obama and Senator John Kerry were opposed to the passage of the Magnitsky Act which sought to punish Russian officials involved in infringements of human rights. Political consultants linked to both the Democrats and Republicans in Washington took dirty money from kleptocrat Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. The Podesta Group headed by Tony Podesta was one of these recipients and his brother, John, had run Hillary Clinton's 2016 election campaign.

## Stretched evidence

Unger's belief in Trump as a Russian agent or useful idiot is undermined by the fact that Trump has no business dealings in Russia – a Trump Tower in Moscow has never materialised. Although it is true that Manafort worked with Russian intelligence officer Konstantin Kilimnik (as they say, former spooks do not exist). Unger explains, not very convincingly, the reason for the absence of a Trump Tower in Moscow is that the Russians want to launder their money out of Russia and "not put more in it".

Unger explains, not very convincingly, the reason for the absence of a Trump Tower in Moscow is that the Russians want to launder their money out of Russia and "not put more in it".

Unger claims Trump was hooked by Russia in two ways. The first was through old-fashioned *kompromat* on his sexual and other activities, such as during the 2013 Moscow beauty contest. Unger cites the Steele Dossier commissioned by the Democratic Party during the 2016 elections which alleged that Trump was compromised and had "unknowingly regularly supplied intelligence to Vladimir Putin". The second was when Russian and Russian-backed money through the German Deutsche Bank rescued Trump from one of his many bankruptcies at a time when all other banks refused to deal with him.

During the 2016 elections, Unger writes that Trump's campaign repeatedly reached out to Russia and knew about Russian operations against his opponent Hillary Clinton and "Russian support came pouring in". Unger believes that Russian hacking provided Trump with his narrow election victories in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan (traditionally Democratic strongholds) which ensured his victory in the US Electoral College.

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As Unger writes, "it is more than likely that the Russian interference made the difference" and he therefore concludes that Russia helped to ensure Trump's election victory. There is no doubt that Russia wanted Trump to win, as Putin had become personally hostile to Hillary Clinton after she had supported protestors in Moscow in 2011–2012, but it was the US Electoral College system that permitted Trump to win even though he received nearly three million fewer votes.

Unger's book provides a fascinating and convincing account of Trump's corruption and the Washington "swamp" of lobbyists and political consultants – although it is portrayed in not a balanced way. He superbly links many threads together from Soviet Russian-Jewish émigrés with ties to organised crime in the USSR, post-Soviet Russian oligarchs, Russian Mafiosi, Putin, money laundering, and corruption in the energy and many other sectors. Unger is a true believer, like many US Democrats, that Trump is a Russian agent or useful idiot. Yet his book stretches the evidence and ultimately fails to convince that this is the case.

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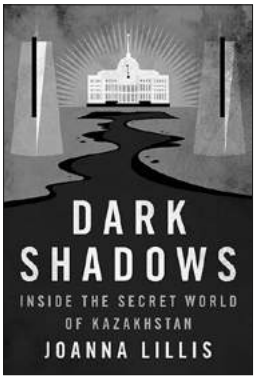
# Much needed context to the mystery of Kazakhstan

AGNIESZKA PIKULICKA-WILCZEWSKA

*Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan.*
By: Joanna Lillis. Publisher: I.B. Tauris, London, 2019.

It has been a tumultuous several months in Kazakhstan's history. This March, the president of 30 years, the "Leader of the Nation" Nursultan Nazarbayev, stepped down in a move unprecedented among Central Asian dictators. As the regional tradition goes, state leaders usually die in office (Kyrgyzstan being the notable exception). Although there have long been speculations on who would replace the longest serving president in the region, the resignation came as a big surprise both to Kazakhstan's citizens and the country's watchers alike.




As the constitution provides, Nazarbayev was replaced by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, not a particularly charismatic person, the country's chairman of the senate and an experienced career diplomat. His former posts include Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, prime minister between 1999 and 2002, and minister of foreign affairs. Tokayev's candidature in the snap presidential elections, called for June 9th, was pushed forward by the ruling Nur Otan party and Nazarbayev himself.

