Bimonthly **November-December No 6 (LXIV)/2024**
20 PLN (w tym 8% vat) | 13.50 EUR | 16.50 USD | 9 GBP
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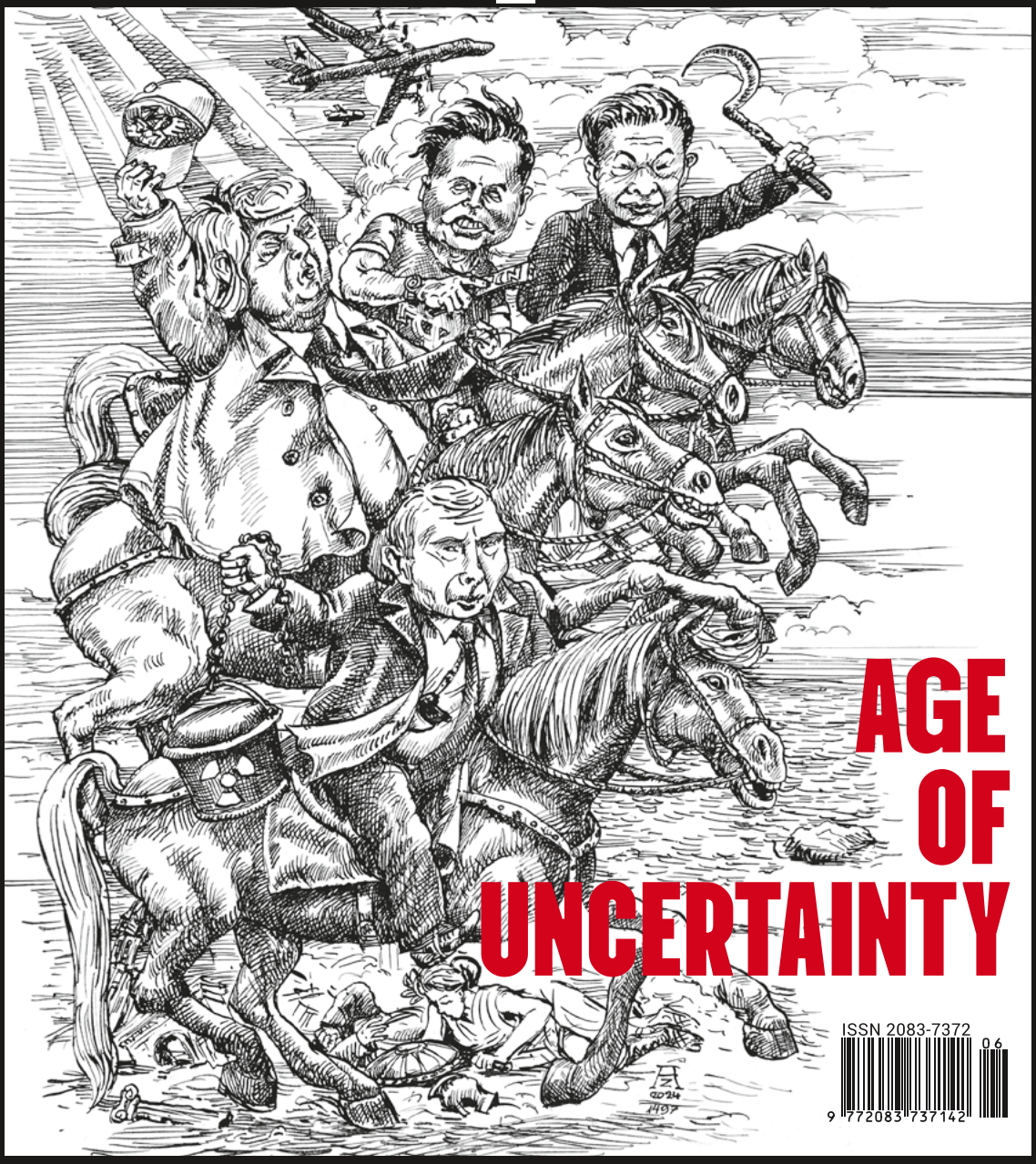

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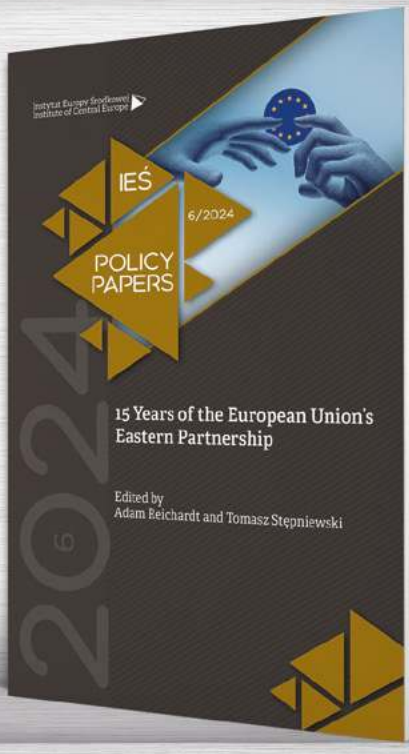

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DEAR READER,

As we bring this issue to print, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment with the recent results of the US presidential election marking Donald Trump's return to the White House. There is little doubt that this shift signals significant changes ahead, with far-reaching impacts on geopolitics and the political landscape, also in Central and Eastern Europe. Trump is often described as "unpredictable," especially when it comes to foreign policy. This unpredictability mirrors the core theme of this issue: uncertainty.

Tony van der Togt opens the issue by examining how Europe might navigate these turbulent times, posing a vital question: "How prepared is Europe to assert its own sovereignty and make independent decisions?" Among the many challenges, the continued uncertainty surrounding Russia's war in Ukraine looms especially large, with implications that extend far beyond the region. The Trump team has outlined a plan for ending the war, however the terms are unclear and Ukraine, as the victim of unprovoked aggression, deserves its interests to be considered in any peace agreement. Author Sofia Oliinyk points out that any negotiations need to respects Ukraine's sovereignty and foster a just and lasting peace for its people.

Looking further, Moldova's President Maia Sandu may have secured a second term, yet her push for a referendum on Moldova's European future faced near-collapse due to intense Russian interference. Meanwhile, in Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party retained power amid widespread accusations of vote manipulation and an unfair electoral process. In the Western Balkans, aspirations for EU membership in North Macedonia and Montenegro are now on shaky ground, as political divisions and democratic backsliding pull these nations further from Brussels.

As the existential philosopher Karl Jaspers once wrote, "uncertainty is not to be overcome but understood". In this issue, our aim is just that: to shed light on the uncertainties shaping our world, to inform you about these broader challenges and to explore how we might navigate them.

Finally, we asked our illustrator to interpret the uncertainty of our times for the cover of this issue. The result is an homage to Albrecht Dürer's, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* from 1498. Dürer's original piece captures the intensity of apocalyptic fear of the 15th century, harkening to the Book of Revelation. While today's situation may not be so apocalyptic in the literal sense, the cover does reflect the anxiety and fear that is currently felt in the geopolitics of the region and beyond.

As always we want to thank to you for your support and readership of *New Eastern Europe*. Don't forget to join us online and check out our podcast, *Talk Eastern Europe*, as well as sign up for our newsletter, *Brief Eastern Europe*.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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New Eastern Europe

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The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław
office@kew.org.pl, www.kew.org.pl

College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław

Zamek Wojnowice
ul. Zamkowa 2, 55-330 Wojnowice, Poland

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

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New Eastern Europe is co-funded by the European Union, under an operating grant titled "Protecting European Values. A proactive approach to strengthening and building European democracy by countering hostile threats aimed at diminishing EU values and bridging existing divides". Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by the European Union

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

New Eastern Europe is co-financed by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland in the framework of the "Promotion of Culture" funding programme.

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
Republic of Poland

Circulation: 3500
Printing: Zakład Poligraficzny Moś i Łuczak sp.j.
International Distribution: Magazine Heaven Direct / https://www.magazineheavendirect.com
Printed in Poland | Published since 2011

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Europe in the age of uncertainty

TONY VAN DER TOGT

As long as we have different narratives concerning the real meaning of Russia's war in Ukraine, the European Union will not be able to act as a coherent and pro-active geopolitical player. The EU should attempt to find a common language to talk about the war and its implications. Only then will we be able to uphold security across the continent, both for ourselves and our partners.

The recent meeting of the UN General Assembly proved to be a focal point for all the uncertainties the world is currently facing: the ineffectiveness of multilateralism; impunity for aggression and violations of international law; and increasing problems related to climate change and sustainable development goals. In short, the international rules-based order as perceived in the West is under threat with major uncertainties as a consequence.

In this context, the EU and its member states have also been struggling when trying to develop a coherent strategy for a more geopolitical European Union. Although the president of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, portrayed her first commission in 2019 as a "geopolitical commission", with the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell stating that Europe had to "learn the language of power", challenges to the EU have increased ever since. This is especially true regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military actions in Gaza after October 7th 2023 (and now in Lebanon). And although the EU has displayed more unity in countering the Russian aggression, its policies on the Middle East show that it is still far from a unitary geopo-

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litical player in its own right. The results of the elections in the US will only add to the uncertainties about the EU's geopolitical future.

In a recent report the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) pointed to a fragmentation of the global order along three axes: "power centres, arenas where power is exercised, and world views". In my own analysis, I underline especially the importance of the fragmentation of world views and argue in favour of developing a more coherent European narrative. I also believe that it is necessary to find a common language in dealing with uncertainties about Europe's future.

Fragmenting world order

Russia's aggression in Ukraine presents the EU with its biggest security challenge in decades along all three axes of fragmentation mentioned above. At the same time, it also presents the EU with great uncertainties. Could the EU really develop into a geopolitical player in its own right, able and willing to defend itself and its partners in its neighbourhood? In spite of all the talk about *Zeitenwende*, we can only identify some limited (albeit probably unexpected) progress within the EU, including in defence cooperation. In general, we can identify a decreasing interest in the war in Ukraine (especially in western and southern Europe) and even some backsliding in individual member states' support for Ukraine. One can only conclude then that European military and financial support will prove to be insufficient if the EU is confronted with a second Trump administration. Europe's struggle to find its own sovereign place between power centres is fraught with great uncertainties about its future.

Could the EU really develop into a geopolitical player, able and willing to defend itself and its partners?

Secondly, uncertainties not only relate to hard security matters in dealing with the war in Ukraine, but also to other arenas where power is exercised, such as broader geo-economics, hybrid influence and cyber. Fragmentation in these areas presents Europe with broader, more global challenges. In this context, the question arises as to how far Europe is able and willing to make its own decisions and develop its own European sovereignty. This is especially true when it is also facing difficult choices between dealing with China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival, or joining the US in its still mostly geo-economic battles with Beijing.

But equally as important as the two other axes of fragmentation is the fact that the EU also has to deal with different world views and narratives. These concern not only other major powers (including the US) but also countries in the Global South

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and even the EU's own member states, political parties and movements. Different ideas about Europe, its values and its future have a fundamental impact on how Europe can deal with uncertainties to find its own place in a fragmenting world order.

Uncertainties on the outcome of the war

The biggest uncertainty facing the EU is related to the war in Ukraine. Support for Ukraine so far has been sufficient enough that the country cannot lose but also not actually win against Russian aggression. Fear of escalation and a full-scale war between Russia and NATO has prevented especially the US and Germany from providing long-range weapons that would enable Kyiv to strike at all those points from which Russian aggression is launched against it. For years now there has been much talk about Russian "red lines", which often are more an element of western imagination than reality. For example, Ukraine itself has proven this by striking targets inside Russia and even taking the war to Russia by its incursion into Kursk Oblast. Western support for Ukraine's peace plan and Zelenskyy's recent plan for victory also fall far short of what is needed to bring this war to an end.

In the meantime, some people in the West still seem to believe that economic sanctions could in the long run force Russia back to the negotiating table. However, discussions about sanctions have shown that their effectiveness remains insufficient when no serious work is undertaken to close all the loopholes. If we are serious when stating that we are also at war, why are so many western companies still active in Russia and why have we not moved decisively in the direction of a more total boycott on trade with Russia?

It is clear that Vladimir Putin is playing the long game and is waiting for western support for Ukraine to erode further. The outcome of elections and the rise of populist parties in the US and Europe contribute to further uncertainties, especially when we encounter more governments with far-right parties or supported by such parties. At present, this concerns mainly Hungary and Slovakia but the rise of *Alternative Für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) in Germany and *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in France could also fundamentally change the political spectrum in Europe, with crucial elections coming up in the next few years. A victory by far-right parties could undermine support for Ukraine, although examples of Italy and the Netherlands have shown that this is not necessarily the case. However, elections do form a major element of uncertainty and could encourage Putin to just

Vladimir Putin is playing the long game and is waiting for western support for Ukraine to erode.

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bide his time. After all, inside Russia repression and propaganda have prevented any serious opposition to the war or to the regime as such. At the same time, the economy has remained relatively stable in the short to medium term.

The EU seems to be confronted with a continuation of the war and probably a stalemate on the battlefield, which could go on possibly for years with all the related uncertainties. These issues both add to insecurity and impact economic growth prospects. They have also already impacted other areas, like logistic chains, migration and cyber. The EU's efforts to reach out to other states, especially in the Global South, to increase support for Ukraine's efforts to end the war have failed. This is partly because of applying double standards when dealing with violations of international law (especially in the case of Israel's military actions in Gaza and elsewhere). This also adds to uncertainties not only about the possibility of a more effective geopolitical EU, but also about the future of an international rules-based order as such.

How do we talk about the war in Europe?

Immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 Europe seemed to be united in its support for Ukraine. The EU even encouraged member states to support Ukraine with military equipment to be paid for by the European Peace Facility. Economic and financial sanctions surpassed what had been imposed earlier in reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea and incursions into eastern Ukraine. Unprecedented sanctions have been adopted, with 14 packages approved so far. Europe has been seriously reducing its dependence on Russian energy, thereby limiting Moscow's ability to influence European policies. But although some Russian propaganda channels have been blocked by the EU and some propagandists have been hit with individual sanctions, Russian influence operations can still continue. Such efforts are resonating among far-right and far-left populist parties, as well as some Russian diaspora communities. Russian propaganda also is still taken seriously by countries like Hungary when opposing further sanctions and any increase in support for Ukraine.

More in general, especially in western and southern Europe, one can see a decreasing interest in the war in Ukraine and a shift in media attention to other issues. These include migration, the US elections and the conflicts in the Middle East. One could easily speak of some form of "Ukraine fatigue", with some people pleading to end this war, "whatever it takes", even if this has to be settled on Russian terms. The same could be said about the fear of escalation, which is mostly an element of our own imagination. The feeling of urgency is waning and although a

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lot of sympathy for Ukraine remains, decisive actions are lacking and assistance is just enough for Ukraine not to lose. Kyiv simply cannot win the war and impose its own conditions on Russia.

All this is in great contrast to Central and Eastern Europe, where people still remember the suffering from past Russian imperialism and envision the war as the most recent emanation of the Russian threat to European security. For these countries the implications for Europe's future are crystal clear and all have taken measures to boost their defence budgets (some up to four per cent of GDP) and strengthen NATO's frontline in deterring further Russian aggression. There is a clear realization here as well that Ukraine is involved in an existential struggle not only for itself but also in support of the European security order as a whole.

In this context, one could identify different and diverging narratives about the implications of the war and the meaning of a Russian or Ukrainian victory or defeat. Such internal differences within the EU about the war in Ukraine and what to do about it will probably remain an area of contention and add to the plethora of uncertainties concerning Europe's future. And this is exactly what Moscow is hoping and playing for: a growth in diverging views and polarization within Eu-

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rope in order to win a clear victory in Ukraine as a first successful step in further challenging the European security order and imposing its will on a divided West.

Dealing with uncertainties: what is to be done?

As stated earlier, an important element contributing to uncertainty is the increasing fragmentation of world views: a fundamental contestation about the meaning of current events and future trends. The Russian narrative is clear: the war is about the protection of Russian identity and great power status, which necessitates re-establishing the "Russian World" (including in Ukraine) and countering the spread of "western" democratic values. In its struggle against the "collective West", Moscow also finds a partner in China in a battle against US hegemony and supposedly universal values. In the Kremlin's mind, great powers should be sovereign and able to decide on their own civilizational values. They should also have the right to project their influence in their neighbourhood as a special sphere of interest. In this respect, the war in Ukraine is also existential for Russia, as a defeat in Ukraine would threaten a regime which has invested heavily in its "special military operation" to make Russia great again.

In Europe we have different narratives about the meaning of the war in Ukraine. Whereas the war was initially seen as a major threat to the European security order and to the multilateral rules-based order as such, the urgency and willingness to go all the way in countering Russian aggression and assisting Ukraine (and by extension the European order) to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity and cultural identity as an independent state has weakened over time. Instead of supporting Ukraine "whatever it takes", we now hear voices supporting a settlement to end the war, including a possible deal on Russian terms, "whatever that takes".

> The EU should attempt to find a common language to talk about the war and its implications.

As long as we have different narratives on the proper meaning of this war, and also in broader security terms, the EU will not be able to act as a coherent and pro-active geopolitical player. The EU should attempt to find a common language to talk about the war and its implications. Only then will we be able to uphold security across the European continent, both for ourselves and our partners. Here, geopolitics should trump economics: as long as our companies are still active in Russia and the economic and financial interests of individual member states undermine a coherent policy towards the war, major uncertainties about the future will remain.

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Furthermore, if the EU still wants to maintain a credible form of "values-based" foreign policy, it should have a more consistent narrative about how it views a global rules-based order and its place in it. This would also imply giving up on double-standards as much as possible, as well as bridging the gap between the diverging policies within the EU about Israel's aggressive and repressive policies against the Palestinians in particular. If Israel can get away with a whole range of serious violations of international law (as also established by the International Court of Justice), the EU cannot build a credible narrative about itself as a promotor of international peace and justice. Divergences between member states should also be bridged for the benefit of a credible geopolitical EU as a whole. Only then may Europe also attempt to bridge some of the diverging narratives at play in the Global South, where countries could then perhaps take European calls more seriously to effectively support Ukraine in its decolonization war.

Building a more credible European narrative

Finally, the EU would also need to have its own narrative vis-à-vis the United States. Isolationist tendencies in the US, its pivot to Asia and a more nationalist narrative necessitate a coherent and unified European answer. The reality is that US commitment to European security is in doubt, especially with Trump's return to the White House. Europe should have good transatlantic relations whenever possible but needs to be able to act independently based on its own sovereign strategy and narrative. This is not only true regarding Russia but also the Middle East. Accepting a more transactional relationship would only harm efforts to build a more common European narrative.

If Europe would like to walk the geopolitical walk, it should also be able to talk the geopolitical talk. This would imply building a more credible European narrative, based on European values, in order to establish what European identity means and how we view Europe's place in a fragmenting and uncertain world order.

Only when we as Europeans are able to find a common language and overcome diverging perspectives among member states on European security and its implications will the EU be able to have an impact on building or reconstructing its own neighbourhood. The experience of those member states in Central Europe, which have been exposed to Russian aggression and repression in the past, could lead us in building a more effective strategy towards Russia and broader global security. EE

Tony van der Togt is a senior research fellow at the Clingendael Institute.

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The uncertain conclusion to Russia's war in Ukraine

SOFIA OLIINYK

As Ukraine continues its resistance against Russian aggression, discussions about the potential end of the war have sparked numerous debates throughout the international community. While many are eager for a swift resolution to the conflict, Ukraine has every right to be concerned about how the war will end.

The dialogue between Ukraine and some western partners was complicated in the early stages of the full-scale war. As President Volodymyr Zelenskyy repeatedly emphasized, Ukraine is unwilling to give up any of its territories to achieve peace. He often referred to the moral aspect of the issue, even if some believed that it was not realistic. He stressed that Ukrainians living in the occupied territories are suffering under Russian occupation and enduring torture and human rights abuses.

For many Ukrainians, the defence of their land is deeply tied to their identity, sovereignty and historical experience. Territorial concessions – whether regarding Crimea, the Donbas or other regions – are not merely political bargaining chips; they represent the core of Ukraine's struggle for survival and self-determination. Furthermore, any future territorial concessions would provide a stark example of a new world order in which borders are determined by power, specifically aggressive power, rather than by international law and agreements. This would pose a significant challenge for any state considered a democracy.

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Defending territorial integrity

Western actors who advocate for territorial compromise often do so with the assumption that this could lead to a quicker resolution of the war. However, this viewpoint overlooks Ukraine's experience and the consequences of similar agreements in the past, such as the failure of the Minsk agreements following the annexation of Crimea. To achieve meaningful cooperation between Ukraine and its western allies, it is crucial that international partners fully grasp the emotional, political and strategic importance of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

The situation becomes even more complex when considering the White House's initial strategy on the war. The idea that Kyiv, backed by the collective power of the West, had time on its side has been a key narrative. However, after two and a half years of full-scale war, the time factor is becoming increasingly unfavourable for Ukraine. This is particularly evident in the light of this year's US presidential elections results creating additional pressure for the decision-making process in Washington.

This shifting dynamic has also affected public opinion in Ukraine. According to the Kyiv Institute of Sociology, since May 2022, the percentage of Ukrainians willing to consider territorial concessions for the sake of peace and maintaining independence has risen by 22 per cent. This significant shift highlights the consequences of delayed western aid and the war-weariness gripping the country. The issue of uncertainty is clear but the critical question remains: how should Ukraine and its allies navigate this situation? The answer is complex. While few wars end in a complete military defeat, including the ongoing conflict with Russia, the idea of negotiations is inevitable. However, war provides critical information and battlefield realities reveal much about the adversary's position.

After two and a half years of full-scale war, the time factor is becoming increasingly unfavourable for Ukraine.

In light of this, proposals like the Chinese or Brazilian peace plans may seem appealing not only to many in the so-called Global South but to some in the western community as well. This may be hazardous for the Ukrainian position in the future. They are flawed in one fundamental way: no deal with Russia can be credible without addressing the root causes of the conflict and ensuring Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Negotiations may be necessary but they cannot exist without maintaining a "credible and capable threat" against Russia. This means that they may come at the cost of Ukraine's long-term security and justice for its people.

Thus, while the challenges of war and shifting global opinions may tempt Ukraine and its allies to entertain the idea of territorial concessions, such actions would

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likely have profound and lasting consequences. Zelenskyy's commitment to defending Ukraine's territorial integrity reflects moral responsibility and a strategic necessity to ensure the country's security and even stability eventually. Any peace proposal that overlooks the fundamental issues of occupation, human rights violations and sovereignty risks perpetuating instability and injustice. As Ukraine faces growing uncertainty and external pressure, it is imperative that negotiations lead to a durable solution that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and fosters a just and lasting peace for its people.

The danger of a frozen conflict

While a frozen conflict might seem like a suitable solution to some western democracies, it would leave Ukraine vulnerable, with parts of its territory facing an uncertain future even if there was no direct Russian rule. These territories were to be designated as buffer zones under international control. Many countries, both in the West and the Global South, believe that an East/West Germany or Korea-like scenario could work in this war. They propose making peace around the current territorial divisions, envisioning Ukraine as a prosperous democracy like West Germany during the Cold War. However, they fail to acknowledge that eastern Ukraine would resemble East Germany or worse. The situation is more comparable to that in North Korea. While East Germany maintained its cultural identity as German, the occupied territories of Ukraine are facing terror and oppression. It would be misguided to assume that eastern Ukraine will follow the same trajectory as East Germany. At the same time, the Russo-Ukrainian War is fundamentally different from the Korean War. This is not a civil war or a conflict between Ukrainians. Unlike Koreans, who are one divided nation, Ukrainians and Russians represent two distinctly different societies.

Therefore, these proposals are unrealistic and would only serve to prolong the tragedy. Ukraine has already endured a frozen conflict through the Normandy format and the Minsk agreements, which left Donbas facing intolerable conditions due to Russia's hybrid aggression and caused more than 10,000 deaths. Moreover, the proposal of a frozen conflict would undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and perpetuate insecurity, preventing the country from achieving full political, economic and territorial reintegration. It is important for countries pressuring Ukraine into negotiations to recognize the irony that any deal that leaves Russia controlling Ukrainian territory could only be accepted by Ukrainians if it included credible guarantees of future security. Today, the only reliable guarantee of Ukraine's security is NATO membership.

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Zelenskyy's commitment to defending Ukraine's territorial integrity reflects moral responsibility and a strategic necessity to ensure the country's security and even stability eventually. Any peace proposal that overlooks the fundamental issues of occupation, human rights violations and sovereignty risks perpetuating instability and injustice.

A frozen conflict would leave Ukraine uncertain, hindering its aspirations for NATO and EU membership. There is no historical example of a frozen conflict involving Russia that has led to peace and stability. Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia all serve as reminders that such conflicts lead to long-term instability rather than peace. While hostilities may decrease, unresolved tensions can simmer and reignite anytime.

Another critical issue is the risk of international support for Ukraine diminishing, as prolonged negotiations lead to a diplomatic deadlock and potentially leave Ukraine in geopolitical limbo. Western allies might reduce the aid essential for Ukraine's military and economic resilience and Kyiv could face decades of fruitless talks with no definitive end in sight.

Therefore, either a significant change on the battlefield must weaken Russia's position in future negotiations or Ukraine will continue to face uncertainty without a clear strategy for ending the war. Considering the UN's repeated failure to offer tangible solutions, the White House's delayed strategic response, and even Ukraine's struggle to communicate the exact steps and options for conflict resolution, there

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is a growing perception that Ukraine's allies are more inclined to wait than act. This means that with the same political actors in place, freezing the conflict would only deepen the uncertainty and delay any viable solution.

Fate of prisoners of war

According to statements from Russian officials, there are currently around 6,500 Ukrainian captives in Russia. This staggering number has left countless Ukrainian families devastated and deeply anxious about the future. The uncertain fate of these prisoners has become one of the most urgent humanitarian crises, with families fearing for the lives of their loved ones, uncertain of whether they will ever see them again. It is not just a geopolitical issue but a personal tragedy for those directly affected by the war.

Compounding the already dire situation are reports of brutal killings of Ukrainian POWs by Russian forces, which serve as yet another stark reminder to the world that the Geneva Convention – the international framework designed to protect war prisoners – is being flagrantly ignored. These heinous acts are not isolated incidents but are reflective of a broader collapse of international norms and law, especially in the context of this war. The failure to enforce these protections has left Ukrainian captives at the mercy of inhumane treatment while the international community struggles to respond effectively.