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## Dissatisfaction

From the beginning, however, the interim president did not have an easy task. His time in office started with protests, whose scale has been unexpected given the usual apathy of Kazakh society. Demonstrations against corruption, democratic deficit, economic inequality and poverty spread throughout the country, attracting various groups from the urban intelligentsia to impoverished mothers. The protests intensified with the June election in which Tokayev was the only candidate with a chance to win. Although it was the first election in 14 years where an opposition candidate – journalist Amirzhan Kosanov – was allowed to participate, and unlike Nazarbayev's victory of 98 per cent in the 2015 election, Tokayev secured a mere 71 per cent of the vote; this did not please the increasingly disillusioned public.

Protests spread across the country with citizens taking to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with yet another rigged election, the lack of real political choice in the country and freedom of assembly. Since public demonstrations are only allowed by an official permit in Kazakhstan, which is not usually granted, the protesters – as well as local and foreign journalists and passers-by – were arrested in large numbers. According to the police, around 4,000 people were detained over the course of the five days.

This is the reality inherited by Tokayev. According to analysts, the new president, a weak man on his own, has been deliberately chosen to continue Nazarbayev's politics and ensure that the old ruler – currently the untouchable lifelong chairman of the national Security Council – continues to have influence behind the scenes. It is worth noting that Nazarbayev's daughter – Dariga – has replaced Tokayev as the chair of the senate, effectively securing the second most important post in the country.

The recent events in Kazakhstan may be difficult to put into context. The country has rarely been on the front pages of western media.

The recent events in Kazakhstan may be difficult to put into context. The country has rarely been on the front pages of western media and is mostly associated – if at all – with the oil boom and the futuristic capital of Astana – a vanity project in the middle of the desert. There are few western correspondents in the country and it is often orientalised and viewed merely as a hot exotic dictatorship – which is a pity, as Kazakhstan is a fascinating country, with a unique, but also tragic, history and a great mix of coexisting ethnos and cultures.

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## Complex reality

Thankfully such images of Kazakhstan can be found on of the pages of *Dark Shadows* – an absolute must read for understanding contemporary Kazakhstan and its current political situation. The author, Joanna Lillis, is a veteran journalist who has been reporting from Kazakhstan for the past 13 years. With a deep knowledge of the country's history, culture and people, Lillis seemingly and effortlessly, in beautiful language, helps readers make sense of Kazakhstan's complex reality.

Contemporary Kazakhstan is not only politics. Lillis explains in detail how the Kazakh nation formed over the centuries.

She explains the processes which led to Kazakhstan's politics becoming a one-man show. Years of repressions against independent media outlets – one of which had to frequently change its title to survive – opposition parties and independent activists had borne fruit. As a result, there has been no one who would challenge the system and the ruler himself. Stability and preservation of the status quo has become the goal in itself, not least to prevent a "Ukrainian" or "Kyrgyz" scenario, a revolution bringing about the total collapse of the state system and proof of the authorities' inability to maintain order.

As the narrative goes, such a scenario can become possible if the enemies of the state are not countered on time. The French-based Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former regime insider and the founder of the opposition Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, has become the usual suspect seeking to stir unrest in the country. Accused of being a puppet-master of anti-Nazarbayev revolts from abroad, Ablyazov indeed has been supporting the opposition in Kazakhstan, although his influence is usually exaggerated. Nevertheless, anyone trying to challenge the system can, sooner or later, expect to be accused of working for the compromised, corrupt former politician.

Yet contemporary Kazakhstan is not only politics. Lillis explains in detail how the Kazakh nation formed over the centuries and how the nomad lifestyle was destroyed by communism in a tragedy of collectivisation which claimed over a million of lives. She details Stalin's deportations of whole nations to Kazakhstan which became their temporary or permanent home. She also provides a heart-breaking account of the Soviet Gulag system and the effects of nuclear experimentation which, to this day, have an effect on the health and lives of the local people. All the difficult experiences of the Soviet era are key to understanding contemporary Kazakhstan, its people and culture.