Considering this and the potential consequences of territorial concessions or a frozen conflict, it becomes increasingly clear that there is no room for a return to the previous world order. The rules and frameworks that once guided global politics, including the Geneva Convention, seem inadequate in the face of such brutal violations. The fate of Ukrainian POWs serves as one more clear sign that the existing global system is unravelling.

> The uncertain fate of Ukrainian POWs becomes more than just a humanitarian crisis; it becomes a symbol.

This situation is reminiscent of a "domino effect", in which each event creates further destabilization. Putin's recent visit to Mongolia; the failed meeting of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which included warrants against Putin and Maria Belova, the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights, for abducting Ukrainian children; or Russia's circumvention of sanctions are all pieces in a larger puzzle that suggest the world system is shifting. These developments are not just isolated events. Instead, they indicate the gradual reshaping of the global order and the weakening of the rules that once held it together. Each step

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brings us closer to a world where old conventions, like the Geneva Convention, no longer function as reliable safeguards and where the consequences of inaction are far-reaching.

In this context, the uncertain fate of Ukrainian POWs becomes more than just a humanitarian crisis; it becomes a symbol of a world in transition, where the old systems are crumbling and new, more dangerous realities are emerging. Without a decisive response, we may be witnessing the beginning of a new and unpredictable global landscape, one where the norms and values of the past no longer hold sway.

The complexity of understanding negotiations with Russia

What is more, ongoing business dealings, technology exchanges and even prisoner swaps between the West and Russia are difficult for the average Ukrainian to comprehend, especially amidst constant war and suffering. The notion that while Ukrainian cities are bombarded and civilians are living in fear that western powers still engage with Russia in certain capacities can feel like a betrayal to those enduring the brunt of the conflict.

Even after Russia's nuclear threats in 2022, the US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Russia's then-Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu held talks to ease tensions. These communication channels between Moscow and Washington remain open to prevent escalation, highlighting the uncomfortable reality that geopolitical pragmatism often overrides complete isolation, even when moral lines are crossed. While these backdoor dealings might serve to prevent catastrophic escalation, they leave Ukrainians questioning the resolve of their western allies, who seem willing to negotiate with a regime that continues to wage a brutal war on their homeland.

> The war in Ukraine is not just about defending borders, but about preserving the international rules-based order.

Understanding such attitudes are essential for Ukraine, especially in leveraging them for its benefit, such as thorough intelligence sharing or capturing key figures valuable for future swaps. However, these negotiations present challenges. First, they give the impression to western societies that Russia can be negotiated with and might even honour its commitments. This weakens the broader narrative of isolating Russia, making it seem like a rational actor that can be reasoned with, despite the atrocities being committed in Ukraine. Second, this could complicate Kyiv's efforts to secure more military aid or push western partners to adopt a stricter stance against Russia. The softer the West's posture, the harder it becomes for Ukraine to maintain the sense of urgency necessary for ongoing support.

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For Ukraine, the priority must remain the defence of its national interests, clearly communicating how western aid directly influences the war effort and outlining its strategic and operational objectives. It is crucial for Kyiv to frame this aid not merely as an act of charity but as an investment in global security. The war in Ukraine is not just about defending its borders but about preserving the international rules-based order that Russia seeks to dismantle.

Ultimately, while the idea of resuming business-as-usual relations with Russia seems unimaginable to most Ukrainians, who face constant threats to their security, the reality is more complex. In a world where power shapes outcomes, countries sometimes prioritize their national interests over morality, even if that means shaking hands with leaders like Putin, much to the dismay of Ukraine's people, who view these nations as allies. The tension between realpolitik and moral responsibility is evident. Western powers may balance their condemnation of Russia with backchannel diplomacy to protect broader global stability.

In this context, Ukraine must recognize that its allies may have multifaceted relationships with Russia and while this can seem disheartening it is also an opportunity. By aligning its strategies to the realities of global diplomacy, Ukraine can position itself to extract crucial concessions or support, whether through prisoner exchanges or intelligence sharing, to advance its national interests. Yet, this delicate balance – between maintaining western solidarity and understanding that these nations may prioritize self-interest – will remain a constant challenge. Ukraine must continually advocate for its position, ensuring that its sacrifices and the moral imperatives of the war remain at the forefront of international decision-making.

What can Ukraine's partners do?

After discussing all the main issues and challenges above, one question remains: what can Ukraine's allies do to address the uncertainty surrounding the key problems that Ukraine and its people are currently facing? The answer is clear: support Ukraine through every possible means.

Numerous NGOs are actively working to assist Ukraine, collecting donations for humanitarian needs and defence. One of the most trustworthy platforms for individuals looking to contribute is UNITED24, which operates with transparency and accountability, making it the best choice for those willing to help. Additionally, information plays a critical role in the context of the hybrid war Ukraine is facing. Hybrid warfare goes beyond military action and includes intense diplomatic pressure; exploitation of national and cultural identities; large-scale military exercises; control over key resources like oil and gas; and the use of media and the in-

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ternet to spread disinformation. These tactics are all part of a broader, subversive strategy known as "non-linear warfare". With this understanding, it becomes crucial for all freedom-loving individuals to take action. Raising awareness and consuming accurate, fact-based content about the war is just as important if financial support is not possible. By sharing reliable information, people can help counter disinformation campaigns and ensure that the world stays informed about the reality of the war in Ukraine.

To summarize, while western countries' interests sometimes overshadow Ukraine's fate and may lack the moral considerations Ukrainians hold dear, Kyiv must adopt a realistic approach to avoid a frozen conflict and prevent the catastrophic consequences of territorial concessions. In this challenging context, Ukraine must strengthen its dialogue with its western allies and expand its diplomatic engagement with Global South countries, which are gaining significant influence in international diplomacy.

Ukraine's partners need to provide support militarily, economically and informationally. Platforms like UNITED24 are vital for transparent donations supporting defence and humanitarian needs. Additionally, Ukraine's allies must counter Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, which include disinformation, diplomatic pressure and economic manipulation.

A coordinated effort to spread accurate information and counter false narratives is essential. By expanding its diplomatic strategy and maintaining its moral and security imperatives, Ukraine can secure a just and lasting peace while preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity. EE

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There will be no peace in Europe with Putin in power

A conversation with Borja Lasheras, advisor on Ukraine to Joseph Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Interviewer: Iwona Reichardt

IWONA REICHARDT: Ukraine is making progress on its path to integration with the European Union. However, this is the first country that is at war at the time of integrating with EU structures, which is an unusual situation and a challenge, both for Ukraine and the EU. How does the EU assess Ukraine's road to membership, given these circumstances?

BORJA LASHERAS: There are several factors to take into account in this regard. When it comes to the so-called fundamental clusters, meaning the rule of law and judicial reform, Ukraine has made some progress. But more still needs to be done. The approach of the European Commission is more or less the same as it is toward EU integrating countries such as Albania, Serbia or Montenegro. At the same time, the EU, of course, realizes that Ukraine is fighting an existential war against a nuclear power. This war, naturally, has an effect on the integration process. For example, just a few days ago, a Supreme Court judge was killed in a drone attack near Kharkiv. Or there are people who worked in the court system and who are now fighting on the front lines. This makes Ukraine's enlargement a different case than what we have experienced with other states. We have enlargement experience with countries that have come out of conflict, but not with a country that's fighting an existential war.

What I have just said is a general assessment. There are of course more nuanced positions, also inside the Commission, as to how to approach this issue. We want Ukraine to make substantial progress with implementing reforms but we cannot neglect the fact that it is

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not Moldova or Albania, meaning it is not a country free from war. This is why I mentioned the example of the Supreme Court judge being killed. When it comes to the proper assessment we have to say that Ukraine has been given candidate country status not only because of the war, although, yes, had there been no full scale war, Ukraine would have not received candidate status on such a short notice. This means that both Ukraine and the EU, which is a pluralistic family, composed of many institutions and member states, are learning how this specific integration process should work.

Also, recognizing that Ukraine's integration with the EU is a strategic decision, we should consider how this process should be reasonably expedited. We cannot have Ukraine become a permanent candidate country. In my view it is also important for the outcome of this war that this process is, like I said, reasonably expedited, provided that Ukraine delivers what it is expected to deliver. Again, considering that Ukraine is in this process at the time of large scale war against Russia, my personal opinion is that we should prioritize very well what we require of Ukraine now.

Which conditions would you prioritize then?

Those pertaining to the rule of law, which in Ukraine's case is very important. It was, as you know, one of the driving forces of the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity. In addition to the strengthening of the rule of law, emphasis should be put on the economy. We want the Ukrainian state to stay resilient and functional. This means that everything that is related to the resilience of the Ukrainian economy and progress in the rule of law is important. But not every reform has to be treated in this very same way. For example, when it comes to such issues as minorities, I think these conditions should be delivered throughout the negotiating process. However, in the EU we have a member state that wants Ukraine to do more than what the Venice Commission at times requires of it in terms of national minorities.

From what I understand Ukraine has already done more than the Venice Commission expects it to do.

On national minorities, that is certainly the assessment too and in its report from June 2024 the European Commission gave the green light to start accession negotiations and shared its view that Ukraine had met all conditions. Summing up, Ukraine, like every other candidate country, needs to meet a number of conditions in order to continue advancing on the accession path. Now it is time for proper screenings and bilateral negotiations. Lastly, I think that we need to strengthen Ukraine militarily to levels we have not done yet. We need to do this to help Ukraine survive.

How can we do that?

Before I answer this question, let me stress again that reforms require a lot of work as well as a functional civil service

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system. Ukraine needs thousands of civil servants, who will implement the *acquis communautaire* in the country. Yet now, at the time of war, we can see that Ukraine has a problem in this regard; some of its civil servants are at the front lines, while others have fled the country. That is why I am saying we need to prioritize and why I also think that in the short term the most immediate action is to provide the maximum military support. Without it, everything else will inevitably suffer.

Can the EU, as a community, provide military support?

In the first stage of the war we did, thanks to the leadership of High Representative Joseph Borrell and other politicians. We provided this support through the European Peace Facility, which was an intergovernmental fund to be used by member states to carry out some military assistance activities with third countries. Keep in mind that this facility is not a part of the EU budget and that is why it's not subject to the Commission competence or Parliament's authorization. It's an intergovernmental fund. Borrell and other politicians were instrumental in using resources from that fund to help support Ukraine, though indirectly. For example, when member states provided weapons to Ukraine and asked the EU for reimbursements, we used resources from that fund. However, we can no longer use this facility because for a year now Hungary has been blocking us from doing that. This means that most of the European aid is provided to Ukraine based on bilateral agreements or through initiatives of coalitions between states. Thus, we can say that these are European initiatives, not EU initiatives. As the EU can no longer assist Ukraine through the European Peace Facility, we are now looking for a "Plan B" that would help us overcome the challenge that has been posed by the Hungarian veto.

What about the use of Russian assets?

Since May 2024, when the Council decided to allocate the extraordinary revenues (the so-called windfall profits) from these assets to the European Peace Facility, they have been used for military support, including ammunition, and to overall Ukrainian defence. The second tranche (first one, of 1.5 billion euros, delivered in the summer, mostly for financing military support) will be applied next year and thereafter, if we finalize the agreement on the G7 loan, will help Ukraine manage its budgetary needs. In a nutshell, while in February 2022 the EU had no resources officially planned for military support to Ukraine, it not only started acting to help Ukraine by imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation, but also activating the European Peace Facility, which was a very important message that the EU wants Ukraine to win and it's going to find the financial resources necessary for that. Overall, the European Commission has proposed up to 35 billion euros to help Ukraine in 2025 and beyond, through that loan backed by the wind-

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fall profits from Russian Central Bank's immobilized assets. According to official figures, together the EU member states and the EU as a whole have provided around 44 billion euros of military support since February 2022. That is very substantial, but not yet sufficient. We still need to do more. I don't think that what we have been delivering is 0.25 per cent of the EU's GDP. If we could do that, we will be providing 40 billion euros of support militarily per year and not in three years. At the moment we deliver less than half of that per year. So it looks like we are helping Ukraine a lot, but we are not investing in its military and defence as much as Russia does in its own. From the estimates I have been reading I gather that next year Russia is planning to spend over 100 billion euros on its military. That is why the resources we provide are not enough for the sort of war that Ukraine is fighting against Russia. They have been decisive in helping Ukraine withstand, but it's not enough to help Ukraine prevail and what we actually need is to help Ukraine prevail.

Back to the integration and enlargement timeline. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said that the next enlargement should happen in 2030. How realistic is this goal in your view? Ukraine is not alone in the integration process. There is, of course, Moldova, Georgia as well as some Western Balkan states that are still waiting at Europe's door.

Georgia, I think we can say openly, has been backsliding. Let's see what happens after the elections, but in general we do not want to have forever candidates, like Turkey. That's a worry. When it comes to the actual date of enlargement (new members in), I can see that perhaps it will not take place in this Commission's cycle, I mean the Commission that is starting now, but maybe this Commission cycle that is starting now will pave the way for enlargement. However, let us remember that member states have their national interests and they play a role too. Like your country, Poland, has national interests and wants to preserve them, especially when there is a prospect of new countries joining the EU. The same can be said about Bulgaria that has blocked North Macedonia's path. We will see more of that.

Overall, while I feel that the period we are entering now will bring us opportunities, I also fear that there might be some disappointments, mainly due to the new constellations that are forming throughout Europe and in front of our eyes. Think of the migration issue and the political forces that are exploiting it.

It is thus possible that there will be one or two steps forward, and then a step backward. I think we will have to work on reconciling different national interests, knowing that at a certain point we will have to do trade-offs. And let me make it clear: these trade-offs will be faced by both the member states and the countries that are joining the EU.

That is why we will need to try to pave the way for the enlargement to work, but also try to make enlargement workable.

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Photo courtesy of Borja Lasheras

"Our main policy towards Russia first and foremost means no high-level bilateral contacts. This will be continued, unless Russia stops the aggression in Ukraine and pays reparations. These are our red lines."

And that requires, maybe not a change of the treaty, but a different understanding of the rules. Sometimes we don't change the rules, but we change our interpretation of them. For example, every country may veto the accession at any step of the process. Thus, to overcome this challenge, we need member states to put European interests above other interests. At times it works, but at times it doesn't.

Unfortunately, we live in the times of populism, which Russia has been exploiting. I don't excuse my country and those who are acting against Ukraine in Poland, but I also see that some things, like the farmers' protests at the border, have been in a way enforced from the outside. I won't say that they have been implanted by Russia, they are probably homegrown, but I would still argue that the current anti-Ukrainian narrative which is gaining popularity in Poland and which also existed at the time of the protests is not only the work of the Polish people.

Well that's why things might get complicated and there may be no en-

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largement with the next Commission. But what I think the next Commission can do is help keep enlargement on the agenda and help enlargement advance, with every step of the process. This will require great leadership skills also from the member states and a will to work towards a consensus and make it happen.

We don't talk enough about the benefits of the enlargement. I don't think we should think that Ukraine is a cost. I think we should keep in mind that Ukraine has now one of the most powerful armies in Europe and its society has a lot of stamina, despite the huge losses it has encountered. As such it can contribute to Europe. I hope we will work to shift this narrative from one that focuses on the cost of the enlargement to one that also emphasizes the opportunities it can bring. However, as you said there are these forces that will emphasize the opposite…

Since these forces are probably pushed or sponsored by Russia, what is the current EU policy towards Russia?

Our main policy towards Russia first and foremost means no high-level bilateral contacts. This will be continued, unless Russia stops the aggression in Ukraine and pays reparations. These are our red lines. Our policy towards Russia thus derives from our assessment of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It also calls for diversification from Russian gas and energy sources, which a couple of member states, Hungary and Slovakia, have deviated from. But overall, we have made great progress in that regard. Most of the oil exports are no longer in place. The situation with the natural gas may not be the same yet, but imports have decreased dramatically.

What we don't have yet in place is a future Russia policy. Before the full-scale invasion, we had some principles, we wanted to work with Russian civil society. We still have these principles and plans to work with Russian civil society, but also at this moment the fundamentals of our policy towards Russia are based on our policy towards Ukraine. This means support towards Ukraine and its defence against Russian aggression. Unfortunately, a few member states don't want to pursue such a policy and want to go back to business as usual. We are seeing it especially in the activities of the Hungarian government. Perhaps at some point other member states will also get keen on that, but the question is what's our vision for the long term? This is where we don't have a discussion yet in the EU. At this moment this discussion may still be premature. In my view, when there is a war against Ukraine, our policy towards Russia needs to be based on maximum pressure on the Kremlin, sanctions and the weakening of Russia's military industry.

Is peace going to return to the European continent?

I don't think that peace in Europe is possible with Putin and his regime. I think at best we will have what I call a cold peace. Or a "cold war" but written

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with small letters, not capital letters. And even that will depend on what we will do and what Russia will do. At the moment, peace is not something that Russia wants. Russia now wants conflict. I would not say that the Kremlin wants to have an open total war in Europe. But it definitely wants to undermine our systems, political and economic.

In this way, Russia is already at war with us. It is a hybrid war, which is waged against our systems, populations, political parties and so on. This does not mean that we will go to war with Russia, but we have to understand that in the Kremlin's view Russia is at war against us.

So no peace in Europe with Putin in power, yes?

Yes. I don't think we can have a real peace with Putin in power. At best we can have some kind of a cold war and tensions. As well as more sabotage and violence.

Why do you think that?

In my view, the survival of the regime is contingent on the war in Ukraine and that is why the Kremlin won't let go. That is why it is very important to support Ukraine to our maximum capacity. We Europeans need to invest massively in the military industry, rearm ourselves and invest in deterrence. Only this will work with Russia. Weakness is something that Russia exploits. It will use it to undermine us, to attack our societies, our politicians. That is why, I don't think that real peace is possible with Putin in power. NE

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Is there a future for the Eastern Partnership?

PAVEL HAVLÍČEK

While the Eastern Partnership marked its 15th anniversary this year, its adaptability to current geopolitical developments has raised questions. Russia's war in Ukraine and Ukraine's and Moldova's progress in EU accession have challenged the relevance of this policy. Yet, despite some shortcomings, the EaP can be a viable instrument to promote the regional agenda of the EU, invest in democratisation of individual countries and foster linkages with the key region of Eastern Europe. There are concrete steps that can increase the relevance of this policy.

Launched in 2009 in Prague, the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy has been one of the most visible and efficient tools of EU foreign policy over the past decade and a half. On the occasion of its 15-year-anniversary, which we celebrated in May 2024, a proper stock-taking of the current state of play is in order. This is particularly important since the EaP is undergoing some fundamental changes, being challenged particularly by the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine as well as by the Kremlin's aggression against its other neighbours, of which six are united within the regional policy framework of the EU.

Three of the countries that have signed Association Agreements with the EU – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – have moved closer to the EU, first by receiving candidate status or having their EU aspirations officially confirmed. Then, in December 2023, the green light was also given by the EU Council to open accession

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talks and give candidacy status to Georgia. The regime in Belarus, on the other hand, has officially suspended its participation within the EaP, even if its civil society and pro-democracy forces still take part in the programme. Finally, Armenia and Azerbaijan have recently again engaged in a bloody conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which temporarily paralysed their active involvement to a large degree. For now, at least on the side of Armenia, the country has started making progress and is now actively using available resources within the EaP.

Is the Eastern Partnership dead?

Looking at the current state of play on the ground, one may wonder if the Eastern Partnership is still even needed or might be considered a useful tool for the months and years ahead, especially within the new mandate of the European Commission. Some argue the policy should be scrapped altogether and replaced by a new set of bilateral partnerships. This could bring relations with individual countries to a higher and more productive level. This topic is highly relevant since, for example, Czech diplomats already in June 2022 pronounced the Eastern Partnership "dead", while Sweden – one of the founding states of the policy – has largely moved away from the initiative and dedicated minimum attention and resources to it during its EU presidency term in 2023. The sole exception to this shift is that of civil society, which is still considered a useful ally across the region and helps coordinates efforts on a multilateral basis.

> Some argue the Eastern Partnership should be scrapped altogether and replaced by a new set of bilateral agreements.

Thus, the question of leadership among the EU members and support for the policy comes to mind. This is particularly true from the point of view of Central and Eastern Europe, where some states have been pioneering the policy since its very beginning, such as Czechia and Poland. Additionally, in relation to Ukraine there is the issue of similarities between today's Ukraine and Belarus, or Azerbaijan on the other hand. This needs to be answered alongside the issue of what is the added value of the partnership for the more advanced members when considering the enlargement track, including most notably for Ukraine and Moldova. Today, after the recent parliamentary elections, this is only to a lesser degree relevant for Georgia.

In addition, particularly for the in-between cases of Armenia, and now more and more also Georgia, a challenge remains as to how to best provide a value safety net and opportunity for progress. This is also true for the more lenient countries, including Belarus and Azerbaijan, in the future when conditions allow. It will also be

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necessary to provide additional answers and policy guidance on what to do with the Eastern Partnership from the point of view of future European Commissions and the upcoming EU presidencies in 2025 and beyond, including most notably that of Poland. This is especially relevant in the context of enlargement policy and the European Political Community, which at least in the case of the first issue occupies more and more attention in the thinking of the more advanced partners of the EU.

What to do with the Eastern Partnership in the future?

While the challenges coming both from the region and external actors are mostly obvious, even if still evolving in time, it is much less clear what kind of policy focus and measures the EU is willing to take in order to invest in the EaP in the upcoming years. Therefore, there is a profound need to launch a strategic discussion on the future of the Eastern Partnership and establish a new consensus among the EU members and institutions on what to do with the policy. Next year's Gymnich Meeting organized by Poland during its upcoming presidency starting on January 1st 2025 could provide a convenient opportunity for a kind of strategic reflection that has practically not taken place during the Hungarian term. In that context, re-establishing a coalition of countries willing to again invest in maintaining the Eastern Partnership is the necessary precondition not only for the survival of the policy itself, but also for the EU institutions in realizing their measures and outlining the next steps for the future.

In that sense, what would certainly help to recreate a new consensus on the future of the Eastern Partnership is to conduct another policy review and further develop the EaP's toolbox, which should be better suited and fine-tuned for the current times of crisis. Of course, it was originally never designed to respond to such issues. The bilateral track, which has always been strongly present and also welcomed in particular by the more advanced EaP members, is here to stay but might need new and more tailored-made content for each of the partners. However, a bigger challenge looms over the regional multilateral format, which in the past went through a profound revision and streamlining by the EU in terms of its content and form. This is required to stay relevant during the times of Russian war and other turbulences affecting Eastern Europe.

In general, the debate about the next course of events for the Eastern Partnership remains particularly sensitive for the in-between country cases that are, for different reasons, stuck between fully supporting enlargement or adopting the cherry-picking situations of Belarus and Azerbaijan. It is also clear that if there is no EaP, for countries like Armenia or Georgia, there would be much less attention

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paid to their situations and individual problems since they have been mostly profiting from finding themselves in the same cluster of states as Ukraine and Moldova. These actors should realize how much they have profited from their EaP membership and give back to the community, including by supporting Ukraine and Moldova as the two front-runner EaP nations facing challenges both from the Kremlin and internal dynamics, as recently displayed during the two rounds of presidential elections and referendum on the future accession to the EU in Moldova. Thus, a new narrative about a regional alliance of solidarity and exchange should be promoted both by the EU and the countries themselves to keep the geopolitical line of argument in place.

In addition, to give up on the EaP now would mean admitting that there is no need for the EU's regional approach and that it was a mistake to have the Partnership from the start, as the Kremlin has been claiming for many years. On the other hand, having a hollow Partnership is also not an ideal situation. EU institutions should ultimately go beyond even the current agenda of 3R: Recovery, Resilience and Reform.

Value focus

The debate about prioritizing and establishing several key focus areas, and among those particularly security; interconnectedness, including people-to-people ties; and energy and climate; should be put to the centre of our thinking. This will help illustrate that many of the problems are of regional significance and cannot be dealt with on a bilateral level. Within this mindset, the starting point should always be what is there for the EU and how can the Eastern Partnership work alongside European interests and thinking about the region and its future.

Among those areas, promoting the resilience of communities and whole societies proved most needed not only in Ukraine, but across the wider region. These areas need more solidarity and support both at the state and society levels in times of Russia's aggression against its neighbours. The key security issues combined with more civilian types of support, as well as establishing partnerships between the state and civil society, also brought powerful consequences for the ability of states like Ukraine to withstand the pressure and challenges from Russia alongside other factors both domestic and foreign. This, indeed, requires a strong value-focused approach and the strict refusal to engage in illiberal practices, including when labelling organizations as foreign agents as we have seen in past months in Georgia.

Finally, to help establish independence from Russian energy resources and promote the EU's own climate goals, it is necessary to make better use of the bloc's

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external partnerships and investments in this area. This includes, for example, the RePowerEU programme; more targeted foreign and development aid tools; and other financial instruments under the Team Europe initiative. These should help to prioritize the EaP and outmanoeuvre external pressure and influences not only from Russia, but also China, Iran and others with interests running counter to the bloc.

While the fate of the Eastern Partnership remains uncertain for now, some recommendations can be made in order to restart the programme. First, the "Group of Friends of the Eastern Partnership" led by Poland, Czechia, Sweden, the Baltic states and Romania, should be re-established. This would spearhead concrete initiatives and bring the necessary leadership to the Partnership, which is now struggling to stay relevant in times of Russian war.

The EU should also launch a strategic review of the policy that would take place both at the level of the EU members during the Gymnich Meeting in Poland next year and at the level of the European Commission. This could help prepare the necessary materials and information for the EU members to take decisions on a future course of action. The EU and its members should then promote a new narrative around the Eastern Partnership as an alliance of solidarity and support in times of Russia's war. The programme could act as a regional pillar for the exchange of best practices and solutions, as well offer wider help for issues that we are seeing today.

The Eastern Partnership could also prioritize and focus on areas with added value for the whole region. As aforementioned, this is especially true when promoting security and resilience; investing in interconnectedness – including people-to-people ties; and energy and climate agenda issues. Approaches to these problems should fit the EU's ambitions as the individual countries will find it impossible to deal with them on their own. Finally, the EU member states should make use of the upcoming discussion on the Black Sea Strategy to encourage synergy with the Eastern Partnership. EE

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Czechia's known and unknown

MICHAL LEBDUŠKA

One year ahead of Czechia's parliamentary elections, polls show a substantial lead for ANO, the populist party founded by one of the richest oligarchs and former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. Like it or not, Babiš's comeback seems inevitable. Yet with this inevitability comes uncertainty regarding with whom and how Babiš will govern again.

Czechia's Andrej Babiš has been a heavyweight political player since the 2013 parliamentary elections. At that time, ANO had its first electoral success. Unexpectedly, it placed second, capturing over 18 per cent of the vote, trailing behind the Social Democrats, who secured the top position. This electoral success allowed Babiš to join the coalition government as finance minister. Four years later, in subsequent parliamentary elections, ANO won decisively. A score ten per cent higher than in 2013 gave it an absolute victory, and first place in the race. Second was the right-wing Civic Democratic Party or ODS, which received only 11.32 per cent of the vote. In 2021, even though ANO lost by a minimal margin to the ODS-led *Spolu* (Together) coalition, it still recorded a good score of more than 27 per cent of the vote.

Unpopularity of the current government

Today, after three years of the centre-right government, headed by Prime Minister Petr Fiala, the situation is different. ANO is steadily leading in the polls with

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more than 30 per cent of support. Second in the race is the ODS-led *Spolu* coalition, hovering around 20 per cent (ODS alone, without coalition partners, maxes out at 15 per cent). ANO's strong position is quite clear, considering that three years ago Babiš lost power very closely and largely by a chance. At that time, more than one million Czechs voted for parties that did not make it to the parliament, while two potential coalition partners received 4.66 and 4.68 per cent of the vote respectively.

More than anything else, ANO owes its high support in the polls to the unpopularity of the current government. Even voters of governmental parties often admit that they are disappointed with the government and the direction in which their country is going and they consider not voting in the upcoming elections. The only exception is foreign policy and most notably current policy towards Ukraine. The biggest concern of Czechs is the state of the economy, because their country has been stagnating for some time now. Indeed, Czechia has been one of the last countries in the European Union to reach pre-COVID levels of economic development and this year GDP growth is estimated at a mere 1.2 per cent. For ordinary people this resembles the situation after 2008, when the recovery from the economic crisis took a very long time.

> ANO owes its high support in the polls to the clear unpopularity of the current government.

Recession and slow recovery, combined with severe budget cuts, has made a significant portion of the society poorer than before. Because of high inflation, which has had, like elsewhere, negative effects on people's consumption choices, real wages are the same as in 2018. The situation of ordinary people strongly contrasts with that of the richest Czechs, especially oligarchs operating in the energy sector, who have gotten richer, profiting from the current crisis. The government has not been the most successful in its key programme priority of reducing the budget deficit, for which it is criticized by very vocal fiscal "hawks" who are calling for even more belt-tightening. In this situation, the news that wages in neighbouring Poland – long stereotyped by Czechs as a much poorer country – have now surpassed those in Czechia came as a great surprise.

The government also appears to struggle with communication and seems unable to effectively present its achievements to the public, which is in a stark contrast with very successful PR of Andrej Babiš. Thus, only the widespread dislike for Babiš has prevented an even greater drop in support for the current coalition partners. However this time, voters of the current coalition might be less motivated to take part in the elections, because of the President Petr Pavel, whom they see as a politician from "their side". In 2021 it was the combination of Prime Minister

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Babiš and the previous President Miloš Zeman, that mobilized voters to support *Spolu* and the other coalition parties.

A political chameleon

Babiš is highly likely to once again become the prime minister of the Czech Republic. The only thing that remains uncertain is how he will govern, and with whom. After all, we are talking about a populist without any ideology. Babiš has already presented himself as a political chameleon capable of adapting to his voters' needs and addressing the dominating political atmosphere. He has no problems with changing views, even by 180 degrees.

Consider his transformations in the past. When Babiš entered politics, he was a right-wing free marketer, with much of his backing coming from businessmen who traditionally vote for ODS. Later he abandoned his original pro-market position to get the voters of the Social Democrats. He succeeded in pushing this party, which is the oldest of all existing Czech political parties with a history dating back to the second half of the 19th century, below the electoral threshold.

Following the political tide, Babiš's latest shift has been towards the far right, as evidenced by his anti-immigrant and anti-European rhetoric. This change brings the former – and potentially future – Czech prime minister closer to politicians such as Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Together with Orbán's party, Fidesz, as well as Marine Le Pen's National Rally, Herbert Kickl's FPÖ, or Matteo Salvini's League, Babiš's ANO has formed a new faction in the European Parliament called the Patriots for Europe. Thereby, to a surprise of his own MEPs, Babiš started distancing himself from the liberals and his former "friend" Emmanuel Macron.

As mentioned earlier, the decision with whom ANO will form a coalition government brings great uncertainty in Czechia. Another unknown issue includes whether during the campaign Babiš will be trying to attract moderate or radical voters? Should ANO fail to get the majority that will allow it to govern on its own, a scenario that seems unlikely now, there are three possible scenarios for the power arrangements that the Czech public may yet see.

First scenario

Perhaps the most preferred scenario for Babiš would be to form a coalition with one of the political forces that is now outside the parliament, but has a chance of entering it next year. This includes a coalition with the easy to remember, voter

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appealing name of *Stačilo!* (Enough!) headed by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which has undergone a very successful rebranding. It managed to garner 9.56 per cent of the vote in this year's elections to the European Parliament, when it got two seats. Additionally, in the regional elections, held in September this year, *Stačilo!* crossed the five per cent threshold in 11 of the 13 Czech regions. Its worst score was recorded, paradoxically, in the region where KSČM campaigned alone; under its traditional banner.

These results show that the Communist Party, which became notorious for having members who were rapidly dying off and being badly beaten by ANO in 2021, has been successfully "resuscitated" by its charismatic chairman Kateřina Konečná this year. What additionally strengthens the chance of *Stačilo!* as a coalition partner for ANO is that the new chairwoman of Social Democracy, which does not seem to have a chance to pass the five per cent threshold alone, Jana Maláčová, has not ruled out cooperation with this party. In this case, it is important to remember that Babiš has a record of cooperating with the communists. After the 2017 elections, the minority government that ANO formed with the Social Democrats was quietly supported by KSČM.

The second option that ANO has is cooperation with a coalition formed by two parties: *Přísaha* (Oath), which was established by the former head of the police or-

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ganized crime unit, Robert Šlachta, and *Motoristé sobě* (Motorists for themselves), which has connections with former president Václav Klaus's circles. These two parties formed a coalition before the European Parliament elections, which allowed them to get an unexpectedly good result of 10.26 per cent of the vote. For ANO, a coalition with this political force would be a logical choice: their two MEPs have already joined the Patriots for Europe faction that Babiš has formed in the European Parliament with other Eurosceptics.

Other scenarios

The second possible scenario is a coalition with the far-right SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) party that is led by Tomio Okamura. Okamura is a Czech politician of half-Japanese background who has received between five to ten per cent of electoral support in subsequent elections since 2013. Until now, however, he has not been a member of any government. Okamura has recently lost some of his voters, who are of the opinion that he has failed to turn his demands into political decisions and found new more charismatic leaders that they can support.

Until now, Babiš did not want to get his hands dirty by cooperating with extreme politicians.

Okamura will thus happily join a coalition with Babiš. As long as Babiš, who himself has rejected many of Okamura's proposals, will be interested in the first place. Until now, Babiš did not want to get his hands dirty by cooperating with such an extreme politician as Okamura. However now it is quite clear that Babiš has been preparing ground for a possible cooperation with SPD as well. How else could we explain why, after this year's regional elections, ANO formed a coalition with this party in several regions, even if it did not need to do it to gain a majority.

A third scenario, sometimes brought up in Czech public discourse, suggests that ANO could cooperate with one of the parties that form the current ruling coalition. Admittedly, the current government and its voters are very hostile to Babiš, but it is also no secret that especially the conservative ODS led by Prime Minister Fiala agrees with ANO on many programme issues. It has a long history of Euroscepticism and supporting Hungary's Viktor Orbán or US president Donald Trump. For example, after the 2022 municipal elections, some of the ODS politicians in the Prague city council wanted to form a coalition with ANO. Their idea to opt for ANO, instead of any liberals, failed only after the intervention of the prime minister and the ODS leadership. For this reason, it is not completely out of the

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question that ODS will "sacrifice itself" and form a coalition with Babiš to hinder the establishment of a government with extremists. Such a scenario would only be possible if several conditions are met. First, the current *Spolu* coalition would have to break up and Prime Minister Petr Fiala would have to step down, which could possibly happen after bad election result next year.

Strong institutions

Just as uncertain as Babiš's potential coalition partners is the answer to the question of what his policies will be like. Babiš does not hide his fascination with people like Orbán in Hungary or Robert Fico in Slovakia. Like them, he often attacks the media and civil society. ANO's leader is also known for his anti-immigrant or anti-European, rhetoric. But, at the same time, Babiš is not as much of a power technologist as Orbán. He is also not driven by the need for revenge, as is the case with Fico, who has now begun to surround himself with a highly conspiratorial circle. While Babiš would probably have wished to take over public media, his image is more of a moderate politician compared to the leaders of some of the countries in the region. For example, anti-vaccine groups have harshly attacked Babiš for the policies his government introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even if Babiš follows in the footsteps of Orbán and Fico in domestic affairs, which is not a foregone conclusion, Czechia will have one asset to use. This will be its strong and well-functioning institutions. It will be very difficult to marginalize their role as these institutions include, first and foremost, the judiciary and, above all, the constitutional court over which neither the prime minister nor the lower house of parliament have influence. The constitutional court is selected by the president and it is then approved by the Senate, where the parties that form the current government maintain, thanks to the different electoral system, a safe majority. Another institution that the Czech system has now and could use to protect its democracy, should such a need arise, is the office of the current president. The incumbent, Petr Pavel, enjoys the support of the current government's voters and by virtue of his position has great influence in society, even if his power is not the greatest. Unlike the rest of the Visegrad countries, Czechia has genuinely independent and influential public media groups that are not afraid to criticize any government. Although Babiš and his allies have succeeded in appointing several of their supporters to the Czech TV council, it would be very difficult to

Babiš does not hide his fascination with people like Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Robert Fico in Slovakia.

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fully control it. We can also expect that any attempt to take over public media will bring on numerous protests.

Less help for Ukraine, but not necessarily pro-Russian

Uncertainty also surrounds Babiš's future foreign policy, mainly because ANO's leader has recently been vocal in his anti-European rhetoric. His faction in the European Parliament has also started working with well-known Eurosceptics. Babiš is against continued support for Ukraine which, in his view, comes at the cost of Czech citizens. Instead, he insists on seeking peace, regardless of the conditions for Ukraine. Most of ANO's potential coalition partners hold similar views.

At the same time, however, we should keep in mind all of Babiš's past transformations, and the fact that he is not a typical pro-Russian politician. For example, it was during the tenure of his government that information was revealed that Russia's GRU military intelligence agency had caused explosions at ammunition depots in the east of the Czech Republic in 2014. This resulted in the "cleansing" of the Russian embassy, which by then had a disproportionate number of employees serving as an intelligence network for all of Central Europe. It is also worth remembering Babiš's 2019 visit to Kyiv. After his stay in Ukraine he returned to Prague, enthused about the opportunities that Ukraine could offer for Czech business. Also in the past ANO agreed on some of the key principles of Czech foreign policy and for example supported Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States in the parliament. All that said, we can expect that when it comes to any ANO government's Eastern policy, there will be a decline in the proactive stance toward Ukraine. However, this does not necessarily mean a turn toward Russia. The truth is that Czech policy on Ukraine will not only depend on the government but also on continuity in the official positions of Czech ministries.

Thus, Czechia enters the final year before the parliamentary elections with the positions of both Babiš and ANO unshakeable. It is very likely that this party will win the elections, with great success. Yet, there is still a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to predicting what will happen after Babiš wins. With the ongoing transformations in Czechia's political scene, as well as those concerning the political "chameleon" himself, it remains unclear with whom Babiš and ANO will govern or what their policies will look like, both domestically and internationally. EE

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North Macedonia's EU membership drifts further away

JOVAN GJORGOVSKI

For the third consecutive decade, North Macedonia finds itself at a critical crossroads. The newly elected government is grappling with a myriad of challenges related to EU integration and its relations with neighbouring countries. The situation has only gotten worse since the EU decided to decouple North Macedonia's membership bid from Albania.

"Anticipated but painful" – this sentiment captures the reaction of many Macedonians upon hearing the news that the European Union has decoupled the country from Albania on the road to EU membership. For years, both nations had advanced together and the announcement came as a disappointment to many. It is clear that North Macedonia was once seen as a frontrunner in EU integration. However, due to unresolved bilateral disputes with neighbours and missteps by its political leadership throughout the years, the country now finds itself lagging behind in a region that is steadily moving forward.

EU integration or an Austro-Hungarian revival?

The EU's decision was revealed, perhaps coincidentally, on the very day Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited North Macedonia. The newly formed

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Macedonian government, eager to maintain strong ties with Hungary, welcomed Orbán with full honours as government ministers lined up at the airport in Ohrid to greet him. Meanwhile, just a few kilometres away in Albania, celebrations were underway as the country marked its progress on the EU path. The contrast could not have been starker: while one nation rejoiced, the other grappled with a bitter setback.

Even though it was a friendly visit, the EU decision loomed over the joint press conference between Macedonian Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski and Orbán, with the Hungarian offering to mediate with Bulgaria to help the country continue on its European path, an offer which was expressly declined by the officials in Sofia. Still, he did not give an answer to the journalists why the Hungarian ambassador at the recent EU meeting voted for the decoupling of North Macedonia and Albania. Orbán's visit reflects a growing trend within the new Macedonian government, which is steering the country toward "alternative" alliances. Recently, North Macedonia secured a loan valued at 500 million euros from Hungary, raising suspicions that the funding may actually originate from China, despite Orbán's denials. The government even announced the arrival of a third mobile operator from Hungary, and even appointed a former diplomat as a special envoy to the Hungarian presidency with the EU. But, most notably, Hungary is also home to former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, a fugitive from justice who escaped to Hungary with Orbán's assistance. He is also the former leader of the political party that is currently in power in North Macedonia. Engaging with a prime minister of an EU and NATO country who began his EU presidency with a visit to Moscow may not be the wisest choice, especially given North Macedonia's strong support for Ukraine in the ongoing war. To put it plainly, many people are wondering: is North Macedonia moving toward Brussels or Budapest?

> Many people are asking the key question: is North Macedonia moving towards Brussels or Budapest?

The government in power claims that even though the EU is the desired destination, Hungary is a real ally, not just when it comes to words but also deeds. All of this comes as the EU presents its growth plan for the Western Balkans and is increasing financial support for the whole region. It was at the meetings in Brussels regarding the plan that Prime Minister Mickoski revealed that he had presented his idea to the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen about constitutional amendments with a postponed effect. The idea behind it is that the Macedonian parliament will vote on amending the constitution but the amendments will be valid after the country becomes an EU member state. So far, there has been no official reply from the EU about his proposal. Bulgaria however has expressly rejected it.

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Prior to the trip to Brussels, Mickoski emphasized his intention to express the deep disappointment and frustration felt by Macedonian citizens over the decades-long struggle for EU integration. "My stance is unequivocal: it's time to end the defeats and abandon policies and diplomacy marked by subservience and compromise," he stated before his departure. This message resonates strongly with Macedonian citizens, who have made countless sacrifices over the past two decades in hopes of joining the European family. The only problem is that since accepting the negotiating framework, North Macedonia is no longer negotiating with Bulgaria but with the EU, and the government in power is fully aware of that. Thus, to solve the issue, they claim to be waiting for the elections in Bulgaria and the forming of a new government in that country. This will allow them to negotiate a better deal and any eventual delayed effect of any constitutional amendments. Unfortunately, Bulgarian politicians have voted in their parliament on a new declaration concerning North Macedonia. They claim that no matter who comes to power, their stance towards North Macedonia will not change.

What is next for North Macedonia after the decoupling?

The prolonged status quo regarding North Macedonia's EU integration not only exposes the country to malign influences from foreign actors but also holds the potential to create instability and ethnic tensions. With over half a million ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia, many are disheartened as they witness Albania progressing on its EU path while their own country lags behind. This disparity is already being exploited by opposition parties within both the Macedonian and Albanian ethnic blocs.

The largest opposition party, SDSM, suffered electoral losses mostly due to its handling of relations with Bulgaria, particularly its acceptance of the friendship agreement which many believe lies at the heart of the current challenges. Additionally, the party's acceptance of the so-called "French proposal" has fuelled further discontent. The proposal incorporated the bilateral issues between Bulgaria and North Macedonia into the EU negotiation framework, despite warnings from both domestic and foreign experts, as well as the opposition, that this could create additional challenges for North Macedonia's EU accession process. The key demand in the "French proposal" was the constitutional amendment to include the Bulgarian people, along with provisions regarding the Macedonian language, history, and culture. Although the proposal was controversial from the start, the government led by SDSM promised to hold consultations with the public. However, these consultations lasted only a few days before the proposal was put into par-

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liamentary procedure and later voted on. This led to North Macedonia beginning the EU screening process, with its further progress tied to the constitutional amendment – a requirement the government at that time knew it lacked the majority to fulfil, yet chose to proceed regardless. Now, two years later, North Macedonia has not amended its constitution as expected and the result is the decoupling from Albania in the EU accession process. In response to the EU decision, SDSM now in opposition, is calling for a special parliamentary session to assess North Macedonia's European future. Ironically, this is the same party that, despite public protests and widespread opposition to the French proposal, voted in favour of it. Former Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski was not only confident of winning the elections but also believed the country would continue its European trajectory. Instead, he faced a historic defeat, leaving his party in a state of disarray. However, this setback has not deterred them from seizing the current opportunity for political leverage.

The Albanian political parties, particularly the largest party, DUI, which has been in power for 22 years and is now in opposition, are planning protests and demanding that North Macedonia continue its path toward Europe rather than, as they claim, pivoting towards Russia. Until recently, the government had claimed – albeit without substantiation – that there were potential destabilization threats facing the country. The government's coalition partners from the Albanian bloc "Vredi" have repeatedly stated that while they understand the complexities, they expect the constitutional amendments to pass. One of their key electoral promises was to see these amendments voted on by the end of the year. Should Mickoski choose to put the constitutional changes to a vote, he could garner support from across the aisle and put the country back on its EU path.

> As a result of North Macedonian not amending its constitution, it has been decoupled from Albania in the EU accession process.

However, the ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, campaigned on the notion that sufficient compromises had already been made for the country's EU future, a stance that significantly contributed to their historic electoral victory. As time progresses, pressure from both opposition parties and the Albanian political factions will inevitably increase. However, the challenge remains that even if the constitution was amended tomorrow, there are no guarantees that Bulgaria will not impose further demands. This is the crux of the issue: how to take a leap of faith and demonstrate goodwill towards a neighbour that has previously exercised its veto power and made unreasonable demands regarding the Macedonian language, culture and history. Currently, Bulgaria is in a pre-election period and North Mac-

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edonia is frequently used as a political tool by all parties. Even if a party secures enough votes to form a government, it is unlikely that their stance toward North Macedonia will change.

A European future held hostage by Bulgarian politics

For several years now, Bulgaria has struggled with political instability, and discussions surrounding its relationship with North Macedonia have become a tool for various political parties. Tensions, which had been simmering for some time, escalated again following an unofficial visit by newly elected Macedonian President Gordana Siljanovska Davkova to Sofia to meet with her Bulgarian counterpart, Rumen Radev. Initially, the meeting seemed amicable. However, controversy erupted when photos were released that notably lacked the presence of the Macedonian flag. This omission triggered a storm of backlash in North Macedonia. Bulgarian officials justified the absence of flags by stating that the meeting was unofficial, likening it to a casual coffee gathering. In response to the diplomatic faux pas, the Bulgarian ambassador was summoned to the foreign ministry in Skopje where he declined to accept a formal note of protest, asserting that Bulgaria's actions were justified.

> Bulgaria's political landscape is highly polarized, much like the rest of the Balkans.

The situation only worsened when Macedonian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Nikoloski described the Bulgarians as "uncivilized" during an interview, prompting demands from Sofia for his apology and resignation. Adding fuel to the fire, some Bulgarian politicians referred to North Macedonia as merely a territory, disparaging its people as "confused Bulgarians" and insulting the Macedonian flag and president, who was described by one as "some kind of an ambassador".

Bulgaria's political landscape is highly polarized, much like the rest of the Balkans. However, there is unanimous agreement among all political parties, both in power and in opposition, regarding their stance towards North Macedonia. No party appears willing to engage in negotiations or seek a diplomatic resolution. The ongoing debate surrounding the rights of Macedonians living in Bulgaria and Bulgarians residing in North Macedonia has become a regular topic at international meetings and within discussions between politicians from both nations. Most recently, Macedonian Foreign Minister Timco Mucunski raised this issue during a speech at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. These developments have reignited tensions in an already fraught relationship between Skopje and Sofia, with a viable resolution remaining elusive.

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Stumbling back on the EU path?

For the third consecutive decade, North Macedonia finds itself at a critical crossroads. The newly elected government is grappling with a myriad of challenges related to EU integration and its relations with neighbouring countries – issues that include the persistent debate over the country's name. During her swearing-in ceremony, President Gordana Siljanovska Davkova notably refrained from using the country's constitutional name, provoking ire from Greece. In response, Mickoski has stated his respect for the Prespa Agreement but insists on using the name "Macedonia" for internal purposes, framing it as a matter of personal rights. This has reignited tensions between North Macedonia and Greece, with Athens even threatening to block Skopje's EU accession.

The challenges with Greece, however, are overshadowed by the even more pressing issue with Bulgaria, exacerbated by the recent decision by the EU to decouple North Macedonia from Albania in the accession process. There is growing concern that if Albania reaches the EU before North Macedonia, then Skopje could face further complications or blackmail from another one of its neighbours, potentially jeopardizing its path to EU membership altogether. The decision made by the EU also coincides with the first 100 days of the Mickoski government, signalling perhaps that the grace period has come to an end and that expectations must now be met.

The choice and the manner of communication used by the partners in the EU suggests that their feelings toward Mickoski's administration remain one of mild irritation. However, there is a noticeable trend indicating that this sentiment is likely to intensify in the coming months. This evolution will largely depend on Mickoski's approach, as well as the response from the opposition. One thing is clear: amending the constitution is an obligation that North Macedonia has willingly undertaken, regardless of differing opinions on the matter. The path towards EU integration now, as in the past, rests firmly in the hands of Macedonian politicians and their ability to reach a compromise. This will hopefully lead to a viable path towards the EU. EE

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In Serbia, a controversial lithium mine project worries the European Union

TATJANA ĐORĐEVIĆ

The Serbian Jadar lithium mine project is one of the largest projects of its kind and has the potential to generate around half a billion US dollars in annual revenue. Yet, the environmental concerns that go along with such a project have led thousands to come out and protest in Belgrade and elsewhere. Nevertheless, President Aleksandar Vučić recently told the *Financial Times* that the mine is expected to open in 2028 and will produce 58,000 tonnes of lithium annually.

At the beginning of September, 21 Serbian activists were placed on a blacklist of the so-called "environmental terrorists" created by an anonymous group known as *Kopaćemo* ("we will dig"). This came in the wake of a large protest in Belgrade on August 18th, which drew a crowd of around 50,000 people. Following the protest, police arrested three activists and a judge promptly sentenced them to 30 to 40 days in prison. Surprisingly, the charges were not related to the blocking of railway traffic, which the activists had staged in protest of proposed lithium mines in southern Serbia, but rather an alleged assault on a journalist from *Informer*, a pro-government tabloid known for its sensationalist stories and support of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.

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On the same day, before the protests even began, organizers Zlatko Kokanović and Nebojša Petković from the environmental group *Ne damo Jadar* ("we won't give up Jadar") were taken in for questioning by the BIA, Serbia's national security and intelligence agency. The authorities gave them a "friendly warning" that the blockades were illegal and that they should be prepared to face consequences. Those consequences came swiftly. After the protest, environmental activists were detained across Serbia.

Discovering kryptonite

Following these events, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, several government ministers, Rio Tinto CEO Jakob Stausholm (the corporation responsible for the lithium mine project in Serbia) and representatives from the company met with residents living near Gornje Nedeljice, where the proposed mine would be located, to discuss the lithium mining project. Vučić acknowledged the locals' legitimate concerns about the potential environmental impact, including the cleanliness of nearby rivers like the Jadra and Drina, as well as waste storage and protection measures. Rio Tinto's CEO reiterated that environmental protection and positive relations with the local community were priorities for the company and he made several promises in that regard.

At Thacker Pass in the US state of Nevada lies a vast lithium ore deposit. The Lithium Americas corporation has secured a permit to mine 73 square kilometres, sparking strong opposition from local residents and activists concerned about potential groundwater depletion and contamination. Despite ongoing lawsuits, construction of the mine is moving forward, with operations expected to begin in 2026. The project aims to supply lithium for one million electric vehicles annually. This area is home to several Native American tribes who consider the land sacred. Nearby abandoned mercury mines, which operated until 1970, caused a spike in cancer rates and continue to leak toxins into the environment. As a former Nevada wildlife official noted, "Geese landing on the old mines are dead by morning."

Now, a new environmental threat looms over the region. The Lithium Americas corporation has received a permit to mine lithium, as the US wants to accelerate the green transition and switch to electric vehicles.

In 2004, the Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto came to Serbia, attracted by the country's rich mineral potential. After receiving an exploration permit, the company discovered the Jadar mine near the town of Loznica in western Serbia. This site contains a unique deposit of "jadarite", a new lithium sodium borosilicate mineral. The high-quality, large-scale lithium and boron deposit lies beneath

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Photo courtesy of the "Ne damo Jadar" NGO

A protest from the *Ne damo Jadar* ("we won't give up Jadar") movement against the Jadar mining project, which is one of the largest greenfield lithium projects in the world. This fall, Aleksandar Vučić told the *Financial Times* that the mine, expected to open in 2028, would produce 58,000 tonnes of lithium annually.

the Jadar river, making it the only place in the world where jadarite can be found. Jadarite was later confirmed as a new mineral by the International Mineralogical Association. The discovery was widely covered by mainstream media, with some outlets dubbing the new mineral "kryptonite", a fictional substance from Superman's planet. Bloomberg wrote that "In the shade of an Orthodox chapel, Rio Tinto has discovered kryptonite, the wonder material from Superman, which it hopes will transform its green energy business."