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## It's complicated…

Kazakhstan's relationship with its big brother, Russia, is also a topic Lillis pays a lot of attention to. Astana, the new capital, was not accidentally moved to the centre of the country. Its location enabled better control of the mostly ethnic Russian north. Until recently, most of Kazakhstan's citizens were not ethnic Kazakhs and did not speak the Kazakh language. The common usage of Russian and a substantial presence of ethnic Russians in the country following the collapse of the Soviet Union, prompted the newly independent Kazakhstan to begin a thorough nationalisation campaign. This is in light of Vladimir Putin's comments that Kazakhs "never had any statehood". Given the number of Russians in the north and Russia's frequent practice of supporting separatist movements in the post-Soviet space, this statement sounds ominous.

But most importantly, Lillis's book is a fascinating account from an expert with a deep love and respect of the country she is describing. While not seen through rose-tinted spectacles, the Kazakhstan which emerges from the pages of *Dark Shadows* is an extremely diverse place full of great characters, stories and a fascinating culture. It is a pity that Lillis did not publish her book a bit later. While we can still follow her analysis of Kazakh politics in her current articles, having this most recent tumultuous period of the country's history included would have made *Dark Shadows* an even better read.

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# Forgotten revolutionaries

KAMIL JAROŃCZYK

*Roving Revolutionaries. Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds.*
By: Houri Berberian. Publisher: University of California Press, Oakland, CA, USA: 2019.

In historical literature the Caucasus is often treated as a periphery – a crossroads between Europe and Asia. The same is true in contemporary world affairs, as it is a region often overlooked until tragedy hits. Even when a book is written about one of the peoples of the Caucasus, it usually is a national history that severs the ties between the different nationalities of the three Empires that the Caucuses were divided between: the Russian, the Ottoman and the Persian. Before the First World War, these empires were going through massive transitions, each in their own way with a great deal of uncertainty.

Armenian revolutionaries, who were split between these three empires, fought for their interests and influenced other revolutions with their ideals. The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a revolution that tried to limit the power of the tsar and led to the formation of a national Duma. The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 was a revolution against the unchecked power of the Ottoman Sultan and brought a constitution to the Ottoman Empire. The constitutional crisis of Iran between 1905 and 1911 was a revolution in favour of a constitution and an anti-imperialist revolt against the increasing role of the Russian and imperial governments of Britain and France in their affairs.

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## Federation of nations

In all three of these revolutions, the Armenians took the side of the revolutionaries. However, the revolutionaries did not seek national liberation in the form of a sovereign state, as many national revolutionaries in the last century have; though influenced by the ideals of liberalism, anarchism and socialism, they saw their place in the wider context of a federation of nations. This was certainly the case in the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire. The only exception was Iran, where Armenian revolutionaries sought a constitution that would guarantee them equal rights in Iran (the reason being the small population of Armenians in Iran). This revolutionary period was crucial to the formation of nationhood amongst the nations of Eastern Europe. Innovations in technology and the emergence of new ideologies played a strong role with these three empires and ultimately led to the revolutions. If given more time to blossom, they could have resulted in a much more peaceful Caucasus.

*Roving Revolutionaries: Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds* by Houri Berberian, a professor in Armenian Studies, takes a different approach to this period of history by connecting the stories of the Arminian revolutionaries across the lands. She highlights the effect that advancements in technology had on the Caucasus and how the revolutionaries were shaped by them. These advancements included the steamboat and the telegraph, but also ideological innovations such as liberalism, socialism and anarchism.

The book is divided into five chapters which puts together the story of the Armenian revolutionaries. Berberian starts by justifying her approach and then covers the reality in which the Armenians found themselves at the turn of the century. It was a world where it took just weeks to travel to other European capitals; a world where one can send messages across the ocean in a matter of minutes; and a world were oil was starting to play an increasing role in more globalised economies. The author also gives a necessary account of the material conditions of the Caucasus and what the reasons were for the emergence of the revolutionaries. She describes how the writings of Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxembourg sparked debates in Baku and Tiflis/Tbilisi and the way revolutionaries moved across the borders of the empire, which were becoming more porous. She also examines how the revolutionaries got around the official censorship and the banning of their organisations.