When the government of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić presented the lithium extraction project in 2021, mass protests against mining activities paralyzed much of the capital, Belgrade, and other parts of Serbia for months. This ultimately led to the withdrawal of plans to open the Rio Tinto mine. In the meantime, the company began purchasing plots of land and houses in the vicinity of the village of Gornji Nedeljice. According to Rio Tinto, there were a total of 656 plots of land within the project area, of which 419, or 63 per cent, have been purchased, amounting to 167 hectares.

"In the central area of the project where the development of mining and processing facilities is planned, there were 52 homes. Of that number, 51 voluntarily sold their properties and moved, usually with the support of our company. In addition, another 23 residential facilities were identified which are not permanently inhabited, such as holiday homes, cottages or abandoned houses, of which 18 were purchased," the authorities of the Rio Tinto company officially announced.

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Under public and environmental pressure, the Serbian government withdrew approval for the mining project's spatial plan in 2022. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić stated that the decision was the right one, emphasizing that the government listens to its people. President Vučić also remarked that the safety of citizens and environmental protection are paramount, though he personally believes that lithium extraction in Serbia presents a significant opportunity for the country's economic growth and development.

The Jadar project is one of the largest greenfield lithium projects in the world. At the current price of ten US dollars per kilogram, this would generate around half a billion dollars in annual revenue. With a projected mine life of 50 years, total revenue could amount to 25 billion dollars for the operator. This fall, Vučić told the *Financial Times* that the mine, expected to open in 2028, would produce 58,000 tonnes of lithium annually. This could be sufficient for 17 per cent of Europe's electric vehicle production, or about 1.1 million cars.

"Europe must remain sovereign in a changing world"

Two years after the project was initially halted the Serbian Constitutional Court overturned the decision in early July 2024. On July 19th, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in Belgrade for a "Critical Raw Materials Summit". During the meeting, the two leaders signed a memorandum of understanding between Serbia and the EU Commission, establishing a strategic partnership focused on raw materials, battery production chains and electric vehicles. On this occasion, Scholz celebrated securing access to the continent's largest-known reserves of lithium, which should reduce reliance on supplies from China.

> German, which recently criticized the Serbian elections, has become a loud proponent of lithium mining in Serbia.

"This is an important European project that contributes to Europe remaining sovereign and independent in the supply of raw materials in a changing world," Scholz told journalists after his meeting with the Serbian president.

More than half a year ago, the German government criticized the election process in Serbia, but now it has become a loud proponent of lithium mining and supports the Serbian authorities in a project that has sparked significant local opposition. While lithium deposits exist in other European countries, particularly in Saxony, a state in eastern Germany, Franciska Brantner, the German state secretary in the ministry of economy and climate action and a member of the Greens

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in the Bundestag, told BBC News in Serbian that she supports the Jadar project, provided that the highest environmental standards are respected. She added that Germany is already working on similar projects in Saxony, as well as in her home region in the Rhine Basin in the south-west, but unfortunately, the technology there is not yet ready.

Boško Jakšić, a journalist and foreign policy expert from Serbia, believes that Serbia benefits more from raspberry exports (which reached 240 million euros in the first ten months of 2023) than it would from lithium mining. He argues that the lion's share of profits would go to Rio Tinto, while the rich agricultural region of the Jadar Valley, where tests were conducted, would be left ecologically devastated.

"While the public fears that the country will turn into a dumping ground for the European Union, leaders in Berlin and Paris assure us that mining would serve as an incentive for Serbia's faster integration into the EU," Jakšić said. Chancellor Scholz however emphasized that Germany cannot guarantee high environmental protection standards in lithium mining, stating that the responsibility lies with the company itself. On the other hand, Vučić reassured his citizens that Rio Tinto will comply with all environmental regulations. "We will never hide anything from our people at any stage of the opening of the mine, at any part of the procedure," Vučić said at the signing ceremony. "As president, I will personally fight for the environment and for the lives of our citizens in Jadar, so that their water and air are clean."

> The Serbian president has reassured his citizens that Rio Tinto will comply with all environmental regulations.

The opposition parties remain unconvinced by the president's environmental guarantees. "There is a complete lack of trust in the government when they say it will be in the interest of citizens," says the co-leader of the Green-Left Front, Biljana Đorđević. "We fear that Serbia will be sacrificed to provide lithium for electric vehicles that pretty much nobody in Serbia can afford."

Nevertheless, a key question arises: if the Serbian government failed to impose such obligations on Chinese companies mining in Serbia, how will it succeed with Rio Tinto, a company with a history of using environmentally harmful technologies that have polluted various parts of the world?

Promoting green energy, dangerous to the environment

In September 2020, Rio Tinto was accused of polluting rivers in Papua New Guinea by releasing toxic substances. Residents of Bougainville claimed that the

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company's actions caused health problems for 12,000 people living in the area. This incident occurred shortly after the resignation of the company's CEO and two general managers following a scandal over the destruction of World Cultural Heritage sites linked to Aboriginal communities in Australia. Rio Tinto's mines in Western Australia had destroyed caves that were sacred to these 46,000-year-old indigenous cultures.

According to the estimate of the American Geological Institute, there are about 26 million tons of lithium reserves in the world. Of that, Chile has by far the most, around 9.3 million. It is followed by Australia with 6.2, Argentina with 3.6 and China with three million. The rest are scattered across various continents. Europe has not been intensively explored until now. It is known that certain reserves exist in Portugal, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Serbia and Spain. But only in Serbia has a project to mine actually begun.

"There is still too little information about eco-friendly lithium extraction," says Dragana Đorđević, a professor at the Institute of Chemistry, Technology and Metallurgy in Belgrade. It appears that ecological experts, the public and even the company are uncertain of the potential effects, as only two mines in the world use a similar lithium extraction process. What is known is that both mines, located in China and the United States, extract lithium from rock material. However, in both cases, the mines are situated in desert regions, and their environmental impact extends up to 150 kilometres in diameter.

According to the estimate of the American Geological Institute, there are about 26 million tons of lithium reserves in the world.

"Mining lithium destroys high-quality agricultural land, pollutes the air with toxic dust, and releases concentrated sulphuric and hydrochloric acids," Đorđević adds. "Toxic mine waters, with high concentrations of boron and other harmful substances, would be forced to the surface under pressure, potentially contaminating the underground waters of the Drina river, which is the highest-quality water reservoir in western Serbia," she warns.

"Toxic waste water will be created, but so will tens of millions of tons of dangerous waste material, which would be a chemical time bomb. Mining that discards hazardous waste into nature where it remains in the form of tailings cannot be considered ecological," Đorđević concludes. Environmental NGOs and inhabitants of Loznica have warned as well that the mine's construction could lead to habitat destruction and water pollution. Many also fear the potential displacement of residents in the area.

Marijana Petković from the association *Ne damo Jadar* says that residents of Loznica and surrounding villages will use all available means to prevent lithium

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extraction in their area. The association sent a letter to French President Emmanuel Macron asking him to halt the project. In his response, Macron stated that it is up to the people of Serbia to decide whether they want the mine or not.

"The people have decided, we will not give up Jadar and there won't be a mine here," Petković said. If the lithium mine in Jadar near Loznica is opened, it will be the first such mine established in a populated area. However, Vladica Cvetković, a professor at the faculty of mining and geology at the University of Belgrade, notes that around 20 similar projects are currently being implemented or planned in Europe.

"I am truly surprised that in our country it is still claimed that the world has abandoned mining. It is evident that the assertion that Jadar would be the first such mine in a populated area is being used as a dramatic and alarming slogan without substantial concern," Cvetković said. "There are no such mines anywhere in Europe at present, but when they do exist, they will be located exclusively in populated areas." FE

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Why Serbia is a country of contradictions

CHRISTIAN ECCHER

Serbia has become well known for its geopolitical position between East and West. Despite this, sharp divides also exist at every level of the country's society. While Belgrade has eagerly embraced a neoliberal model, it still promotes its role as a defender of traditional values. The effects of such contradictions can be seen throughout Serbia.

Serbia is a country of contradictions. It is very close to the European Union, in fact almost in the centre of Europe, but at the same time it is very far from it. Serbian labour migrants have always chosen Western Europe as a destination for emigration, but the heart of the nation beats in the East, with a cultural and sentimental link to Russia. In Serbia, joining the EU is more a matter of national and social prestige – joining a club of rich and well-ordered countries – than a necessity. To the contrary, many of the rules laid down by the EU are seen as an obstacle and a hindrance to EU candidates.

It has to be said that Brussels, especially in recent years, has not done very much for its popularity in Serbia. The EU is not only Serbia's number one trading partner but also its biggest donor, with four billion euros given since 2000, compared to 31.4 million euros from China in second place. As far as Russia is concerned, there are no real data on the subject, but Moscow is not even in the top ten largest donors. Nevertheless, ordinary Serbians believe that it is Russia that helps Serbia the most, including financially.

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The Vučić phenomenon

There is another, purely Serbian, contradiction: the ruling political class, led by President Aleksandar Vučić, promotes a deeply neoliberal domestic policy while at the same time manages to present itself to the public as a very responsible political class, striving to preserve the Serbian nation and to take care of the public. In this way, Vučić is similar to Belarus's Alyaksandr Lukashenka, but one who does not defend national assets and instead sells everything he can. For example, he is prepared to sell the whole of central Serbia to the multinational Rio Tinto for lithium extraction.

Vučić's party has been in power since 2012, twelve long years in which the president has built up an extraordinarily strong and very stable political system. Vučić became the absolute master of Serbia at a time when the West (above all the US and Angela Merkel's Germany) became disappointed with the incumbent Boris Tadić, who was guilty of failing to resolve the Kosovo issue and who did not have the strong support of the electorate. At that time, the only real alternative was the Radical Party of the war criminal Vojislav Šešelj. Thanks to the political work of western diplomats, Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić left the Radicals and founded the Serbian Progressive Party, SNS, on the basis of which they won the 2012 presidential elections. Nikolić became president, but behind him Vučić ruled, promising the West that he would solve the Kosovo issue.

Vučić formally became president in 2017 but de facto he has been the most powerful man in Serbian politics since 2012. Under Slobodan Milošević, Vučić was minister of information and one of the architects of the ethno-nationalist propaganda of those years. Years of balancing between the West and the demands of Russia and China followed, before a reconciliation agreement was finally reached in the form of the agreement signed in Brussels with the Kosovo Albanian representatives. During these years of rule, Vučić grew stronger and stronger until he became the absolute master of Serbia. This was made possible by the SNS machine, a party with a strong hierarchical structure with Vučić at the top. Every post in the civil service is reserved for those who bring additional votes to the coalition government (which also includes the socialists of Ivica Dačić, the longest-serving politician ever in the countries of former Yugoslavia).

Vučić formally became president in 2017 but de facto has been the most powerful man in Serbian politics since 2012.

Every state institution, from hospitals to universities, is strictly controlled by the party and follows the iron logic of absolutism. The heads of companies are appointed by the SNS leadership and can act as absolute rulers in the institution

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they control. In fact, they are little "Vučićs" themselves. The opposition parties are left with crumbs, much like the humanities faculties, but nothing fundamentally changes. These leaders also adopt the logic of absolute rule and are no different from Vučić and "his people" (the faculty where I work has had the same dean for 18 years. I have not seen this anywhere, not in the Central Asian countries, not in Russia and not in Belarus).

Intellectuals and university professors are silent and, following a corporatist logic similar to that promoted by Mussolini in Italy in the 1930s, they participate in the system of government and receive money from the state through research projects and state funding, as long as they do not interfere with the government. Meanwhile, whoever obstructs the government must leave, with the bureaucratic machine casting its ominous shadow over them. Most dissidents – even those who simply refuse to take part in this system of government – quietly emigrate abroad, to the West.

Happy and Pink

Meanwhile, the ruling class has been enormously enriched by corruption and deals with western and eastern partners, such as the concession of Belgrade airport to the French company Vinci; the construction of the elite Belgrade-on-the-Water (*Beograd na vodi*) neighbourhood by a company from the United Arab Emirates; and the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed rail contract with Chinese and Russian companies. These are just a few of the deals made with foreign businessmen, which have been followed by a series of scams. Contracts with foreign companies are often state secrets, so it is not known what Serbia's foreign debt really is. One example involves the Fiat car industry group, which received impressive state funding to relocate one of its factories to the Serbian city of Kragujevac. For this reason, the West (especially the EU) has criticized Vučić and called him an autocrat, but at least for the time being it has no intention of withdrawing its political support.

> Serbia's ruling class has been enormously enriched by corruption and deals with western and eastern partners.

Why is the president still enjoying the sympathy of the majority of the Serbian population? Institutional control and clientelism are key, but even more important is the role of the media, in particular the two private TV channels "Pink" and "Happy", which ensure voter support for the ruling party and Vučić. The journalist and political analyst Boris Varga points out that in Serbia, the role of the state-

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owned RTS has never been crucial in achieving and reproducing consensus. The model of private television as the main engine of propaganda has been promoted as far back as Milošević, as it avoids criticism from the opposition and international organizations.

State television does remain relatively free and this does not hinder the ruling class, as the population mainly follows other broadcasters which attract the masses thanks to the widespread use of paraphernalia such as reality shows. The main private TV channels are Pink, owned by the tycoon Željko Mitrović (who is a musician, industrialist, drone maker, inventor, and cocaine addict to boot), and Happy, originally a children's TV channel, which has illegitimately turned into a very powerful political propaganda tool. The director of Happy is the journalist Milomir Marić, and its regular guest and commentator is the war criminal and MP Vojislav Šešelj. The government team uses Happy and Pink to disseminate its monologues, and from the two broadcasters' Belgrade studios Vučić regularly attacks the small opposition media and discredits political opponents. Happy and Pink are the most watched TV stations in towns and villages, but in addition to them there are dozens of private broadcasters controlled by the state-owned telecoms company Telekom Srbija, which is gradually expanding its control over the airwaves.

The differences between urban and rural Serbia are dramatic, both economically and culturally. These channels penetrate where poverty and a lack of knowledge, prevails. Around 6.9 per cent of the Serbian population live in absolute poverty, while 29.8 per cent are in a situation defined as severe, on the verge of poverty and at risk of social exclusion (i.e. these people are barely making ends meet). These are very high figures, especially considering that the average wage (February 2023) in Serbia is only around 600 euros per month and inflation is 16 per cent. Serbia is one of the poorest countries in Europe and its population spends almost everything it earns on food. A real middle class exists only in Novi Sad and Belgrade. The opposition has two television channels, N1 and Nova S, owned by the American-based United Media, which only broadcast via the SBB internet platform: this means that the majority of the population does not have access to these channels.

Sources of change or instability?

Vojvodina is a multi-ethnic region of Serbia with as many as 28 nationalities, many languages and many cultures. The Yugoslav constitution of 1974 granted the province autonomy during the previous era. In the 1990s Milošević abolished its autonomy, and it was only in 2001 when the so-called "Omnibus Law" was adopted that the area's unique status was restored. However, this only exists on paper.

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Serbia is still a highly centralized country, with all decisions being taken exclusively in Belgrade.

Vojvodina is considered the richest region in Serbia, though it is essentially losing this status. Local Hungarians, especially young Hungarians, are relocating to Hungary to study and work. The local Romanians have almost disappeared from Banat (the Romanian name for the region) and other nationalities live on their own land, but play no role at the political and institutional level in the Republic of Serbia. According to the historian Boris Mašić, the process of "Saintsavization" [referring to Saint Sava, the patron saint of the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose cult is an important part of the idea of a Greater Serbia] and the process of "Serbianization" is now underway in Vojvodina. The regional capital, Novi Sad, is experiencing an unprecedented "urbicide". Construction is taking place wherever possible, even where it should not be, and environmental protests are being suppressed with violence.

Vojvodina is considered the richest region in Serbia, though it is essentially losing this status.

However, there are still some good things. For example, the regional Radio Television Vojvodina (RT Vojvodina) maintains a multilingual structure and many other broadcasters (e.g. Slovenia's regional RTV Koper) often visit RT Vojvodina's headquarters in order to learn from it how to create multilingual television.

Will the opposition be able to build on the success of the month-long demonstrations and create a political alternative to Vučić? It is unlikely that this will happen. In fact, there is a lack of personalities with high ethical values who could unite the parties opposed to Vučić. These groups are deeply divided amongst themselves. On the right are Boško Obradović and his movements *Dveri* (Doors) and *Zavetniki* (Confessors), which advocate for a nationalist policy worthy of the Italian Fascist Party of the early 1930s. On the left are ecological movements and civil organizations which do not find a common language and are not united by a political platform.

The opposition hopes that the West will find an alternative to Vučić, and this could happen in the future, but there is a danger that the new president, whoever he or she may be, will represent the interests of foreigners in the country rather than the Serbian people. The state, then, is Vučić himself, the only politician with concrete experience of governance. This was demonstrated by the recent visit of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Belgrade at the end of June 2024. Scholz arrived unexpectedly in Serbia to persuade Vučić to open lithium mines in the middle of Serbia, in an area that (used to be) a nature reserve. Three years ago, Serbs were already protesting against the opening of these mines by the multinational Rio

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Tinto. Although the president promised that the mines would not be opened, pressure from the West forced Vučić to change his mind. The population is protesting again, and the pro-European opposition feels ridiculed and deprived of Brussels's support in its fight against the Vučić autocracy. At the same time, the population is gradually losing confidence in the European integration project.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin continues to exploit the situation to create instability in the Balkans. The Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, Alexander Bochan-Harchenko, regularly makes statements to the pro-government Serbian press and accuses the West of organizing clashes and demonstrations in Kosovo and Metohija at the same time, in order to provoke a real "Serbian Spring".

This is a clear signal to Vučić: Russia is on your side and if you are on our side too, we will defend you. In order to further balance between East and West, Vučić is returning to the old and effective policies of nationalism and Kosovo. Whenever there are institutional problems, the Serbian president causes a series of protests in Kosovska Mitrovica. Then new problems are created and new tensions are artificially diffused. However, playing with fire always carries risks: a resurgence of nationalist extremism in the region cannot be ruled out. Violence could break out in Kosovo and Metohija, then spill over into Serbia's borders and even cause an explosion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an ethnically divided and institutionally dysfunctional country.

So far, Vučić has managed to position himself as the guarantor of the Dayton Agreement and of the integrity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but there is nothing to say that one day he will no longer be able to take control of the situation and to quell the violence. The Kremlin is just waiting for such an opportunity to finally infiltrate the Balkans and cause chaos in Europe.

Obstacles to change

In order to better understand this complex and very interesting country, we need to focus on the people and their everyday lives. As aforementioned, there is a huge gap between Serbs living in cities and Serbs living in small towns and rural areas. In the cities, Serbian society is rather schizophrenic: it seeks a western, neoliberal model of life, focused on the search for personal wealth, while at the same time wanting to uphold the traditional nationalist values of the 19th century. In this respect, Serbian society is identical in every respect to Russian society: selfish and greedy for wealth, but ready to send young (poor) people to war to defend national values and punish enemies. Meanwhile, poverty and total ignorance reign in the Serbian countryside.

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To give you an idea of the situation, here are some figures: in a country of just under five million inhabitants, there are around 700,000 people without teeth. Out of necessity, not opportunism, these people understand politics as a contract with the currently dominant classes: I give you a vote, you give me a job; you can steal and get rich, but you can provide me with my daily bread, coffee and cigarettes. The political parties in opposition cannot and do not know how to talk to these people: they mock them, but they do not understand that they are dealing with people who are barely making ends meet. These people are demanding concrete answers, not promises of institutional reforms, EU accession and so on.

Words about democracy are not enough for anyone. Vučić, meanwhile, often addresses the people, goes to the villages (like Lukashenka in Belarus) and promises to solve their everyday problems (and often does so). You do not explain to people who are barely getting by that sewage or road problems are for the competent authorities to solve. What matters to them is that the problems are solved as soon as possible. That is why they vote for Vučić, because there is always the hope that he will appear in person in their villages and help them to solve specific problems.

Intellectuals, especially writers, are another major obstacle to change in Serbia. Most of them are still living in the 19th century and are looking for a significant role in society. They would like to play an active role in the political sphere and they would still like to be the ones who create ideologies for people. A good example is Dobrica Ćosić, who was a writer and prime minister under Milošević. It is clear that he did not achieve anything concrete but was merely used by Milošević for his own purposes. Even opposition intellectuals would like to return to their old role as ideologues: a poet friend of mine (from the opposition) recently confessed to me that he was nostalgic for the time when poets were valued and took part in political decision-making.

The role of the political intellectual is now obsolete, and we should not be nostalgic for those times. Serbian intellectuals love their nation very much, but not the people who make it up, because they do not know them and do not want to know them. One very famous writer told me frankly that his role is to use his novels to motivate people to go to Kosovo and to go to war, while he sits in his study and writes for them.

Inherited nationalism

Young people live in a bubble. Completely disconnected from the world around them, they rarely develop a critical awareness of themselves. They are passive and feel unaccepted. Humanities graduates work mainly in the service centres of west-

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ern companies, answering calls from rich westerners when they have problems with an online order or a refrigerator they have just bought. They seem to be satisfied with low salaries, as it is all about survival. The entertainment industry provides cheap entertainment, from a week-long seaside holiday to drugs that make you forget reality.

The first generation who knew neither the Austro-Hungarian Empire nor Yugoslavia, and who grew up in the Republic of Serbia, have already entered universities throughout the country. However, the causes of the youth crisis need to be found elsewhere, not in Yugoslavia or Vienna. What does this stagnation really mean in a country where, until very recently, young people largely opposed Milošević and his dictatorship? The greatest responsibility lies with the school system which is completely devastated. One police officer, who wishes to remain anonymous, confessed to me that over the last 20 years the police have started to monitor the diplomas obtained by students at public universities. More than 40 per cent of them are bought or obtained with bribes. "We are so desperate that we don't know what to do. The entire country's police force would not be enough to bring order to the country's universities and to distinguish genuine diplomas from fake ones," says the police official.

The nationalist rhetoric of the former dictator Milošević is still heard at all levels of public discourse.

Primary education is even worse than secondary education. Serbia has been at the bottom of the PISA (the OECD's programme for assessing the literacy level of 15-year-olds) rankings for many years. More than half of Serbian citizens are functionally illiterate, i.e. they cannot read and understand a text of moderate complexity, such as a newspaper article. The opposition does not know how to talk to this part of the population, which is easy prey for the nationalist and populist statements of Vučić and his allies.

In this way, a huge class divide is reproduced. Young people from good families, who are also tired and unmotivated, are leaving their homes en masse and going elsewhere, mainly to the West, where they can continue their education, find work and a satisfactory social role. After all, Austria is less than 500 kilometres from Belgrade. The poorest stay and survive as best they can on the basis of the values and models provided by the dominant classes. These are, again, the nationalist models of the 1990s. It is true that, since then, Serbian society has been subjected to constant convulsions, violence and verbal intolerance, which seem to be inspired by more than just the younger generation. The nationalist rhetoric of the former dictator Milošević is still heard at all levels of public discourse.

The nationalist ideologies inherited from the 1990s are complemented by the typical values of neoliberalism, which the country has embraced with open arms

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since the end of the last Balkan wars: competition, disdain for the weakest, and enrichment at any cost. These two models, although seemingly opposed to each other, are in fact coherent. Serbian youth live in a kind of schizophrenic bubble where the defence and glorification of national superiority meets and merges with the pursuit of wealth and success at the social level. The country's absolute master, Aleksandar Vučić, has managed to reconcile these contradictions, because he is in complete control of the country's public life. **FE**

This text is based on a talk given at The Nida Forum which took place on September 6th-7th, 2024 in Nida, Lithuania, at the Curonian Spit History Museum. The forum is organized by the Thomas Mann Cultural Centre.

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The myth of the Serbian-Russian friendship

NATASZA STYCZYŃSKA

The Serbian-Russian friendship is a politically constructed myth that emerged during the Milošević era but gained prominence after changes in Russia and the strengthening of Putin's position. Serbia, with its anti-NATO and anti-western sentiments that were caused mainly by the 1999 bombings and the activities of the Hague Tribunal, became a useful partner for Russia, opening a window for renewed influence in the region.

After reading a series on Serbian history of the 19th and early 20th centuries by Slobodan Jovanović, a highly esteemed Serbian historian, lawyer, philosopher, literary critic, diplomat and politician from the early 20th century, one might wonder why the myth of Serbian-Russian friendship appears so enduring in contemporary Serbian policy, culture and society. Indeed, Russia's historical presence was less significant than that of other European powers. The answer lies in the political construction of this historical friendship over recent decades. This myth serves both nations. For Russia, it helps maintain influence in the Balkans and counter EU presence, while for Serbia it supports its position in the ongoing Kosovo issue and reinforces illiberal policies.

Serbian emancipation in the 19th century transformed a poor, underpopulated agricultural land into a modern nation by European standards. Historian Leopold von Ranke praised this transformation in his 1829 book, *Die Serbische Revolution*, which celebrated Serbia's revolt against Ottoman rule. The country attracted numerous foreigners from more prosperous European nations, who contributed to

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its modernization across various sectors, including music, architecture, the military and academia. Throughout the 19th century, Serbia, initially autonomous within the Ottoman Empire and gaining independence in 1878, exemplified the process of a former Ottoman province successfully completing a European-style modernization. There was no feudalism, boyars or high culture that excluded common language speakers, and Russian influence in the country was relatively modest during that time.

Soviet distrust

In the 19th century, the Russian tsars favoured Bulgaria over Serbia due to its proximity to their objective of taking Constantinople. At the same time, Serbia was aligned with the Habsburg sphere of influence. The Habsburg empire, along with other European powers, thwarted the Russian-backed Treaty of San Stefano in 1878, preventing the formation of an expanded Bulgaria that would have included much of present-day south Serbia.

By the late 19th century, Russian influence in Serbia grew with the rise of the Radical Party led by Nikola Pašić, a prominent Russophile and influential statesman. Despite the May coup in 1903 and the subsequent dynastic change, Russia was not Serbia's sole ally. St Petersburg shared this role with France. Following the October Revolution, French influence became the most significant until the late 1930s.

During the interwar period, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was a firm opponent of the Soviet Union, with formal diplomatic relations established only in 1940. However, the attitude towards the Russian White emigration that settled in significant numbers in Belgrade and other towns was markedly positive, contrasting with sentiments toward the Soviets.

By the end of the Second World War, the Yugoslav partisans had become one of the most effective anti-Axis resistance movements, liberating the entirety of Yugoslavia by May 1945 alongside the British and Red armies. Unlike other socialist states, socialist Yugoslavia experienced the departure of the Red Army from its territory in Spring 1945. Joseph Broz Tito, leader of the Yugoslav communists, had gained Stalin's trust due to the rapid Sovietization of the state. However, in 1948, a major schism occurred with the "Tito-Stalin split". Stalin imposed an economic blockade on Yugoslavia and deployed Soviet troops to the borders of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria with Yugoslavia. This led to the purge of Yugoslav communists suspected of being pro-Soviet. The break in relations with Stalin allowed Yugoslav socialism to develop independently of Soviet influence but also fostered a cautious attitude among the main Yugoslav communists toward the Soviet Union.

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After Tito died in 1980, the power of communist leaders in the various Yugoslav republics grew, alongside a rise in ethno-nationalism. Slobodan Milošević emerged as the dominant figure among these leaders following the "Antibureaucratic Revolution", a series of coups in Vojvodina, Kosovo and Montenegro. A key difference between Milošević and other ethno-nationalist politicians in the region was his faith in the Soviet Union and later Russia. Interestingly, Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first president, was distrustful of Milošević. During the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, Russia supported international sanctions against the Milošević regime. In 1992, Moscow endorsed UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions and establishing the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

In the 1999 Kosovo War, Russia did not assist Milošević's Yugoslavia though it did express discontent over NATO's bombing of Serbia. Seeking to establish a foothold in the region, Russia deployed peacekeeping forces to Kosovo after the Kumanovo Agreement in June 1999, doing so without consulting the international community. However, the contingent did not effectively participate in the peacekeeping mission. Still, the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia became the main argument backing up the thoughts and feelings of anti-western circles, who claimed that the only trusted partner could be found in the Orthodox East.

Following the democratic changes in Serbia and the October Revolution of 2000, which ended Milošević's rule, Yugoslavia entered a new democratic chapter for the first time since the Axis occupation in 1941. In 2003 it transformed into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro.

Construction of the myth

The democratic reforms in Serbia were short-lived. Elements of the *ancien régime* and former allies of Milošević orchestrated the assassination of the reformist Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. His main political rival, Vojislav Koštunica, who served as president of Yugoslavia from 2000 to 2003, is believed to have protected the conspirators after becoming prime minister in early 2004. Koštunica and his associates gradually reintroduced a key narrative from Milošević's propaganda: the betrayal of Serbia by former western allies, primarily the US and the UK. This shift was accompanied by a rise in clericalism, historical revisionism and the development of a new myth of eternal friendship with Russia, the largest Orthodox nation.

This narrative was pivotal in allowing the political elite to evade responsibility for the dissolution of Yugoslavia, lost wars and the country's impoverishment. To sustain this narrative, having a powerful foreign ally like Putin's Russia became essential for Serbian nationalism. Serbia experienced turbulent times, with Mon-

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tenegro proclaiming independence in 2006, followed by Kosovo in 2008. At the same time, for Russia, the eastern enlargement of NATO (1999–2004) and the European Union (2004–07) posed threats to its desired influence over former Soviet republics and satellite states. Concurrently, Balkan countries were orienting themselves towards the West by submitting EU and NATO applications, and the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003 confirmed the EU's commitment to including Western Balkan nations.

Simultaneously, Serbia sought a significant ally to support its non-recognition of Kosovo in the international arena, a role that Russia was eager to fulfil, especially amid rising competition with the US and its European allies. However, Russian backing of Serbian policies in the UN Security Council, particularly concerning Kosovo's status, came at a price.

In 2008, Serbia's petroleum industry was sold to the Russian company Gazprom for a fraction of its market value. This transaction was dubbed the "deal of the century" and was supported by Koštunica and other leading politicians, reflecting a political consensus that viewed it as a beneficial move. Boris Tadić, Serbia's president from 2004 to 2012, expressed confidence in this approach during his 2004 inauguration speech, stating, "Today, our foreign policy priorities are European integration, good neighbourliness and balanced relations with the three centripetal points of world politics: Brussels, Washington and Moscow." After visiting Beijing in August 2009, he further defined Serbia's foreign policy within the framework of "four pillars".

> Serbia sought a significant ally to support its non-recognition of Kosovo, a role that Russia was eager to fulfil.

After Boris Tadić replaced Koštunica as Serbia's leading political figure in 2008, Russian influence continued to grow despite Tadić's apparent position as a pro-European statesman. Notably, he was one of the few European leaders who did not condemn Russia's war in Georgia that same year. While Tadić promoted messages of reconciliation in the former Yugoslav region, his policies aligned with ethno-nationalism, subtly supporting Serbian nationalistic politicians and parties, particularly among Serbian minorities in the region. His approach, especially regarding Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), set the stage for the post-2012 era, as the new Serbian political establishment would likely continue to support these same groups.

The political change of 2012 marked the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) led by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, former close associates of Vojislav Šešelj, who had been convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of crimes against the Croatian minority in Vojvodi-

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na during the Yugoslav Wars. This shift was facilitated by Ivica Dačić, leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), who changed alliances to support the SNS. Dačić has consistently remained one of Russia's most loyal allies in the region.

Friends forever or pragmatic partners?

The reformist potential and expectations concerning the SNS and SPS gradually diminished despite some positive developments regarding Kosovo and the signing of the Brussels Agreement, which aimed to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo under EU auspices. The first war in Ukraine in 2014 marked a period of increased Russian influence not only in Serbia but also in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As the EU struggled to present a unified stance in support of Ukraine, some member states began exploring potential rapprochement with Russia already in 2015, seeking to ease economic relations and discuss issues like travel, visas and energy policy. This provided a valuable message to the Serbian political elite, which recognized that expanding Russian influence could serve their interests. In 2014, both Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin visited Belgrade, offering "unconditional support" for Kosovo's reintegration into Serbia.

Souvenirs and graffiti featuring Serbian and Russian symbols, as well as images of Putin, began appearing in 2014. Two years later, they had become symbols for "anti-imperialistic" nationalist movements and football hooligans. The peak of "Putinomania" occurred during the opening of the Sveti Sava Church in January 2019, where Putin and Vučić were the main guests. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some compared Putin's popularity in Serbia to that enjoyed by rock stars. This came as a surprise for many Russians who fled their homeland and settled in Belgrade to avoid conscription. Putin remains the most popular foreign politician, which explains why 80 per cent of citizens oppose the introduction of sanctions against Russia

In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the myth of friendship between Russia and Serbia was effectively propagated in western media. Foreign journalists often relied on Serbian sources that crafted this narrative, rather than analysing the historical, political and economic ties independently. This myth was supported by the "special connections" among political leaders, church officials, sports clubs and influential figures closely linked to the state apparatus, such as film director Emir Kusturica and poet Matija Bećković. This environment contributed to what some analysts refer to as the "systematic forgetting" of historical facts, creating a narrative that portrayed Russia as Serbia's most important foreign

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policy partner and key economic donor. This is despite the EU being the largest provider of financial assistance to Serbia. In 2018, to commemorate the 180th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Serbia and Russia, foreign ministers Ivica Dačić and Sergey Lavrov published a joint article in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and the Serbian *Politika*, highlighting years of "friendship, trust and cooperation" between the "two fraternal nations". During the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia, along with China, employed "vaccine diplomacy" to foster sales of their medical equipment and vaccines. This was also done to fuel mistrust toward western-produced vaccines and medications.

In Serbian media, the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 was largely portrayed as NATO-provoked, with widespread arguments asserting that Russia was defending Russian-speaking citizens. According to the report by the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), a Serbian human rights organization, most media coverage tends to be pro-Russian and presents biased reporting. While most European nations condemned the brutality of the Russian invasion, Serbian intellectuals, church officials and celebrities signed petitions against sanctions on Russia. The petition demanded that Serbian officials not join the sanctions imposed by the West, despite Serbia's obligations to align foreign policy with the EU's one like other EU candidates from the region. Serbia was the only EU candidate state that did not fulfil this commitment.

Serbian World and its repercussions

The development of the *Srpski svet* (Serbian World) project, a smaller counterpart to the *Russkiy mir* (Russian World), exemplifies how Russian ideas have been adapted for local purposes. In 2021, Serbian Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin, a veteran politician from the Milošević era, was put in charge of promoting this new concept. The Serbian World aims to create a "*Ujedinjeni srpski svet*" (United Serbian World), advocating for the unification of Serbs in the region to protect their identity, language, culture and history, with Belgrade as the central decision-making capital. As Vulin stated, the long-term goal is political unity among Serbs. However, proponents of this concept neglect to mention that integrating the Western Balkans with the EU would allow for borderless living for Serbs in the region.

The primary (mis)use of the friendship myth serves political agendas, reflecting a continuity of themes from Milošević's propaganda, and finally constructed in Koštunica's time. Serbian policymakers employ this narrative for two main purposes. First, they impose certain values through the school curriculum, promote special relations in culture and sports, and foster a clerical society that views the

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Orthodox churches in Belgrade and Moscow as the only "pure" institutions. This strategy promotes "traditional values and culture" aligned with Putin's Russia while condemning the liberal West. Historical revisionism contributes significantly to a cult of ethnic self-victimization. Consequently, support for EU integration has declined among Serbian citizens. Opposition parties espousing Euroscepticism and nationalism have emerged, yet paradoxically, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) remains the most solid European partner. This dynamic has strengthened the phenomenon of "stabilitocracy", creating fertile ground for illiberal policies that disregard the rule of law and minority rights according to a majoritarian interpretation of democracy.

The second purpose of this narrative is to bolster nationalism in regional policies, which, while interconnected with the first, also targets citizens in neighbouring countries, particularly Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This has resulted in Belgrade's increased influence through politicians dependent on Serbian support. The actions of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro have empowered pro-Serbian and pro-Russian "reformist" parties that have been part of the government since autumn 2020. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, support for Milorad Dodik, the political leader of the Republika Srpska entity (currently under US sanctions), contributes to the further destabilization of the country.

Perpetuating the myth

The Serbian-Russian friendship is a politically constructed myth that emerged during the Milošević era but gained prominence after changes in Russia and the strengthening of Putin's position. For Russia, the EU's "Big Bang" enlargement, along with new NATO members from eastern and southeastern parts of Europe, signalled an opportunity for action to secure the Russian sphere of influence. Serbia, with its anti-NATO and anti-western sentiments, caused mainly by the 1999 bombings and the activities of the Hague Tribunal, became a useful partner, opening a window for renewed influence in the region.

The myth was embraced by Boris Tadić and his circle, and later was further developed by Aleksandar Vučić. As a result, it has significantly fostered anti-EU sentiments among Serbian citizens while bolstering nationalism and Russian influence in the region. The prevailing reasoning in Serbia is that the West cannot be trusted and that strong ties with Russia are the only guarantee for preserving the country's territorial integrity and avoiding the recognition of Kosovo on the international stage. The myth emphasizes strategic relations between Serbia and Russia in foreign policy and economy. Interestingly, the data do not seem to confirm this claim,

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as Russia is not even among Serbia's top five largest trade partners. The 2023 reports demonstrate that EU-Serbia trade in goods accounted for 60 per cent of Serbian trade in total. Moreover, the EU is the largest donor in the Republic of Serbia.

Conversely, Russia views its relationship with Serbia as a means to reassert influence in the Balkans, counter NATO expansion, and project power within a geopolitically significant region. An example of this extended Russian influence is the 2016 attempted coup in Montenegro, where Russian military intelligence (GRU), with the assistance of Serbian partners and local pro-Serbian political leaders, sought to violently overthrow the government during parliamentary elections. The Montenegrin security services arrested 20 Serbian nationals suspected of plotting to impede the election of a pro-NATO government, just as Montenegro was set to join the Alliance the following year.

While many Serbian citizens perceive the friendship with Russia as beneficial, experts caution that gradual and indirect changes, primarily in the cultural and value spheres, are often overlooked. This myth narrows Serbian identity and fosters anti-modernization tendencies, rendering society less inclusive and undermining public trust in institutions and European neighbours.

In his speeches, Vučić advocates for a "four-pillar" foreign policy that seeks to balance relations between the West, Russia, China and also the Arab states. One of the examples of this multi-focus foreign policy is the recent revelations by the *Financial Times*. The newspaper reported on an 800-million-euro export of Serbian grenades to Ukraine (via EU member states). This news, confirmed by Vučić, did not provoke a strong reaction from Russia. Analysts note that Serbia's ammunition exports to Ukraine are not driven by a genuine commitment to supporting Ukrainians against Russian aggression but are primarily motivated by economic and political self-interest aimed at alleviating western pressure. The revenue from these transactions, like other EU funds, is likely to reinforce the existing autocratic regime, which is modelled after Russia. Ultimately, while the narrative of eternal friendship resonates with Serbian society, the relationship is fundamentally pragmatic, driven by strategic interests rather than genuine friendship and loyalty. *EE*

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Montenegro's fight for EU membership amid Serbian revanchism

LEON HARTWELL

The small Balkan state of Montenegro has been an official European Union candidate for many years. In spite of widespread support for integration, the political situation in the country has made accession an increasingly unlikely prospect. This challenge is compounded by growing influence of Serbia's autocratic regime, which poses an immediate threat to Montenegro's EU aspirations.

In a recent article, the *New York Times* suggested that Russia poses the primary external threat to Montenegro's aspirations to join the European Union. This narrative, while appealing to many western officials and pundits, is misleading. Russia certainly plays a disruptive role in Montenegro and the broader Balkans, but it is Serbia, under the increasingly autocratic regime of Aleksandar Vučić, which presents a far more immediate and significant challenge.

Earlier this year, I travelled to Montenegro, meeting with a wide array of political figures from Milo Đukanović, Europe's longest-serving leader, to former Prime Minister Dritan Abazović. I also spoke with over ten per cent of the Montenegrin parliament, as well as journalists, scholars and western diplomats, including the US ambassador. While the views expressed in this article are my own, they are informed by these discussions. My key takeaway from this trip is that Montenegro stands at a crossroads, teetering between EU integration and a possible regression into Serbia's orbit. Why should Montenegrins – and the West – care about these developments?

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From Europe Now! to Europe Never?

There is no doubt that Montenegrins are eager to join the EU, with nearly eight out of ten citizens in favour of integration. In June 2022, capitalizing on this desire, a new political movement, Europe Now!, was founded by the former finance and economy ministers Milojko "Mickey" Spajić and Jakov Milatović. Their goal was straightforward: to catapult Montenegro into the EU with urgency, as the exclamation mark in their party's name suggests. However, as time has passed, it seems Europe Now! might be more of an obstacle to Montenegro's EU path than a champion of it. Earlier this year, the EU gave Montenegro a favourable Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR), typically a sign of significant progress in governance, the rule of law, human rights and economic reform. Yet, some Montenegrin analysts contend that this positive assessment was driven more by the EU's desire to show momentum in its enlargement process than by actual reform achievements in Montenegro.

Regardless of the IBAR's merits, the larger issue is whether Montenegro's government can now deliver the reforms necessary to qualify for EU membership. The EU will not simply hand over membership as a symbolic gesture. Montenegro needs to prove its worth. At the same time, most Montenegrin parliamentarians I spoke to doubt that the country will join the EU soon, despite their eagerness to be part of the supranational structure. Their scepticism in part stems from the current government's actions.

Europe Now! initially surged in popularity, winning both the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, with Milatović becoming president and Spajić taking on the role as prime minister. Less than a year later, however, Milatović left the party after clashing with Spajić. Losing one of its central figures, Europe Now! has since struggled to maintain its momentum. This was evident in municipal elections across Montenegro, from Budva to Podgorica. Meanwhile, Spajić's behaviour has only fuelled internal discord; some parliamentarians confided in me that Spajić dismissively refers to his Europe Now! colleagues in parliament as "my idiots".

> The EU will not simply hand over membership as a symbolic gesture. Montenegro needs to prove its worth.

Spajić's nickname, "Mickey", has taken on a more pejorative twist: some critics refer to him as "Mickey Mouse" behind his back, a jab at his erratic actions, policies and penchant for absurd ideas. During the summer, Spajić reshuffled his cabinet, thereby creating a government that now suffers from a case of elephantiasis. His new cabinet includes seven deputy prime ministers, 25 ministries, and a minister without portfolio. His opponents have accused him of inflating the gov-

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ernment in a bid to appease disparate factions. For a country of just over 600,000 people, the bloated government has turned into a source of public mockery, with social media memes showing ministers playing musical chairs, struggling to find seats in government meetings.

Not long after the reshuffle, Spajić conspicuously cancelled his attendance at a critical defence and security council meeting allegedly due to prior commitments. It emerged later that he was vacationing in France, accompanied by a motley crew, including a Pilates instructor, an influencer, a DJ, a model and a cryptocurrency trader. The presence of the crypto trader seemed more than a coincidence. Spajić, it appears, just cannot seem to stray far from the world of digital currencies.

The prime minister has flirted with the idea of turning Montenegro into a crypto utopia, envisioning a nation awash in Bitcoin mining and digital currency. "We do not have our own national currency," he lamented in a 2023 HBO documentary. "We use the euro, but we cannot print it. That's not fair. That's not cool." But his crypto dreams carry serious risks. Critics warn that crime syndicates could exploit Montenegro's crypto-friendly policies to launder money. And there is the environmental toll – crypto mining is notorious for guzzling electricity and water. In 2021, the average Bitcoin transaction consumed 16,000 litres of water, enough to fill a swimming pool.

The prime minister has flirted with the idea of turning Montenegro into a crypto utopia.

The crypto dream also has a shadowy past. Spajić has repeatedly downplayed his links to South Korean crypto mogul Do Kwon, founder of Terraform Labs, who is currently facing legal action for financial misconduct. However, according to US court documents, Spajić invested 75,000 US dollars in Terraform Labs before it was officially registered in Singapore in 2018. The company's eventual collapse wiped out $40 billion from the market, leaving chaos in its wake.

Meanwhile, the economic policies of Europe Now! have been met with mixed results. The party has promoted salary increases, which were achieved in part by reducing pension contributions and eliminating healthcare contributions – the latter alone made up four per cent of Montenegro's GDP. The timing of the latest round of salary hikes, just before the recent Podgorica elections, seemed strategically aimed at bolstering the party's support. Nonetheless, this financial manoeuvre has raised alarms about its sustainability, with critics warning that future pensions for many Montenegrins are likely to shrink and quality healthcare will become increasingly inaccessible.

The larger concern with Spajić, however, is not just his penchant for reckless policy – it is that he has cozied up to dangerous allies. He has formed political partner-

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ships with political figures who openly support both Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Vladimir Putin. These alliances raise troubling questions about where Spajić's loyalties truly lie, and whether Europe Now! is taking Montenegro closer to Europe or steering it dangerously off course. For a country that once dreamed of Europe Now!, the bitter reality may soon be "Europe Never?"

Serbia's revanchist regime

When asked about the biggest external threat to Montenegro's sovereignty and the EU's integration path, Montenegrins often declare that Russia is the number one threat – not necessarily because they believe it, but because they know it is what westerners expect to hear. Russia's geopolitical machinations are familiar territory for audiences from Washington to Brussels, where Putin serves as the default bogeyman. The reality on the ground in Montenegro, however, tells a more nuanced story.

When pressed, Montenegrins will ultimately admit that Serbia poses the bigger threat to their country's future. This is not borne out of some ingrained anti-Serb sentiment – indeed, the historical ties between Montenegro and Serbia run deep. Rather, the issue lies with the Vučić regime itself, and its relentless pursuit of a revanchist agenda. Yet, in both Washington DC and Brussels, policymakers have tended to adopt a Belgrade-centric lens when viewing the Balkans, casting Vučić as a force for regional stability rather than the destabilizing actor he truly is. The Belgrade-centric approach also partly explains why Montenegrins are reluctant to call a spade a spade.

While the Kremlin undoubtedly holds sway in Montenegro, with Russian elites owning about a third of the country's registered yachts and nearly 40 per cent of its real estate, Serbia wields far more influence. Serbia ranks as Montenegro's top import and export partner, a position Russia does not hold. Moreover, though Moscow and Belgrade often pursue complementary goals in the Balkans, western analysts frequently mischaracterize the Vučić regime.

Vučić is often portrayed as "Putin's puppet", but this overlooks his own agency and unique foreign policy objectives in the Balkans. The Vučić regime wields a more immediate and potent influence over Montenegro, thanks to its deep-rooted connections to Montenegrin politicians, the media, and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Serbia's reach into Montenegrin society, both overt and covert, far surpasses what Moscow can achieve from afar.

The real threat Vučić poses to Montenegro and the region lies in his regime's promotion of *Srpski svet* (Serbian World), an ideology akin to Putin's "Russian World". *Srpski svet* envisions all ethnic Serbs – whether they reside in Serbia, Bos-

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nia and Herzegovina, Kosovo or Montenegro – united under one political roof. It is a direct descendant of the Greater Serbia ideology that fuelled violence in the 1990s, a dangerous form of nationalism that fosters division, exclusion and hatred.

Advocates of *Sprski svet* also promote "othering" among Montenegrins – where subnational identities are manipulated to create divisions among groups that once coexisted. In Montenegro, this tactic has intensified ethnic distinctions, straining the country's social fabric. Montenegro is a mosaic of identities, including Montenegrins, Serbs, Albanians, and Bosniaks. Yet, many Montenegrins lead with their ethnic identity rather than a national one, saying, "I'm Serb" or "I'm Albanian". This contrasts with the civic model seen in countries like the United States, where ethnic heritage is often secondary.

Othering has intensified this polarisation, especially between Montenegrin Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins. *Srpski svet* propagandists fuel this process with two somewhat contradictory claims: one, that there is no real difference between Serbs and Montenegrins; and two, that Montenegrin Serbs are victims of systemic discrimination. Both ideas ultimately serve the same purpose: to justify the creation of *Srpski svet*.

Montenegrin opposition leaders fear that Vučić will do everything in his power to prevent Montenegro from joining the EU, especially if it happens before Serbia secures its own membership. Arguably, Vučić officially aspires for EU membership, but only if it can be achieved without political conditions that would curb his power. Moreover, Montenegro's accession would undermine Serbia's influence in the region and shatter Vučić's *Srpski svet* ambitions. The benefits of EU membership would significantly reduce Serbia's leverage over Montenegrin institutions, particularly in the realms of politics and organized crime.

A Montenegro inside the EU would also contest the Serbian media's portrayal of the country as a "failed" or "criminal" state. Should Montenegro become an EU member, this narrative would become harder to sustain, and Serbian citizens, who have grown disillusioned with EU accession, might be spurred to reignite their own demands for integration. For Vučić, this could pose a threat to his autocratic grip on power. At present, only four out of ten Serbians favour joining the EU, but Montenegro's success could rekindle hope and pressure Vučić to shift course.

A dual allegiance?

According to various opposition members, Spajić has increasingly become beholden to right-wing, pro-Serb actors with close ties to the Vučić and Putin regimes – most notably Andrija Mandić (the president of Montenegro's parliament)

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and Milan Knežević. Both men have a troubling past. In 2016, shortly before Montenegro joined NATO, Russia attempted to derail the process by allegedly sponsoring a coup attempt involving a network of Russians and Serbs. Mandić and Knežević were accused of being central figures in the plot. While initially convicted for their involvement, a recent ruling by Montenegro's higher court controversially overturned their convictions.

Although Mandić and Knežević are careful to publicly oppose EU integration, their actions tell a different story. A clear example of this came in response to Serbia's objection to Montenegro's endorsement of a UN resolution condemning the Srebrenica genocide. In a bid to appease Vučić, who vehemently opposed the initiative, Mandić and Knežević helped push through a parliamentary resolution focusing on the Croatian concentration camp at Jasenovac during the Second World War, describing it as genocidal. This manoeuvre was seen by many opposition members as not just an attempt to curry favour with Vučić, but as a direct attack on Montenegro's relationship with Croatia, a key player in its EU accession path.

This balancing act between appeasing pro-Serb actors and moving toward EU membership risks keeping Montenegro in limbo, vulnerable to manipulation. Keeping Montenegro out of the EU would present Serbia with a strategic opening, one that could, in time, revive the old dream of uniting Serbian and Montenegrin territory under a single banner.

A military invasion by Serbia seems far-fetched in a world where Montenegro is a NATO member. Yet, the spectre of a future referendum, one that reconsiders NATO membership or floats the possibility of a new federation, remains a threat. Pro-Serb parties are already promoting the idea that Montenegrins, including those living in Serbia, should be granted dual citizenship. Some Montenegrins worry that, for a nation as small as Montenegro, with barely 600,000 people, such a shift could tip the political scales dramatically. Dual citizenship could, in effect, bolster the voting power of pro-Serb elements, setting the stage for elections or referenda that could compromise Montenegro's sovereignty and further entrench Serbia's influence over the country's future.

Sources of influence

Among the avenues of Serbian influence in Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the media – especially television – stand out as the top platforms. The Serbian Orthodox Church plays a powerful role across the Balkans, operating in Montenegro similarly to how the Russian Orthodox Church once operated in Ukraine. Religious guidance aside, the Serbian Orthodox Church actively pursues

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political agendas aligned with Belgrade, as was the case with the recent UN Resolution on the Srebrenica Genocide. During the Yugoslav wars, it endorsed nationalist causes, and today, it actively supports the *Srpski svet* agenda, mobilising against pro-Western political forces and aligning with Serbian and Russian narratives.

Pro-Serb media narratives also dominate the Montenegrin landscape with three of the four broadcasters with national frequencies controlled by Serbian media groups. These outlets, though privately owned, are heavily influenced by Vučić's regime and promote narratives that align with Belgrade's strategic interests. More than nine out of ten Montenegrins have access to cable television, making it easy for Serbian channels like TV Pink and TV Happy to reach a wide audience. These channels, known for their entertainment programming as well as their politically charged content, have gained significant popularity in Montenegro.