The third chapter goes into depth on the influence of constitutionalism and federalism had on the Armenian revolutionaries and how the revolutionaries tried to inject those ideas into the revolutions they were participating in. She also provides a deeper understanding of the monumental and largely forgotten

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role that socialism played in the budding national movements of the region, and explains the way western socialism was being adapted by Armenian revolutionaries and how it fit the context of the Caucasus with its prominently rural agrarian societies that have no political representation. Finally, the book reflects on the revolutionaries and on the way history has treated them.

## A case for connected history

Traditional ways of telling history fall short when you try to explain the development of oppressed nations under the empires of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Focus often falls on a certain group of revolutionaries whose actions and ideas fit the national mythos of the current nation state. As a contemporary topic, national history is often highly politicised and creates a skewed nationalistic bent on what was a much more varied approach to national liberation, thus leading to the downplay of certain beliefs and actions, or the obscuring of certain revolutionaries or movements altogether. This book sheds light on such movements and parties like the ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) and the SDHP (Social Democrat Hunchakian Party) – both socialist parties but with different tendencies. The ARF played a greater role in all three revolutions than is often acknowledged and is still an active party in Armenia and Lebanon – although they have changed a lot over the last century.

Berberian also illustrates just how connected the Armenian diaspora were with the example of one of the founders of the ARF. Rostom (his real name Stepan Zorian) devoted his life to revolution where he travelled across Europe. He spread revolutionary ideals amongst his compatriots and secured sympathy and support throughout Europe by attending international socialist events in Europe. A map of Europe and the Middle East is included in his travels between 1893 and 1918, where he visited over 20 cities across the whole map. In the second half of the book, Berberian goes into detail about the ideological milieu in the Caucasus at the turn of the century, and how the revolutionaries tried to fit the liberation theories of constitutionalism, socialism or federalism to their situation.

The Armenian revolutionary organisations did not just reach out to Armenians. In the oil fields of Baku where many Iranian migrants worked, they would see and sometimes take part in Armenian-organised socialist activities, such as union strikes and collective bargaining. One can draw a direct line between the Iranian migrant workers in Baku and the popularity of constitutionalism in Iran in 1905. The book also covers Armenian activity in all three revolutions. In Iran they sent an armed force of Armenian revolutionaries that played a cru-

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cial role in key battles of exchange – like equal rights of the Armenian minority in the Ottoman Empire and for arms to be smuggled from Iran into other parts of the Caucasus.

In Russia, they helped cut railroads and took part in organised labour struggles that were taking place throughout the Caucasus. In the Ottoman Empire, they negotiated and supported the Young Turks in the overthrow of the Ottoman Sultan and the reinstatement of the Ottoman constitution, as well as advocated for Armenian rights and for a federative Ottoman state. These struggles were not disconnected from one another, and to write about the role the Armenians played in all of them is one of the best ways to reach a more holistic view of that period.

## Contemporary issues

The current state of the Caucasus, after the First World War and after the atrocities and suppression, seems to have fundamentally split as a result of the blossoming revolutions of the prewar Caucasus. The idea of a Transcaucasian federation with equal rights for the three main groups seems like an alien concept now considering how the region looks today. Armenia, in particular, is very different than it was a century ago.

There is no division amongst the three empires – there is only the post-Soviet state of Armenia which is homogeneous both ethnically and religiously. There is no issue regarding a federation or workers' rights which were at the forefront of politics. In this way, one can ask what connection does contemporary Armenia have with the revolutionary organisations and the people who formed them?

This is an area where the book could have gone further. The book only covers the material and ideological factors, but it is limited in how it relates to the Caucasus today. For western historians, however, such a work is valuable. Yet for those readers interested in how history provides the needed context for current affairs, this book might lead to disappointment. The book abruptly ends at the start of the First World War and argues that only after the Armenian genocide did everything drastically change. One is left wondering – what is the lasting impact of these revolutions? What influences, if any, do they play in the modern world? Perhaps this is a task for further historians and those specialising in Armenian Studies.

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