According to Montenegrin journalists, in recent years, media outlets from Serbia, such as TDI Radio and Radio S, have been increasingly acquiring private and independent radio stations across the region. Notably, they have purchased a significant number of stations in Montenegro, including Radio Montena and Radio Jadran, among others. This growing influence of Serbian-owned media in Montenegro has raised concerns about the consolidation of media ownership and its potential impact on the independence and diversity of local media voices.

In addition to promoting narratives to justify *Srpski svet*, these media outlets also frequently promote anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric, often amplified by Russian propaganda outlets like RT and Sputnik, which operate out of Serbia. Consequently, many Montenegrins' perceptions of their country's place in the world are shaped by these narratives. As the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe once said, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." For Montenegro, the risk is clear: the longer its media landscape is dominated by Serbian outlets, the more difficult it will be to foster a national identity distinct from Belgrade's sphere of influence.

As Montenegro moves closer to EU membership, it is likely that anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric will only intensify, making it increasingly difficult for the country to stay on course.

Embracing diversity and the EU

Montenegrins frequently express a longing for decisive leadership, reminiscent of figures like Tito during the Yugoslav era. However, ultimately, what Montenegro needs is not necessarily a strong charismatic leader but a robust, united coalition of political parties whose primary goal is EU integration.

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For the coalition, every decision, every reform, must be strategically aligned to push the country closer to Europe. This coalition should prioritize reforms that bolster democratic institutions, promote transparency, and counteract anti-EU narratives that have gained traction from Serbian and Russian influences. By presenting a united front, the coalition can not only enhance the legitimacy of its initiatives, but also foster greater public trust among Montenegrins, who are eager for a strong vision of their future.

Beyond the structural reforms needed for EU integration, such a coalition must also focus on its internal cohesion. The notion of "othering" certain groups within the country, particularly with regard to ethnic and political divisions, needs to be confronted. Instead of falling victim to divisive narratives, Montenegro could draw inspiration from the "Rainbow Nation" concept championed by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in post-apartheid South Africa.

The essence of this concept lies in celebrating diversity, where the different identities within a nation are seen as its strength, much like a rainbow is composed of different colours that together form something beautiful. For Montenegro, embracing this idea could foster national unity and present a powerful counter-narrative to the divisive rhetoric promoted by the Vučić regime. It would also set a positive example for other Balkan nations struggling with similar issues of identity and sovereignty.

The critical role of EU and US support

Amidst all these challenges, EU and US support for Montenegro has never been more critical. Montenegro is at a pivotal crossroads. While it has made significant progress toward EU integration, the internal and external forces working to undermine its progress cannot be underestimated. If pro-Serb, pro-Russian factions are allowed to prevail, the country's EU membership could be derailed, with far-reaching consequences not only for Montenegro, but for the entire Western Balkans.

The EU and US must make it clear that Montenegro's future lies in the West and that tangible rewards await if the country remains on its current path. At the same time, the transatlantic community needs to deliver the right mix of political, economic and strategic support to keep the momentum going. This includes bolstering independent media in Montenegro, countering Serbian narratives, and encouraging judicial and political reforms that bring the country closer to EU membership.

There is an important precedent that Montenegro and its western allies should consider: the experiences of the Baltic states. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, though

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small in population like Montenegro, have faced similar challenges in dealing with Russian influence – especially in the realms of media and political manipulation. Yet, through concerted efforts, these countries have managed to create relatively resilient democratic institutions and robust media environments, despite the constant threat from their much larger neighbour to the East.

The Baltics offer a clear lesson for Montenegro: with the right combination of internal resolve and external support, small states can stand up to outside influence and thrive within the EU and NATO frameworks. For Montenegro, partnering with the Baltic states to explore their media reforms and strategies for countering foreign influence could be a critical step toward safeguarding its own path to EU membership. A key figure in this endeavour could be Kaja Kallas, the incoming EU foreign policy chief, known for her staunch stance against authoritarianism and external manipulation.

If Montenegro is allowed to slip back into Serbia's orbit, it would represent a major geopolitical setback.

If Montenegro is allowed to slip back into Serbia's orbit, it would represent a major geopolitical setback for both NATO and the EU. A reorientation toward Belgrade would not only halt Montenegro's EU integration but would also raise the spectre of Montenegro exiting NATO. Such a development would leave a strategic vacuum along the Adriatic, one that Serbia and, by extension, Russia, would eagerly exploit.

For the EU, there is also a broader regional implication. Successfully integrating Montenegro into the EU would send a clear message to other Western Balkan countries that the path to membership remains real and achievable. This would offer a counter-narrative to the growing sense of Euroscepticism that is fuelled by pro-Russian and pro-Serb actors across the region. EE

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How Russia's full-scale invasion has accelerated the flooding of Donbas coal mines

STANISLAV STOROZHENKO

Russia's war in eastern Ukraine has dramatically impacted the areas that used to make up the coal mining industry. Since 2014 most of the mines on the territories of Donbas not controlled by Ukraine have been closed down and many of them subsequently began to flood. If the coal region remains in a state of uncontrolled flooding over the next five to twelve years, then two-thirds of the territory of Donbas will become uninhabitable for normal life.

Despite Russia's full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian government remains committed to its pledge to phase out coal after 2035, the former deputy energy minister, Yaroslav Demchenkov, said in the summer of 2023. By 2021, Ukraine, as well as the country's largest energy company, DTEK, had already joined the Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA), an initiative aimed at a phased transition to carbon-free energetics. In addition, during the COP28 climate summit, German Galushchenko, the energy minister, also announced plans to create a "de-carbonized mix of Ukraine's energy system" from renewable energy and nuclear power.

However, this was not always the case. Back in 2012, the government of the now fugitive former President Viktor Yanukovych declared in its ten-year energy

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strategy plans to increase coal production in order to reduce dependence on "imported energy carriers" – in particular Russian gas. The fate of those plans changed dramatically in 2014 with Russia's hybrid aggression in Donbas, the largest coal region in Europe and key to Ukraine's energy sector at the time. Most of the region's coal mines fell into the hands of Russian-controlled forces from the self-declared "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" – triggering a crisis in Ukraine's coal-dependent energy industry. For the first time since independence, the state found itself dependent on imports of all types of energy resources.

However, in spite of the permanent crisis situation in the energy sector, since 2014 there have been other important issues such as the uncontrolled flooding of mines. This has caused local "earthquakes", gas releases to the surface, and the polluting of the water sources in Donbas. In 2022 the situation became even more dramatic, when the heads of the Russian-controlled quasi-republics asked Vladimir Putin to close most of the mines in the occupied part of Donbas, jeopardizing the global importance of the region into the future. One of the world's largest former industrial regions, war-torn for 11 years, is now at serious risk of becoming "two-thirds uninhabitable" due to uncontrolled massive mine flooding according to a recent report.

Echoes of the past

During the Second World War, Donbas was under Nazi occupation between 1941 and 1943. This period was enough for all the coal deposits of the region to be flooded. For the Soviet Union, coal was the "bread of industry" in a state of war, and rebuilding the region's mines became a key goal for Moscow after its liberation. Some 50,000 people were sent to work on draining the mines. The first successes were seen in only two years, when the first 69 mines were restored. At the same time, 80 per cent of all mine tunnels underwent re-inspection and reinforcement.

However, the working conditions for people in the mines were unbearably harsh, says Viktor Yermakov, a doctor of technical sciences and an expert on the mines of Donbas. "The mines of the central region of Donbas had no right to life even immediately after the region was rebuilt after the Second World War. In 1943 they began to be pumped out and coal was extracted there, but these were unbearable, unthinkable labour conditions. These mines simply should not have existed," Yermakov says.

Nevertheless, despite the harsh conditions of miners' manual labour, the coal industry in Donbas was actively developing until the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, in the region where coal had been mined since the 18th cen-

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tury, the problem of the unprofitability of some coal mines began to grow acutely. There were several reasons for this: the low level of modernization in the mines, the ageing of the mine stock, and the depletion of coal seams. At the beginning of the "coal depression" Donbas tripled in size when compared to before the war. However, the amount of water that was pumped out of the mines in a year was almost equal to that needed by the Soviet Union to drain the mines after the war.

Even in these conditions, many unprofitable mines continued to be subsidized following Ukrainian independence, because coal played an important role in the country's economy – it fed thermal power plants and also provided raw materials for metallurgy. At the same time, the coal industry provided jobs for hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, many of whom lived in cities tied to the coal mines.

In 2012, two years before the war in Donbas, the government of Yanukovych aimed to increase coal production in the country, promising to invest about ten billion US dollars in the "exhausted" industry. The conflict initiated by Russia in eastern Ukraine dramatically changed the situation – the region became separated from the main part of the country by a front line. This problem did not bypass the coal industry of the region and since 2014 most of the mines have remained in the territories of Donbas not controlled by Ukraine. Many of them subsequently began to be flooded.

What is happening now

The water passing through the mines becomes saturated with the impurities of metals, sulphates, mercury and other dangerous chemical compounds. When it enters water sources such as rivers, lakes and wells, it renders them unfit for normal use and drinking. If such water reaches the ground, it salinizes it, causing soil degradation.

Yevhen Yakovlev, a hydrogeologist from the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, speaks regularly about the scale of the flooding of mines in the occupied territories of central Donbas. According to him, from 2014 to 2022, uncontrolled flooding took place in about 30 to 40 mines, most of them adjacent to the front line. Yet before and after Russia's full-scale invasion, there was no water pumping in the occupied mines near the front line. In the case of Donbas, where many digs are connected by passages, this provoked, among other things, the flooding of adjacent mines on the Ukrainian side, which have been pumping out mine water.

Anastasiia Bushovska, an energy expert from the Ecodia Center, tells me about waterlogging that occurred near the Zolote mine in the Luhansk region in 2018: "In the Zolote mine, the water literally broke through but they still managed to

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pump out this water. The local authorities were engaged in setting up this process. Of course, the full-scale invasion began and these processes stopped. The water obviously broke through and we know from representatives of the military administration that the mine became flooded." The situation has taken a darker turn since 2022, when the Russian leadership decided to close the 101 out of 115 mines in the occupied territories of Donbas. Yakovlev emphasizes that "The number of mines that have gone into uncontrolled flooding mode has increased by about one and a half times. If before it was 30 to 40 mines, now we are talking about 60 mines. We can only talk about this approximately, because there is no normal monitoring."

In addition to the contamination of water and soils, the rise of mine water is also dangerous because the water coming to the surface pushes explosive gas out of coal seams. This, in turn, is also dangerous because it can trigger localized earthquakes.

"Earthquakes are appearing in areas of active flooding. Previously, these earthquake symptoms were more active around Donetsk, and since 2021 they have moved eastward – to the area of Debaltsevo," Yakovlev says.

The immediate threat of spontaneous methane releases to the surface is very high in the occupied areas of Donetsk.

According to Yakovlev's estimates, since 2022 gas has been actively escaping in places of lowered relief, and this may pose additional threats to settlements that are located above the mining fields. In Donbas, this could affect as many as 60 places. "We observed such processes live near Selidovo (Donetsk region) in November 2021 during an expedition. In the area close to the flooded Korotchenko mine, we found gas outlets on the surface, as well as wells with literally carbonated water," he said.

The immediate threat of spontaneous methane releases to the surface is extremely high in the now occupied area of Donetsk, Yakovlev argues. He also bases his arguments on old maps of the Donetsk coal basin that he was able to find in the archives. With the help of these maps, experts will be able to approximate and model where the risk of gas escaping to the surface in the region is highest. Nevertheless, Yakovlev and Yermakov note that data on the situation with mine flooding in the occupied territories is insufficient due to the lack of monitoring. The experts noted that unofficial contacts between scientists from Ukraine and the occupied territories still take place.

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Donbas, Ukrainian scientists, together with the OSCE, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Red Cross, managed to monitor mines near the front line. However, after Russia seized most of the Luhansk region, Vuhledar, Avdiivka and Mariinka, the flood zone expanded, taking away the opportunity to monitor the situation in areas close to the front

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line. In addition, in early 2022, Russia vetoed the work of the OSCE, taking away the organization's ability to monitor the mines.

"To have some data you need to have access to these territories. As long as there is no access, no monitoring, we cannot assess what the degree of pollution is there. There are data from projects that were conducted before the full-scale invasion. There were projects that tried to assess the level of contamination. But it's incomplete information. As long as we don't have access to those territories, we don't know exactly what is there and what we can do about it," Bushovska notes. Ukraine's environment ministry also stated that it has no data on the situation in the occupied part of Donbas.

Post-mining

The history of the German Ruhr coal basin is in many ways similar to the history of Ukraine's Donbas. In the 19th century the Ruhr region provided industrial and military power for the German Empire, just as Donbas did for the Russian Empire. Later, after the Second World War, coal mining in the Ruhr Basin also contributed to the revival of the economy and industry of West Germany after what amounted to total destruction. In 2018, the country's last coal mine, Prosper-Haniel, was closed. This was preceded by a nearly 30-year process of transforming the coal industry through what is called "post-mining". This is based on several principles: phasing out coal mining, creating new jobs for former coal workers, and creating environmentally safe areas on the site of former mines and mine fields. A similar transformation has taken place in England, France, Belgium and other countries.

> the Ukrainian energy ministry's attention is more focused on energy security than the fate of Donbas mines.

"The state took away the mines, coal companies and other things at first. And then they handed them over to a specially created post-mining enterprise. And then they disposed of these assets, including the land. They received certain benefits for it. And for this money they conducted post-mining activities. Step by step, each mine was closed," says Victor Yermakov, describing the process.

Yermakov, who has studied the experience of post-mining for years, notes that he does not see the Ukrainian government's interest in the idea. He says the energy ministry's attention is now more focused on the energy security of the country, which has suffered significant attacks from the Russian army.

"We gathered many Ukrainian scientists in Germany to show them what post-mining is. We published a special brochure, a monograph about post-mining in

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Ukraine. We did this work, but after coming back from Germany, I don't see any interest in post-mining. Maybe they will realize it after some time. Everyone dismisses it, everyone thinks it is an unnecessary waste of money. I don't think it's unnecessary to invest in the future of your children, in the health of future generations," he says.

Yakovlev, an active supporter of the idea of post-mining as well, nevertheless believes that the classic experience of pumping out water used in Germany's Ruhr is no longer possible in Ukraine. Although the regions are similar in both number of mines and area, the difference is that the situation in Donbas is more complicated. This is due to spontaneous and uncontrolled flooding, which is now in its 11th year.

"In places, the surface will sink below the depth at which groundwater levels were at one time. And the territory of Donbas will be fragmented in this case. It will not be helpful for the landscape. It will be a mass of saline streams, hollows, swamps and so on. And if we take into account that 90 per cent of the population of Donbas live in cities, and there are 60 settlements above the mines, the living conditions will simply be at the level of survival," Yakovlev says.

He concludes that if the coal region remains in a state of uncontrolled flooding in the next five to twelve years, then two-thirds of the territory of Donbas will become uninhabitable for normal life. "It will be usable in limited areas. It can be something like forestry, reclamation or agrarian areas. But this already now needs to be worked out and modelled in different ways. Or, if we consider the pessimistic option, in which we do not have time to do anything – this is the simplest option and its consequences are already visible now," the expert says.

Experts and scientists interviewed are unanimous in their opinion that the key issues now are the lack of monitoring of the flooding of mines as well as a lack of any vision or plan from the Ukrainian government about what will happen to the coal region after de-occupation. "Unfortunately, there is no vision of what will happen to the region after de-occupation, and what to do about it. I would hope that these territories will be de-occupied and then they can be transformed," Bushovska said.

According to the former head of the trade union of workers at the now destroyed Yuzhnodonbaska-3 mine, Hryhoriy Dotsenko, the Ukrainian energy ministry also has no information about whether their enterprise will be restored after the war: "We talked to the deputy minister about what will happen after the war and what our perspective will be. He says "I don't know anything, I won't say anything, that's it." At the moment it is still a closed topic, no one is discussing it, no one is thinking what will happen next. The focus is all on how to win the war," Dotsenko said.

The Ukrainian energy ministry declined to comment on the state of the coal industry and its perspectives for this article, citing the need not to disclose information that can be used by Russia to continue its attacks on energy facilities.

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"Russia controlled everything"

The Yuzhnodonbaska-3 mine, one of the youngest coal mines in Donbas, has been under Russian occupation since September 2024 and currently is in the rear of Russian troops in the Donetsk Oblast. It is now completely destroyed. According to Dotsenko, the enterprise was extremely promising and could have continued coal mining operations for at least another 50 years. "There were plans to build another mine in our area. The strata of coal deposits reached Pavlograd (in the Dnipro region). We would still have enough to work, in a normal mode for 50 years. Plus, we had very good quality coal, coal gas with low sulphur content. And our coal was used for power engineering and metallurgy," Dotsenko says.

A miner reported that in March 2022, during an offensive in the neighbouring town of Vuhledar – Volnovakha – the Russian army destroyed the power substations that were supplying energy to the Yuzhnodonbaska-3 mine and other mines around it. As a result, the level of mine water in the area began to rise rapidly, flooding once promising digs and carrying aforementioned environmental risks. He noted that specifically this is true regarding the risk of methane escaping to the surface.

Dotsenko is convinced that the Russian army carried out these strikes deliberately. Their goal, he believes, was to dehumanize Vuhledar. "The strikes were most likely to disable Vuhledar. Well, plus the mine that provided work. In general, little by little they knocked people out of the city," he notes.

Yermakov, who used to be the head of the Ukrainian delegation to the environmental negotiating group with Russia, summarizes that the aggressor state had been obstructing any solution to the problem of mine flooding even before the full-scale invasion. According to him, representatives of the Russian Federation "did not even want to hear" that the process of flooding the region's mines was uncontrolled, claiming that they had done the job of closing the mines "properly".

"We asked them questions and asked them to provide information about environmental safety measures regarding those mines they were closing. It was precisely about design decisions, and it was Russia that was responsible for their development. Russia refused to provide this data, and therefore, in the end, this negotiating group ceased to exist, and we did not communicate in this regard anymore," the scientist emphasizes.

According to him, Russia controlled "every movement and word" of its representatives of the negotiating subgroup, including from the side of the quasi-republics, which it introduced into the negotiations without agreement.

"Russia controlled everything, and even when only specialists with experts remained at the talks, I saw that side being all in one room. If our experts were online, each at their own workplace, they were "taken" by the so-called "ministry of state

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security of the Donetsk People's Republic" into one room that controlled their every movement, and not only the conversation. The mood was unfriendly, negative and even among the experts from the Russian side were most of my acquaintances with whom I had worked back in Donetsk when the mines were closed before the war started in 2013. Nevertheless, they were forbidden from having any professional conversations, to provide any professional information – it was all checked and it was all guided by Russia," the scientist summarizes.

Maryna Turenok, an expert at the "Right to Defence" Foundation, which studies the topic of mine flooding in Donbas, emphasizes that the problem of mine flooding is transnational and directly threatens two regions of Russia and the Sea of Azov.

"The hydrographic peculiarity of eastern Ukraine is that virtually all untreated mine water, getting into open areas, gullies, reservoirs and rivers of the Siversky Donets Basin, then flows directly into the Siversky Donets itself, the main river artery of the region. Then the polluted water flows through the south of the Belgorod and Rostov regions of the Russian Federation into the Don river, and from there into the Sea of Azov. The pollution has a "transboundary" character," she says.

Stanislav Storozhenko is a Ukrainian journalist and producer. He worked as a news editor for Liga.net and Ukraine's public broadcaster Suspilne. He also co-operated as a fixer with *The Telegraph*, *New York Times*, *Al Jazeera* and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.

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Moldova's election and the power play of energy dependency

JAKUB A. BARTOSZEWSKI AND MICHAEL M. RICHTER

Nowhere is the choice between Europe and Moscow more evident than in Moldova's energy sector. By promising cheap gas, Moscow offers pro-Russian actors a powerful campaign tool. This quick fix appeals to both the population and oligarchs.

In a statement on the start of accession negotiations between the European Union and Moldova on June 25th 2024, the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasized that "together, we can forge a larger, more dynamic, and forward-looking Europe." However, she also cautioned that the "journey [of accession] will be rigorous and demanding [and] there are no shortcuts". This reflects the long-term vision of a European and prosperous Moldova, championed by its President Maia Sandu, who has implemented significant reforms during her tenure. Yet, this pro-European vision was tested on October 20th. Moldova held both presidential elections and a referendum on EU membership, which sought to enshrine European integration in its constitution.

These elections revealed a country at a crossroads. Maia Sandu, receiving 42.45 per cent of the vote, failed to win an absolute majority and faced the second-placed Alexandr Stoianoglo on November 3rd in the second round. Sandu won the second round with 55 per cent of the vote, cementing a second term in office. Yet, even more strikingly, and against all pre-election polls, the EU referendum won by only a tiny margin, receiving 50.39 per cent of the vote. Whilst the OSCE noted in its

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report a slight administrative bias in favour of Maia Sandu, the president herself accused Moscow of significant interference. The head of the delegation from the European Parliament, Michael Gahler, also noted "malign and illicit Russian interference, especially through vote buying, hybrid attacks and disinformation".

Demographic challenges

These results show, however, that Sandu's pro-European vision faces challenges from opponents promising economic shortcuts through closer ties with Moscow. As such, the pro-European vector is not given unconditionally and must be fought for. This is particularly important in light of the parliamentary elections scheduled for summer 2025, as the president needs the parliament for effective governing. Alternative ideas are often masked as a multi-vector foreign policy. This is seen in the rhetoric of Alexandr Stoianoglo, who was endorsed by the former governing party, the Party of Socialists of Moldova. He campaigned to reject possible EU integration. Beneath the surface of foreign policy choices lies a profound decision between long-term prosperity and independence. This could involve the necessary reforms, or a return to the path of corruption, lawlessness and seemingly cheap energy resources that have cemented the country's dependence on the Kremlin.

Moldova has struggled demographically and economically throughout its contemporary history, as shown in Figure 1. It has consistently had one of the highest remittance shares in GDP globally, a reflection of weak institutions that have earned it the title of "Europe's poorest nation". Although recent improvements in institutional metrics are promising and the quality of Moldovan institutions is now closer to its EU regional peers – Poland and Romania – it will take time for these changes to translate into strong economic growth. Poland's experience illustrates this well: following significant institutional reforms in the 1990s, its GDP per capita (PPP) grew from 48 per cent of the EU average in 2000 to 79 per cent in 2022.

> Maia Sandu's pro-European vision faces challenges from opponents promising economic shortcuts through closer ties with Moscow.

However, Moldova's journey has been marred by scandals, such as the 2014 bank robbery, where one billion US dollars – 12 per cent of its GDP – were stolen by the pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor. Convicted in 2017, Shor fled to Israel and later Russia, where he now orchestrates, with the help of the Russian security services, anti-European campaigns designed to destabilize Moldova. As such, his political party was described as being "created out of corruption and for corruption [which] is a threat to the consti-

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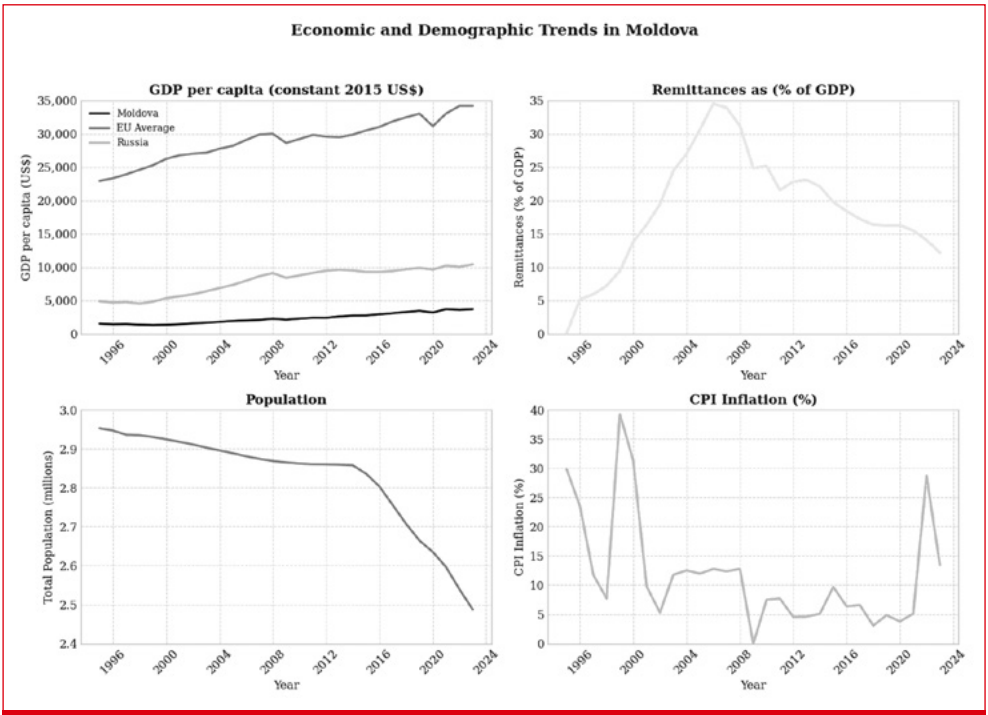

Figure 1: Economic and demographic trends in Moldova.
Source: Own analysis based on the World Bank's data.

tutional order and security of the state". Unsurprisingly, Moldova's 2023 National Security Strategy also names Russia, together with its role in systemic corruption, as an existential threat.

Moldova's breakaway region, Transnistria, is the prime example of Russia's interference tactics through fostering systemic corruption. In this region, Moscow provides natural gas free of charge from the Cuciurgan Power Plant, which accounts for roughly 80 per cent of Moldova's electricity supply. The profits from selling this electricity to other parts of Moldova are a significant part of Transnistria's budget. Additionally, the region benefits from low prices for resources, which come with incentives for corruption. However, as the saying goes, "there is no free lunch." The Kremlin tracks these price differences as debt and uses them as leverage for geopolitical, economic or political concessions. Gazprom claims Moldova's debt is as high as 709 million US dollars, a figure the Moldovan government disputes.

Nowhere is the choice between Europe and Moscow more evident than in Moldova's energy sector. By promising cheap natural gas, Moscow offers pro-Russian actors a powerful campaign tool that also undermines reforms by fuelling corruption. This quick fix appeals to both the population and oligarchs, with the first

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group enjoying low energy prices in the short term whilst the second continues to strip the country of its assets, with predictable socio-economic consequences in the long run. Therefore, to break free from the Kremlin's grip and pursue a pro-European future, the parliamentary elections will have major repercussions for the energy sector. The European Union's role will be pivotal in supporting the pro-European vector in Moldova that has come under pressure.

Moldova's energy landscape: infrastructure and import routes

In 2023, Moldova's energy consumption was approximately four million tonnes of oil equivalent (Mtoe), compared to 93 in Ukraine and 35 in Romania. The average for EU countries was 114 Mtoe, with a total consumption of 5,700 across all 27 member states. Per capita, Moldova consumed 1.5 toe, compared to Ukraine's 2.2, Romania's 1.8, and the EU average of 3.1 per person. Moldova's energy intensity, measuring energy consumption per unit of GDP, was 267 toe to every one million US dollars, which is lower than Ukraine's 581 but higher than Romania's 117 and the EU average of 96. Thus, despite inefficiencies, Moldova's energy consumption is low compared to its regional peers, largely due to its small population and limited industrialization. In 2023 the only EU country with a similar level of energy consumption was Luxembourg at 4.1 Mtoe.

Natural gas has historically made up the majority of Moldova's primary energy consumption, as shown by the Total Energy Supply (TES). TES represents all energy produced or imported into a country, minus exports and storage, reflecting the energy needed to supply end users. After natural gas, petroleum products and biofuels, mostly solid biomass like wood, make up the next largest shares. Coal and renewable energy sources, such as hydropower, wind and solar, contribute only marginally to Moldova's energy mix. The country produces just 20 per cent of the primary energy it consumes, mostly from solid biomass, meaning most other primary energy sources are imported. Some of these primary sources are converted into fuels or electricity for final consumption, as indicated by the Total Final Consumption (TFC). TFC represents the energy used by individuals and businesses for activities such as heating, lighting and powering vehicles. Importantly, the conversion from primary to secondary energy sources involves energy losses, leading to differences between TES and TFC. In Moldova, petroleum products used in transportation account for the larg-

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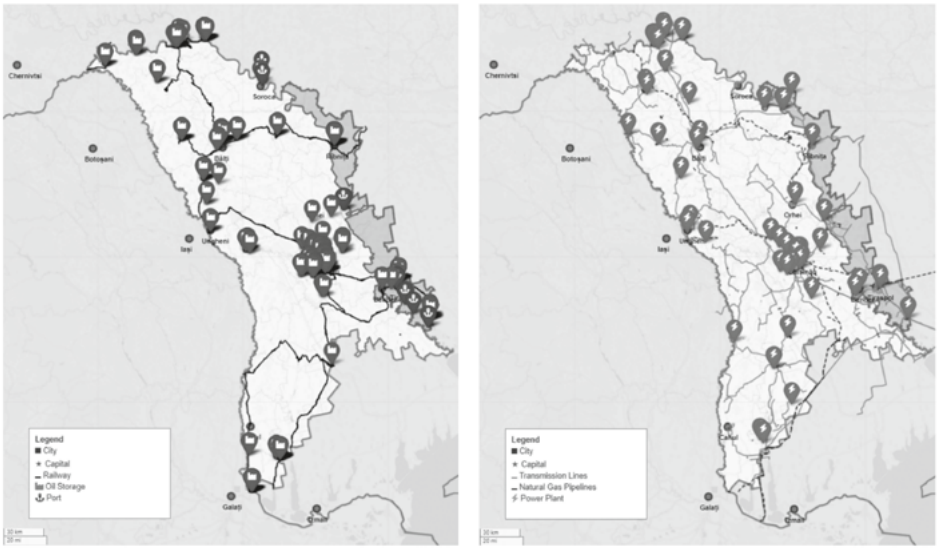

Figure 2: Map of energy infrastructure in Moldova as of 2024.
Source: Own analysis based on the OpenStreetMap dataset.

est share of final energy consumption, followed by natural gas and solid biomass used for cooking and heating.

Electricity is the fourth largest category of final energy consumption in Moldova, yet it remains crucial for any modern economy, as most industrial processes, from manufacturing to data services, depend heavily on it. Interruptions in electricity supply lead to significant economic losses, disrupting essential infrastructure like communication systems. Reliable electricity is thus the backbone of a modern industrial economy. Moldova's electricity generation is largely undiversified, relying mostly on natural gas, with small contributions from hydropower, coal, and renewable sources like wind and solar. While reliance on natural gas for electricity generation is not inherently problematic, an analysis of Moldova's energy infrastructure and its import routes reveals the risks this poses for its energy security, which is defined as the ability of a country to ensure reliable and uninterrupted access to energy at affordable prices.

As an energy system, Moldova is almost entirely reliant on imports. The only source of primary energy produced domestically is biomass, typically wood used for heating and cooking. With no refineries, Moldova imports all petroleum products mostly via its railroad network. These routes connect Romania, Ukraine and Moldova's only maritime port, Giurgiulești, located on the Danube river with access to the Black Sea, to oil storage facilities with a total capacity of 150,000 cubic metres,

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as shown in Figure 2. All of Moldova's natural gas is also imported. Historically, it came from Russia via pipelines entering from Ukraine, one in the north and three in the east, entering Transnistria. Since 2015, Moldova has had a natural gas route from Romania through the Iasi-Ungheni interconnector although, due to technical constraints, it allows for transporting much less natural gas than the other routes. Moldova lacks liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, making it unable to import natural gas in this form.

Moldova's natural gas imports from Romania and Ukraine can meet most of the demand on the territory controlled by Chișinău. However, the devil lies in the details, as the separatist region of Transnistria consumes the majority of Moldova's imported gas, primarily at the Cuciurgan Power Plant, which supplies 80 per cent of the country's electricity. The region controlled by Chișinău generates very little electricity. Moldova also has transmission lines connecting it to Ukraine and Romania. Most of its imported electricity comes from Ukraine, whose grid operates in sync with that of Moldova. In contrast, connections to Romania face transmission limitations because Romania's grid, part of the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E), is not synchronized with Moldova's, though efforts are underway to achieve full synchronization.

Energy security implications

Moldova represents a stark example of energy insecurity. Practically landlocked, it boasts an energy-inefficient economy which depends on imports for over 80 per cent of its energy needs, with domestic production limited to biomass. This heavy reliance on imports makes Moldova's energy system inherently vulnerable to external shocks and price volatility. The severity of this insecurity depends on the relations with suppliers. For example, similar to Moldova, natural gas is the primary fuel for heating and power generation in the New England region of the United States, where natural gas prices, particularly at Boston's Algonquin point, are highly volatile because the region relies entirely on imports. However, the key difference for energy security implications is that while New England can import natural gas from reliable sources, such as neighbouring US states, Canada or internationally via LNG, Moldova remains reliant on natural gas from Russia, a country openly hostile to its pro-western ambitions. Compounding this issue is Moldova's reliance on electricity from the Cuciurgan Power Plant. The plant runs on heavily subsidized Russian natural gas creating artificially low prices that make alternatives, like natural gas imports from Ukraine or Romania, uncompetitive, giving Russia significant leverage over Moldova through energy blackmail.

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Indeed, Moscow did not hesitate to use it to realize its foreign policy objectives in Moldova. In October 2021, Russia engineered an energy crisis to undermine public support for the newly elected pro-European government of President Maia Sandu, which planned gas sector reforms. The crisis began when Gazprom, Russia's state-owned gas supplier, demanded a significant price increase – from 550 US dollars to 790 per 1,000 cubic metres – and reduced gas supplies, forcing Moldova to declare a state of energy emergency. This energy blackmail succeeded, as Moldova eventually signed a five-year contract with Gazprom and postponed EU-driven gas reforms. A second crisis unfolded in October 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, again targeting social support for Sandu and the government. This time, Gazprom cut gas supplies by 30 per cent, citing technical issues related to Ukraine's transit, while electricity from Transnistria's Cuciurgan plant was also reduced. Moldova had to buy electricity from Romania at much higher prices, though power flows from Transnistria were restored in December 2022.

As winter 2024–25 approaches, the question remains whether Russia can again resort to energy blackmail. While Moldova has significantly reduced its reliance on Russian gas by importing from Romania and Ukraine, it still depends heavily on the electricity from Cuciurgan. However, Ukraine, still at war with Russia, is most likely to refuse to renew its gas transit contract with Gazprom that expires in December 2024. This would result in disruption in natural gas flows to Transnistria this winter. In recent weeks, Moldova has made bold moves to reduce Gazprom's influence, including an audit that reduced Gazprom's debt claim from 709 million US dollars to 8.6 million and transferring control of the Moldovan gas network to the Romanian-owned Vestmoldtransgaz. If gas supplies to Transnistria are cut, Moldova may have to rely on more expensive electricity imports from Romania and Ukraine, marking a pivotal moment for the region's energy independence. However, a supply disruption in Transnistria could also trigger an energy crisis, which could be a make-or-break moment for Moldova's energy security and its path to reducing Russian influence.

Policy recommendations

On September 27th 2024 the Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean said during his speech at the United Nations General Assembly: "Our European path is a matter of vital national interest and our strongest guarantee of peace, democracy and development. On October 20th Moldova will reaffirm its European choice in a referendum to enshrine EU integration into our constitution. Russia may continue its attempts to disrupt Moldova's path … but we, the Moldovan people, are

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united in determination. Only we can choose our future." Yet, as the referendum has shown, the pro-European vector is hanging on knife's edge and faces clear pressure from Moscow. Hence, the prime minister's words will remain aspirational without changes to Moldova's energy infrastructure, which currently enables Russia to use energy blackmail and further meddle in the country's affairs. Structural changes in Moldova's energy infrastructure and market design are urgently needed to break free from Russian influence. This is an important task ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections next summer.

An immediate solution to address Moldova's energy vulnerability is to expand transmission capacity from Romania. This would allow Moldova to import more electricity, reducing its dependence on Russian-controlled sources in Transnistria. However, this requires significant upgrades to transmission infrastructure and the full synchronization of Moldova's grid with ENTSO-E, processes that are already underway. The challenge is that electricity from Romania is much more expensive than from Transnistria, so external financial support from the EU will be crucial in keeping prices affordable and maintaining social support for the incumbent reformist government.

An immediate solution to address Moldova's energy vulnerability is to expand transmission capacity from Romania.

A long-term solution for Moldova's energy security would be to diversify its electricity generation by building a large power plant on the right bank of the Nistru river, in the territory controlled by Chișinău, and increasing the share of renewables, such as wind and solar. Additionally, investing in new natural gas import routes, either through pipelines or LNG, would further enhance energy security by reducing Russia's leverage. Another potential solution could be the reintegration of Transnistria, bringing the Cuciurgan plant back under Moldovan control, though this remains unlikely as long as Russian troops are stationed in the breakaway region.

In theory, Moldova's energy problems are easy to solve: the country consumes little energy compared to its regional peers and only needs several infrastructural investments to become free from Russia's energy blackmail. However, infrastructure projects like power plants, even if small in scale, require time and significant capital. Attracting private investors necessitates a stable, low-corruption environment with strong public institutions, which are historically lacking in Moldova. State-led initiatives have often failed due to either a lack of funding or corruption, preventing the development of alternative power generation and energy import routes over the past 30 years. This has left Moldova dependent on Russian-controlled energy sources.

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Since 2021, Sandu and her government has made significant strides in improving institutional effectiveness, paving the way for the potential deregulation of the energy market and attracting private investment in Moldova's energy infrastructure. The same government has weathered two Russia-induced energy crises and now seems closer to finally breaking free from Russia's influence. However, its success hinges not only on the outcome of the October election and referendum but also on crucial decisions regarding energy security, which will shape Moldova's long-term dependencies. As a net importer, Moldova must redirect its supply routes to reliable, friendly suppliers, an effort that requires long-term infrastructure investments, which are not possible without breaking the vicious cycle of corruption. Moldova seems to be on the right path, but the transition away from Russian energy may bring economic pressure, with rising energy costs affecting the population. This could necessitate financial support from the EU to maintain social backing for the reformist government. That said, Moldova represents a "low-hanging fruit" for European integration given its relatively low energy consumption. The cost of helping Moldova shed its Russian energy influence is modest compared to the strategic benefits of securing another pro-European country in Eastern Europe, and potentially a new EU member. EE

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GDAŃSK

IT HAPPENED IN GDAŃSK

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

With a little help from my friends

In August 1980, the phrase "There is no freedom without solidarity" (*Bez wolności nie ma solidarności*) was everywhere on the streets of Gdańsk. Nine years later, in 1989, during the so-called Monday demonstrations (*Montagsdemonstrationen*) in Leipzig, Dresden, Halle, and other cities across East Germany, thousands of residents chanted, "We are the people" (*Wir sind das Volk*).

The ideological thread connecting these events was a shared hope and a newfound awareness of the power that solidarity could bring. Many participants, often challenging their fears for the first time, were driven by a refusal to accept a repressive system that denied freedom and sought to fully control the society. First the Poles, then the East Germans, were almost overwhelmed by the prospect of freedom. United in solidarity, they realized they were shaping a force capable of toppling authoritarian regimes.

In Poland, people found the strength to build a social movement that gathered 10 million. Empowered, they broke through all barriers, just as the iconic Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa had when he famously jumped over the gates of the Gdańsk Shipyard, sparking a peaceful, bloodless political transformation. In Germany, the desire for freedom drove tens of thousands into the streets, ultimately bringing down the Berlin Wall. This transformation was fuelled by hope, solidarity, and an overwhelming hunger for freedom, which

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in this part of Europe, still under the Soviet influence, was craved with an almost unquenchable thirst.

The words "There is no freedom without solidarity!" – spoken in Polish – echoed powerfully in Berlin during the 35th anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Solidarity with those fighting for human rights today was a central theme of the commemorations. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Berlin Mayor Kai Wegner both spoke about the history of the Solidarity movement and Poland's key role also in the fall of the Berlin Wall. Leaders from democratic opposition movements worldwide also took part in the celebrations.

Former Polish opposition activists – Bogdan Borusewicz, Ewa Kulik-Bielińska, Bogdan Lis, Grażyna Staniszewska, and Jacek Taylor – came to Berlin to participate in the celebrations which lasted for a few days. These included official ceremonies but also meetings with Berlin residents and former East German opposition members. There were also educational workshops for young people.

When standing by a preserved section of the Berlin Wall, Basil Kerski, the director of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk said: "'There is no freedom without solidarity' is not merely a slogan from history; it is a commitment and a foundation for today's world order, where human rights form the basis of our community." In a similar vein, speaking at the Chapel of Reconciliation, Bogdan Borusewicz, stressed that morality and values were the driving forces behind the Polish solidarity movement and remain as such behind Poland's obligations today towards those who are oppressed.

I was one of the participants in the anniversary celebrations in Berlin, which was especially moving for me because, in the autumn of 1989, I began studying German philology at the University of Gdańsk. To this day, I regret not having had the determination – and perhaps the courage – to join my classmates who, inspired by the demonstrations in East Germany, travelled to Dresden and Leipzig in solidarity. Skipping out of lectures, they not only observed but actively participated in the events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Now, participating in the commemorations of the 35th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, I realised once again how many elements there were that linked these two protest actions: the Polish Solidarity and the German *Bürgerbewegung* (citizens' movement). This was evident even in the symbolic images. The German hosts chose to incorporate the motif of dominoes – a symbol familiar to

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us, as it has long been a part of Poland's narrative that "it all began in Gdańsk". This slogan refers to the idea that what began in Gdańsk with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 found its geopolitical resolution in the events, which took place in the city in 1980–1989. The slow collapse of the system of European oppression, rooted in the provisions of the 1945 Yalta Conference, started with the birth of the Solidarity movement and the strikes that broke out at Gdańsk's Lenin Shipyard in 1980. Poland's first democratic elections in June 1989 provided a crucial momentum for the civic uprising in East Germany. Solidarity set off a chain reaction – the toppling of the dominoes – which led to an unstoppable wave that ultimately brought down the Iron Curtain.

During a meeting with German and international opposition figures, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said, "Our breakthrough would not have been possible without the struggle of the Poles. It was Solidarity that first believed that the democratization of our part of Europe was unstoppable." Over time, this belief from Poland spread to East Germany.

In recent days, the words "Solidarność, Gdańsk, shipyard, Poland" were echoed countless times in Berlin. We heard these words from President Steinmeier, Berlin Mayor Kai Wegner, and the director of the Berlin Wall Foundation, Professor Axel Klausmeier who said to us, guests from Gdańsk: "It was you who punched the first holes in the Berlin Wall."

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The victory achieved in Europe, however, was not shared by those in China fighting for democratization. The protests at the Tiananmen Square ended in a bloody massacre. To emphasize the continued relevance of the values of the 1980s, the organizers in Berlin invited guests from countries that are still struggling for freedom, democracy, and human rights. Today, around 70 per cent of the world's population still lives under some form of dictatorship. Thus, among the guests gathered at the Berlin Wall were Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya from Belarus. Tsikhanouskaya, who after the arrest of her husband, Siarhei, ran for president in 2020 and according to exit polls won the elections remains outside Belarus. She has not heard from her imprisoned husband for over 600 days now. There was also Masih Alinejad, an Iranian women's rights activist, as well as representatives from Ukraine, Venezuela, China and Hong Kong.

This raises fundamental questions about the depth of our solidarity with those still in need of support and inspiration for change. How far are we willing to step out of our comfort zones to offer meaningful help? To what extent are we prepared to make sacrifices and even risk discomfort or opposition for the common good? And how much will the temptation to build new walls – to distance ourselves from others and insulate from the challenges of today's world – prevail?

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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

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Paris Olympics 2024

A "Team Europe" approach

EREKLE IANTBELIDZE

While the 2024 Paris Olympics were a showcase of athletic excellence, they also highlighted the challenges of maintaining political neutrality in a globalized world. A united European voice could have played a significant role in shaping the narrative surrounding the games and addressing the complex issues that arose.

The 2024 Paris Olympic Games, marked by controversy and intertwined with societal issues, offered a microcosm of contemporary Europe. The opening ceremony's depiction of religious scenes, drawing parallels to iconic western art, ignited public debate and political divisions. While athletes prepared for their performances, the rhetoric surrounding these depictions fuelled tensions both within Europe and globally. In contrast, the games also celebrated the EU's motto of "United in diversity", highlighting freedom of movement and rights. The European Commission's introduction of "Team Europe 2024", a medal counter, aimed to foster a sense of European unity and pride in athletic achievements.

The Olympics have historically served as a platform for ideological and political competition, particularly during the Cold War. Contemporary politicians continue to view the games as a means to showcase national sporting prowess and bolster their own image. While the European Commission cannot be accused of promoting division, its focus on medal rankings contributes to a competitive atmosphere that may incentivize less ethical behaviour among other state actors. By analyzing the interplay between sports, politics and culture, we can identify some insights into the complexities of contemporary European identity and its global projection.

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The politics of branding

As a prominent European capital, Paris had the unique privilege of hosting the 2024 Olympic Games. This mega sporting event presented a golden opportunity for France and its European counterparts to showcase their rich history, vibrant culture and shared values. Beyond the athletic competitions, the Olympics served as a platform for nation-branding initiatives, fostering social, economic and political goals.

Nation-branding, as defined by Ying Fan in 2006, involves strategically employing branding and marketing techniques to enhance a nation's image. In the context of the Olympics, sports play a pivotal role in shaping national identities, symbolizing a nation's unity, pride and aspirations. While nation-branding often focuses on external audiences, sport diplomacy, as practiced by international actors, targets both domestic and international stakeholders. The EU has been actively engaged in sport diplomacy for over a decade, organizing competitions, promoting sport development through initiatives like Erasmus+, and leveraging sport to foster a sense of European identity. The 2024 Paris Olympics offered a prime opportunity to strengthen this European spirit, both within the bloc and globally under the umbrella of the "European way of life".

However, the effectiveness of nation-branding and sport diplomacy depends on several factors that the EU could not achieve at this particular event. First, the messaging must resonate with both domestic and international audiences. Second, the brand must be authentically embodied by the nation's citizens and government. Third, public involvement should be genuine and meaningful, rather than merely a façade to legitimize top-down initiatives. The 2024 Paris Olympics provided a platform for Europe to showcase its unique identity, promote unity and strengthen its global standing. Despite attempts to leverage sport diplomacy and nation-branding, Europe's enduring legacy from the 2024 Paris Olympics remains uncertain. While the games undoubtedly showcased the continent's cultural diversity and historical significance, their long-term impact on European unity and global standing is still to be seen.

EU and sport diplomacy?

The EU's strategic engagement with sport diplomacy emerged in 2015, following the establishment of the High Level Group on Sport Diplomacy. This initiative, under the guidance of Commissioner Tibor Navracsics, culminated in a comprehensive report outlining key recommendations. Subsequent Council Conclusions

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in November 2016 formalized the EU's commitment to utilizing sport as a diplomatic tool. The European Union Work Plan for Sport (2017–2020) further underscored the importance of sport diplomacy in fostering European values and promoting cooperation with third countries. Empirical evidence unequivocally demonstrated the positive impact of international sport projects on bilateral relations. A comparative analysis of case studies revealed several salient features: high-level political engagement between member states and third countries has proven instrumental in generating local interest and participation. Sport projects that aligned with the emerging priorities of member states' international development objectives enhanced their broader diplomatic impact.

By promoting grassroots sport, the EU aims to build social cohesion and promote active citizenship across Europe.

A more in-depth examination of case studies has yielded valuable insights into the successful implementation of international sport development projects. Tailored approaches were essential to aligning EU member states' sport expertise with the specific strategic objectives and challenges faced by third countries. Capacity-building and upskilling of local organizations were crucial to ensuring the long-term sustainability of project initiatives. Moreover, a comprehensive review of relevant EU funding sources indicated significant potential for supporting sport development projects that involved partnerships between member states and the EU as a whole.

To what extent has the EU developed a robust framework for sport diplomacy, focusing on promoting sport participation, integrity and sustainability? Through its EU Work Plan for Sport, the bloc prioritizes creating a safe, value-driven environment in sport while fostering socio-economic and sustainable dimensions. The plan also emphasized increasing sports participation and encouraging physical activity for all age groups, with special attention to vulnerable populations.

Today, by promoting grassroots sport and endorsing an active, environmentally-friendly lifestyle, the EU aims to build social cohesion and promote active citizenship across Europe. A central focus of the EU's strategy is enhancing governance in sport. This includes encouraging good governance practices, combating issues like match-fixing and promoting gender equality and athletes' rights. Additionally, the EU recognizes the importance of voluntary-based grassroots sport and supports their development through initiatives like the Erasmus+ programme, which allocates funding to support sport mobility, cooperation and innovation.

The EU also underscores the significance of investment in sustainable sport infrastructure, which includes developing environmentally-friendly facilities and limiting the sector's carbon footprint. Innovation and digitalization are seen as key

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drivers of progress in sport, supporting health, economic development and the resilience of the sector, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Promoting sport tourism and cross-sectoral cooperation is also prioritized by the EU to boost the sector's sustainable development.

On the other hand, international cooperation plays a vital role in the EU's sport diplomacy. The EU seeks to strengthen dialogue with governments and sporting organizations both within and outside Europe, including the International Olympic Committee, aiming to exchange knowledge and address global challenges such as doping, fraud and the manipulation of competitions. Furthermore, EU policy initiatives, such as the White Paper on Sport from 2007, serve as foundational documents for ongoing efforts, guiding future policy and cooperation.

The EU's approach to sport diplomacy is characterized by its focus on promoting integrity, participation and sustainability.

In terms of social inclusion, the EU actively promotes the integration of marginalized groups, including migrants, through sport. Initiatives like the European Week of Sport, which encourages physical activity across Europe, exemplifies the EU's commitment to fostering a healthier, more active society. Awards such as *#BeActive* and *#BeInclusive* further highlight innovative efforts to break down social barriers and promote a sense of European identity through sport. The EU's approach to sport diplomacy is characterized by its focus on promoting integrity, participation and sustainability. Through cross-border cooperation, innovative policies and a commitment to inclusivity, the EU aims to develop a dynamic and resilient sport sector that contributes to Europe's social and economic growth.

What if the EU had been united in Paris 2024?

The 2024 Paris Olympics, while celebrated for its athletic achievements, was also a microcosm of the complex interplay between sport, politics and global events. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has long strived to maintain a façade of political neutrality, but the Paris Games, with its myriad challenges, exposed the inherent political nature of the event. One particularly intriguing question is: what if the EU had adopted a unified stance on the Games? While the EU is often seen as a force for unity and cooperation, its member states often have divergent interests and priorities, particularly when it comes to international affairs.

The Paris Games were marred by several geopolitical tensions. The ongoing war in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the global threat of terrorism

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all cast shadows over the event. The IOC, in an attempt to balance competing interests, often found itself in a precarious position. For example, the IOC's decision to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete as Individual Neutral Athletes (AINs) was met with criticism from many, including some EU member states. While some argued that the athletes should be punished for their countries' actions, others contended that they should not be penalized for the actions of their governments. Had the EU presented a united front on this issue, the IOC might have faced greater pressure to adopt a more consistent approach. A strong European voice could have significantly influenced the global discourse surrounding the Games and the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes.

One might think that speaking with one voice was related to the concept of aggregating European Olympic medals into a single tally. However, this is flawed for several reasons. Firstly, the EU does not currently possess a unified National Olympic Committee (NOC), meaning that individual member states compete independently. This fragmented approach allowed for a greater number of athletes to participate in the Olympic Games, ultimately increasing the potential for medal wins. Secondly, the benefits of individual national teams were particularly evident in team sports. For instance, the recent victory of Italy, France and Poland in the women's team fencing competition was only possible due to each country fielding its own team. In contrast, the United States and China were limited to entering a single team each, restricting their medal potential even in sports where they dominate.

> The EU can play a positive role in the sporting landscape without compromising the integrity of the Olympic movement.

While the notion of a unified "Team Europe" approach might evoke feelings of unity and shared achievement, it is essential to consider the broader implications. While the EU could certainly leverage its collective influence to promote European athletes and values on the international stage, a unified team could inadvertently lead to the EU exerting undue influence over international sporting governance. Instead of pursuing a unified team, the EU could more effectively advocate for European athletes and values by strengthening national Olympic committees, promoting European sport culture, advocating for fair play and ethical standards, and supporting grassroots sport development. By focusing on these areas, the EU can play a positive role in the global sporting landscape without compromising the integrity of the Olympic movement.

Furthermore, the EU's role in addressing human rights concerns related to the games could have been more prominent. While human rights groups raised concerns about the treatment of homeless people in Paris and the potential for human

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rights abuses, the EU's response was somewhat fragmented. A unified European stance could have amplified these concerns and put pressure on the French government to take more concrete steps to protect human rights.

While the 2024 Paris Olympics were a showcase of athletic excellence, they also highlighted the challenges of maintaining political neutrality in a globalized world. A united European voice could have played a significant role in shaping the narrative surrounding the games and addressing the complex issues that arose. However, the reality is that the EU, like any international organization, is composed of diverse member states with often conflicting interests. A truly unified European stance on the games may have been a difficult, if not impossible, goal to achieve. While sport and the Olympics may have contributed to a stronger European identity, it is unlikely that EU member states would willingly relinquish their national pride and achievements in individual and team sports without direct supranational oversight. Such a significant change would require substantial institutional authority. EE

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

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Fell without a shot being fired

MIRON SAMKOV, SVETLANA SINITSA,
NATALIA BARANOVA AND VIOLETTA GRISHKOVA

The Russian State Duma is considering a bill that would restrict library access to works by "foreign agents" in public libraries. Although the Duma went on break in August without passing the amendments, some libraries decided to "play it safe" in advance.

"If I take a book and never return it, in other words, steal it, what should I do according to the rules?" Such questions have been addressed more and more frequently to librarian Natalia from a small town in the Moscow region. In her opinion, this is how readers try to save certain books or add them to their personal libraries while they still have the chance. "People ask us, 'have you written off anything yet? Write it off into our caring hands,'" Natalia says.

According to her, some libraries have already started getting rid of books by so-called foreign agents, even though there are no such legal requirements. Works by Dmitry Glukhovsky, Mikhail Zygar, Dmitry Bykov, and other authors are included in the ministry of justice's registry and tossed out, along with other worn-out books, for recycling. As Natalia put it, libraries "fell before the first shots were fired".

She has heard from colleagues that they have already received an official letter recommending the removal of "foreign agent books" from reading rooms "not to irritate the public". A list was attached to the letter, but she has not seen it herself. "We haven't reached *Fahrenheit 451* yet, so the books aren't being burned; they're just written off and sent for recycling. Vigilant citizens would walk around and say, 'they've removed Akunin, good job,'" Natalia adds, referring to those readers who do not want to "save" the literature.

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Increased control

At the library where Natalia works, books by foreign agents have not yet been sent for recycling, but they have been hidden in a closed collection. At first the librarian printed labels that read "This material was created by…" on the printer, but her colleagues dissuaded her from marking the books in that way, saying it "dishonours the honest name of librarians". For now, they have decided to just stick on an 18+ age restriction label, as required by law.

Natalia mentioned that sometimes books by foreign agents returned by readers are mistakenly placed in the reading room. However, books that contain descriptions of LGBTQ+ content require closer monitoring. For example, the 18+ book *A Summer in the Red Scarf* (*Лето в пионерском галстуке*) by Elena Malisova and Katerina Silvanova (both recognized as foreign agents), despite being in high demand among readers, is more likely to be tossed away than to be hidden in the collection. Since the book allegedly promotes LGBTQ+ themes (the LGBTQ+ movement is recognized as an extremist organization in Russia), Natalia said that if this book is accidentally found on the shelves, library staff could be held accountable for promoting "gay propaganda". However, there is currently no liability for displaying books by authors labelled as "foreign agents".

Recently, Natalia's library was renovated and now more young people come there to work and visit exhibits. People also seem to have a renewed interest in books. Natalia believes that reading has become a new luxury and mentioned that the trend for books was even described in *Vogue* magazine. She explains the increased control over libraries: "In my opinion, our authorities are trying to take control of everything vibrant and positive that unexpectedly emerges in our country. Naturally, both the authorities and concerned citizens have now started paying closer attention to libraries as well."

At the library where Natalia works, books by foreign agents have been hidden in a closed collection.

At a university library in the Northwestern Federal District, they have already heard about the pending law. While library management has not given clear instructions on what to do with books by foreign agents, the staff are keeping an eye on the justice ministry's list themselves. According to the librarians, they regularly monitor the ministry's website and check their electronic catalogue to see if they have any new books by foreign agents so they can mark them accordingly. They report this to their superiors every month and warn colleagues about which books should be removed from open access. However, some librarians are in no rush to take such initiative.

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"I told the subscription desk worker that we need to remove Igor Lipsits's economics textbook. But my colleague replied that she would only deal with those editions once she had an official document on her desk," says Ksenia, a library employee. Igor Lipsits is a Russian economist and a former professor. He created Russia's first complete series of economics textbooks for the seventh through to the eleventh grade. In March 2024, the justice ministry recognized Lipsits as a foreign agent.

If a reader wants to borrow a foreign agent's book to take home, the book will be provided from the closed collection with a warning about the author's status (provided the reader is over 18). "In the closed collections, we added bookmarks with an 18+ label and a note that the author is included in the [foreign agent] registry. But this labelling is done more for us, than for the readers. We cannot put official markings on the books because there's no such directive," Ksenia explains.

According to Ksenia, in the municipal libraries in the Northwestern Federal District, some libraries have already begun marking books on their own initiative. At the library where Ksenia works, there are over a hundred books by authors labelled as foreign agents. The most frequent are works are by Boris Akunin, Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Dmitry Bykov. These books were always popular, but recently, Ksenia feels that they have been requested even more frequently. "Perhaps people are afraid they won't be able to read them later," she suggests.

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"Some people, though, may refuse to read them out of principle, because the author is a foreign agent. That's a personal choice. The main thing, of course, is not to go overboard with all these laws. Many books were written long before any of these events [and restrictive laws], and it's unlikely that the author included anything illegal in them," the librarian reflects.

In the literary world, people still laugh off the foreign agent label while they can. "I've read foreign agent books myself, of course. I managed to read many of them before the authors received that status. Honestly, I think the foreign agent law is very foolish. People joke that being labelled a foreign agent is the best recommendation. And that's partly true. I was at a book festival in July, I picked up a book by Irina Arkhpova, and when I went to another stand, the saleswoman saw the book and immediately suggested, 'We have books by potential foreign agents here, want me to show you?'" Ksenia smiles.

However, regarding works by authors included on official lists of terrorists and extremists, some Russians have already developed a sense of self-censorship. "Not a single reader has asked for books by authors listed as extremists, even though those books used to circulate regularly," the librarian recalls.

Russian law prohibits the distribution of extremist materials, as well as their production and storage for the purpose of dissemination. While the situation with extremist literature is relatively clear it is still unclear how the new law will legally restrict access to books by foreign agents (and include those who may not only be authors but also editors, publishers, illustrators, or even just contributors to a preface). The Russian Library Association's statement says that libraries, in their work, are also guided by the constitution which guarantees citizens the right to freely access information.

Libraries are hiding

Recently, at Russian national library conferences, special sections were held where staff discussed the issue of foreign agent books. For example, at the Corporate Library Systems: Technology and Innovation Conference in June 2024, an entire roundtable was dedicated to this issue. This was titled "Foreign agents, inventory, or inspection: questions that need solutions". However, the participants of the discussion in St Petersburg perhaps did not leave with a clear understanding of how the proposed legal amendments can be applied in practice. One of the presenters – Tatiana Petrusenko, an executive secretary of the section on library collections – noted that of all the laws restricting access to information, the law on foreign agents is "the least justified and least adapted to library activities". She

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mentioned that prosecutors in Russia are already inspecting libraries, apparently to check compliance with norms that have not yet been enacted.

"Inspections are currently underway in Russian libraries [in Yaroslavl, Vladimir, Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and other cities]. Prosecutors or their assistants are visiting libraries with those lists," says Petrusenko. She adds that it's a "list of authors who have been labelled as foreign agents and thus they [prosecutors] are looking for them in libraries".

A list of 38 foreign agents can be found in open access on library websites. Library staff compiled the list themselves, relying on data from the ministry of justice. Some institutions, such as the Moscow Regional Universal Library, even publish something along the lines of "guidelines" for handling books by foreign agents. For example, they advise colleagues to go to court if "a librarian or library visitor suspects that a work by an author recognized as a foreign agent contains signs of extremist literature".

When libraries seek clarification from authorities, they are often ignored. "When we hold our library events, we often invite representatives from the ministry of justice or the prosecutor's office, but they never come because they avoid giving any recommendations, especially on such a tricky and unclear issue like foreign agents," Petrusenko complains.

We have been through this before

Lilia lives in the same town near Moscow as Natalia, but works in a different library. She admits to having a negative opinion about some foreign agent authors, but condemns book censorship in general: "We've already been through this. We "burned" [Lev] Gumilev, [Boris] Pasternak, and [Joseph] Brodsky. So there's no need to do that again. The content of these books is worthy. Yes, some people behave badly, but how are the books at fault?" the librarian reflects.

She gave examples of two writers: "Take Boris Akunin, for example. His works are excellent, light reading. Want to relax? Unwind your mind? Good, quality reading. For those who enjoy historical detective stories, he's your guy. I recommended him to everyone. Take Lyudmila Ulitskaya. Yes, she's saying nonsense now, but her texts are brilliant, her language, her style. Try finding another author who writes like that."

In recent years, the work of librarians has changed significantly. According to Lilia, they now have to do everything: manage social media, know how to take a photo and organize events. The one hour that used to be allotted to librarians for familiarizing themselves with new books, so they could later give recommenda-

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tions to readers, has been cancelled. The library where Lilia works has undergone renovations, with new ceilings, floors, windows and blinds. However, there was not enough funding to renovate the walls or furniture and the renovation itself dragged on for five years. The library is transitioning to digital operations: all books are being entered into an electronic database and obtaining a library card must now be done through the government services platform *Gosuslugi* (a unified portal of state and municipal services).

"The state needs to know everything – what you eat, where you go. And of course the state is interested in your spiritual life and what you're up to," Lilia remarks with sad irony. She opposes the digitalization because she believes books are "too personal" and the right to read in a library "should be unconditional" not only for those who have registered through *Gosuslugi*. However, she never brought it up to her management.

"The way it is now: if you don't like it, then look for a job somewhere else. No one is worried about attrition anymore. Either you adapt somehow, fit into this system, try to align it with your values while having minimal losses for your colleagues and readers, or you don't work here," Lilia says.

> The right to read in a library should be unconditional, not only for those who have registered through a trackable system.

In a small library in the Tver region, not many people visit, but there are regular readers. They are mostly retirees and students. The first group often inquire about romance novels and detective stories, while the second are interested in classics and scientific literature. Oksana has been working here as a librarian for three years. According to her, the job is hard and the pay is low (the vacancy for a second librarian has long remained unfilled), but Oksana enjoys the work and loves interacting with people. Once a year, she and her colleagues conduct an inventory check and remove "morally outdated" and worn-out books. Some of these are placed on a table for "book-crossing", but most are collected by a truck and taken for recycling. The books by foreign agents have been moved to a storage area for now.

Authors are not the only ones who suffer

Olga works in one of the libraries in a city with a population of over a million. Due to an internal directive, they have already disposed of books by foreign agents. Just in case, they have even closed the book-crossing area: what if someone brings in a "prohibited" book and the librarians do not notice in time?

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"We were sent a list of books that needed to be removed, and we catalogued these books as defective. What happened to them afterward? They were taken away. Most likely, they were sent for recycling. However, some staff take them home, and sometimes readers steal books by foreign agents. They borrow them on their cards and then never return them. In exchange, they buy other books or reimburse the cost in cash," Olga explains.

An employee from one of the libraries in the Vologda region shared that she also took home several books by foreign agents to preserve them, as she fears they might someday be confiscated. Library management tries to play it safe; they are not willing to take risks for the sake of books. According to Olga, librarians find it very difficult to decide on the disposal of works by foreign agents. She sees the reason for this hidden conflict in the fact that libraries are managed by staff managers rather than librarians.

"For the manager, the main goal is to avoid problems and remain in their position, while the value of books is relative to them," Olga gestures helplessly. According to her, books by foreign agents have also been removed from children's libraries, including the book *I am a Snake* by Andrei Makarevich.

"Authors are not the only ones who suffer, but also the illustrators and the entire team that would work on the book. It is especially sad for collections that include one of the foreign agent authors. We are forced to remove them as well. "Adequate librarians" do understand that this is a major problem. There are no official orders or regulations, and the value that the library holds is being destroyed by the library itself," Olga admits with sadness. EE

The names of the protagonists have been changed to protect their identity.

This text first appeared in the Russian independent media publication Novaya Vkladka and was written by the journalists Miron Samkov, Svetlana Sinitsa, Natalia Baranova and Violetta Grishkovaya. It is shared here in order to help spread information and stories about Russia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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From defensive fact-checking to proactive promotion of quality media

A conversation with Christophe Leclercq, founder of the EURACTIV media network and the Executive Chair of Europe's MediaLab. Interviewer: Adam Reichardt

ADAM REICHARDT: We spent the last two days here in Kraków talking about disinformation, Russian disinformation and Russian interference in our societies. I would like to start by asking you about the EU High-Level Expert Group on Disinformation, in which you participated back in 2018, and what you think we have learned since then?

CHRISTOPHE LECLERCQ: I think we have very much improved the analysis of Russian disinformation and other sources of disinformation. We have improved the level of fact-checking and debunking, but we have not made a major impact in terms of the quality of the information space. One of the main reasons is that social media platforms dominate the readership and are sources of influence for most people. We stress the quality of media reporting, but actually its own influence is quite limited. There are ways to improve the situation, which were recommended by this high-level expert group on disinformation, but they have not been properly implemented.

As you mentioned, one of the key challenges is related to social media platforms, not only limiting the information that we see, but also spreading bad information. What more can be done? And what are some things you have been working on since?

There have been efforts by some platforms like Facebook to get rid of the worst social media accounts and some of the platforms which determine what you and I are seeing. It would be possible to influence those algorithms by using not only the current signals that favour "clickability" and the viral potential of posts, but also reflecting quality. These are called trust indicators. They were recommended in the Code of Prac-

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tice in 2018 that later led to the Code of Conduct, both endorsed by social media platforms. Every yearly report by the European Commission on implementing these codes, however, has shown that it remains to be done. But it would be completely doable. The social media platforms are very good at optimizing the click rate and the advertising revenues they get from social media, but it's not in their interest to reduce the virality of posts. Basically, fake news tends to be fun and attractive to the audience, therefore maximizing the advertising volume. The platforms could do it if they are pushed from two directions. First, this could come from the policy-makers, and there is now a good legislative framework at the EU level which could be implemented more strictly. And second, companies that do advertising could also push for their ads not to promote disinformation but to promote quality information so they could use these trust indicators also to attribute greater advertising rates and prices compared to other types of content, which means that the platforms could recoup some of the volume they would lose.

I think it's a very interesting idea. I worry, however, with especially one of the main platforms where information is spread, X, formerly known as Twitter, they would be quite against this, also because Elon Musk, who's been very outspoken, would claim this is an attack on "free speech".

My summary of the report of this high-level expert group is to avoid censorship, dilute fake news and promote quality content. We have avoided censorship and this would actually not censor, it would just give less visibility to bad-quality information. As for X, it is not in line with EU regulation and it may well lose its ability to operate in Europe if it doesn't improve. I guess we are in a very special phase, with the US presidential election in November and maybe Elon Musk will see the light after that.

But quality information is also a huge challenge in the media environment in general, which is very competitive. We are inundated with information, a lot of which is free. Media outlets have to be quick, to break news (often without fact-checking) and get clicks. How can we improve quality in this environment?

I do not want to focus too much on these trust indicators, but they would also have a positive impact from that viewpoint because editors who choose quality versus the click rate will be encouraged by the numbers as they will get a higher rating. This is actually a reason why some publishers of tabloids were reluctant about trust indicators because they feared they would be ranked less than top quality newspapers, but they would still be much better rated than Russia Today or any kind of unknown sources. So it's all in relative terms. Another element regarding quality is the importance of harnessing artificial intelligence under the control of editors. For me this is the next huge challenge for the media sector. We have been more

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Photo courtesy of Christophe Leclercq

or less absorbed by the internet. It has taken years and unfortunately we lost half of the journalists in Europe in this era. Now artificial intelligence is even more of a challenge and of course the media has to use artificial intelligence in order to improve its productivity and its customization, while leaving the parameters in the hands of journalists, of human beings, following a framework and values. To do that, we need to improve the resilience of the media sector. And I'm not thinking just of rule of law and protecting journalists but being able to pay them well. Therefore, the question is how to improve the business models of the media sector.

This topic of business models is very critical because I think media is going through some sort of transformation right now and we have to also pay attention to not allow quality journalism to be victim to the changing models. What are some, if you have any, suggestions on business models that would promote quality media in Europe? Can it be considered a way to fight against disinformation?

I would mention in the spirit of brevity just three things. First of all, the public sector has a role to play. It's legitimate to have public broadcasters, for example. Secondly, new models can be explored, such as the philanthropy model. There is a general interest in some types of

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journalism, for example, solutions journalism which is about looking not only at the negatives of what's happening in our societies. Thirdly, we always think about business models and revenues. Let's look at the cost side as well, because if we don't, it's the number of journalists that will be reduced. I believe that the media sector in Europe is far too fragmented compared to other service industries. There are too many players. It's not sustainable and so I think we will have more consolidation.

Basically, there are three possible paths. The first, unfortunately, is to cease operations, which has already happened to many media outlets. The second option is to cooperate, sharing costs and accelerating innovation. This is the spirit behind programmes like Stars4Media, supported by the EU, which my think-do-tank, Europe's Media Lab, has developed. The third way is to merge, which is why I integrated the policy-focused media outlet Euractiv into the Mediahuis group. I realized that investing the vast amounts required for artificial intelligence and innovation would be beyond my individual capacity. Typically, media concentration is opposed in the name of pluralism, and it's true that if it occurs at a national level between similar outlets, it often results in one outlet disappearing, cutting the editorial staff in half. However, if it involves cross-border mergers – uniting outlets that are aligned in political orientation, target audience or technology – then it can be a very powerful strategy.

We've talked a lot about media and I think it's very relevant in the context of fighting Russian disinformation, but let's come back to the Russian disinformation topic and look at some of the other solutions that may be useful for us in Europe to become more resilient. What are some ideas that you have or have been working on?

I would regroup them into two categories. First of all, I've learned a lot at this conference organized in Kraków by the Jagiellonian University. And I would say the first category of solutions is in gathering evidence and sharing information, and maybe bundling together more of the various initiatives which exist. I tend to call the world of fact-checking and debunking a cottage industry, but it needs to grow to industrial strength, much like the platforms themselves. This is still what I would call the reactive approach, being on the defence, protecting from Russian disinformation. The other type of approach is perhaps more sensitive but one I think we need to adopt: proactively winning the information warfare battle while obviously not losing our values. There are red lines – it's not about lying – but the same information can be presented in different ways. We should consider using micro-targeting, as the Russians do, to engage with our different Russian-speaking audiences, both the diaspora and inside the country. We may want to choose the topics carefully.

There are topics which are more in line with the traditional values of Russia and why not use them. We also have people with traditional values in the West

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who may be better spokespeople to the Russian audiences than extremely progressive audiences. So let's try to build bridges with the Russians. I'm not talking about the Kremlin, because I would not hope for much change there, but I'm talking about the educated middle class in Moscow and St Petersburg, which is the key to any change in Russia. The diaspora left from those circles, and there are still millions of people in St Petersburg and Moscow, could support or even trigger change in Russia as it has done in the past. There have been revolutions in Russia, why not another one?

There is also exile media, Russian and Belarusian exile media, which has been trying to take this approach to reach the audiences inside the country. Is Europe doing enough to support them in helping them reach such audiences?

I think not. And the question is highly relevant. Legally, they are now EU media because most of them have been established within the EU. But of course, they should also be handled as addressing Russian-speaking audiences, not only domestically but also in Russia itself. So far, if I talk about the EU support programmes, they are too small and they are also divided between domestic EU programmes and foreign EU programmes. I'm in favour of streamlining this because there are great programmes like, for example, the journalism partnership, part of Creative Europe, which should be open to media with roots in Eastern Europe, so beyond the current membership of the EU. I hope this will be done as part of the new mandate with the new European Commission. We have lobbied for having a democracy commissioner in an op-ed published on *Project Syndicate*. And we are lucky because we will actually get two democracy commissioners, one also in charge of justice and the other one, importantly, in charge of digital sovereignty. One commissioner comes from Finland, therefore a frontline country, and I have great expectations for what she could be triggering in terms of opening such programmes. In addition, I think it would be important to have many more journalists in Brussels covering EU and NATO affairs, both for Eastern European countries, and I'll define what they could be, and separately for Belarus and also for Russian exile media. Therefore we, Europe's Media Lab, have developed this programme *Maison du Médialab*. It is aimed at tripling the number of Brussels correspondents from Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia. Tripling sounds like a huge number, but actually it's starting from a very small base. For example, Moldova has no correspondents in Brussels. It is amazing when you think of the importance of the EU and NATO for them, and Ukraine has only five which is much less than there was from Poland ten years before enlargement. So this is quite doable. Russian exile media should be treated differently, but equally supported. I think there are grounds for having a similar scheme for Russian exile media in Brussels so that they get clos-

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er to EU institutions, while still retaining their independence and their separate voice. They may well be patriotic, they may well have different views from Ukrainians, but at least they should report in a fact-based way on what's going on in the EU and also in NATO.

Is there anything else that you wanted to cover before we finish?

I think it is important to consider not only the mainstream media, big broadcasters and general newspapers which have transformed themselves on the internet. There is also a big role to play for niche media, such as *New Eastern Europe*, *Euractiv*, *Politico*, many others, because they, in turn, inform the mainstream journalists. Very often, the topics which are covered on TV have been covered the day before by mainstream newspapers and a week before by specialized publications. So there is a role to play also for our type of policy media. NE

This interview took place during the conference titled "Shadows of Truth: Decoding Russia's Disinformation Campaigns", which was co-organized by LSE IDEAS CSEEP at the Jagiellonian University and New Eastern Europe.

Christophe Leclercq is a former management consultant and EU official. He is the founder of the EURACTIV media network and the Executive Chair of Europe's MediaLab (Fondation EURACTIV). He was a member of the 2018 EU "High-Level Expert Group on disinformation", and is now on the Advisory Council of EDMO (European Digital Media Observatory, managed by EUI in Florence).

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

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Revisiting the lessons of the Russo-Georgian War

An interview with Heidi Tagliavini, head of the independent international fact-finding mission into the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war. Interviewer: Vazha Tavberidze

VAZHA TAVBERIDZE: Let's start with the legacy and importance of the Tagliavini Report and get the perspective of the person who probably had the most say on it.

HEIDI TAGLIAVINI: Our report was based on the information available in 2008 and early 2009, when it was compiled some 15 years ago. It brought transparency to a dark chapter in the history of the conflict between Russia and Georgia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Our report also established a number of important standards in international law, in humanitarian law and in human rights. Finally, it calmed down a very heated situation, both in Georgia and internationally.

Crucially, the report was accepted by both sides: the Russian Federation and Georgia. It has been considered a reference document up to now as it states that specific international standards need to be respected. This is relevant far beyond the Russian-Georgian context.

It has been 16 years since the war, has your perspective changed on what happened?

From today's perspective, the war in Georgia in August 2008 looks somehow like a dress rehearsal for what would later happen in Ukraine. And, in hindsight the report has aged very well. It continues to be valid, especially in the legal field, but also in giving an adequate description of the history and context of the conflict. It defined standards that should be commonly, and internationally, accepted. I can give a few examples. The report developed the whole issue of the legal status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; it elaborated on the right to self-determination or to secession; it also addressed, for the very first time, another extremely important question of the so-called "passportization" issue (a practice whereby Russian authorities would grant Russian citizenship to people living in occupied lands – editor's

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note). Another very important chapter that continues to have large implications was the use of force. We elaborated very much in detail who would have had the right to use force at what stage and for what reasons. It looks like almost nobody did. All these elements, especially the legal part, remain valid up to now and also in other international conflicts.

Fifteen years is still a quite a long time. Is there anything you would want to change in it, given the chance today? Any corrections or revelations that you might have had since?

No changes, no corrections, no speculations. The text is still valid, as well as up to date. What we can say today is that, unfortunately, the conclusions that should have been drawn from our report haven't really been taken into account. In 2009 some countries, especially those of Eastern Europe, were already warning the European Union, asking who would be next [to face Russian aggression]. And this warning was not heeded. But you know what it is like in politics: once a war is over, once a ceasefire or peace has settled in, relations resume. This is normal political practice.

When the report came out, a fierce information battle ensued to use the report as leverage. Who do you think were the winners and losers of the report? Or, rather, who benefitted the most?

At the time the report was published, I thought there were no winners in the war. Today, I would be a bit more cautious as we have the impression that, in the long run, Russia was the winner, and all others the losers. While working on the report, we also had to deal with this huge, uncontrollable cloud of speculations and, therefore, we came to the conclusion that the complete report should be published immediately after its release and presented to those who commissioned the report, which was the European Union Council of Ministers in Brussels. Still, you can't prevent people from writing what they want, regardless of the facts on the table, but you can try to minimize the harm.

The report was initiated by the EU. It was a concern of Europe and European citizens. Speculations on the report were seen mainly in Georgia and Russia, not in Europe, which means that, internationally and historically, the speculations and abusive interpretations will not persist. What will persist, in my opinion, is the result of our investigation into the facts as well as the legal findings. When somebody today examines the August 2008 war in Georgia, that person will be unable to avoid our report, being the universally-acknowledged reference document. History is a very malleable element, but our report is an expert opinion mandated by an international institution. And, most important, the credibility of this report has been accepted by the Russian Federation and by Georgia.

Yet the Georgian perspective to this day remains that Russia benefitted from it more because of the way it was worded,

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that Georgia was blamed for starting the war. Was it a just accusation?

This is the Rubicon question, the Tskhinvali shelling. We worked a lot on the exact wording. In the report we call it "the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict", but it was also the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, of provocations and incidents. This is really the formulation we wanted to give it. I myself worked for five years in the conflict zone between the Georgians and the Abkhaz, and I saw so much tension, more on the South Ossetian side towards 2008, but this tension was a constant feature. And, when I still was working in the UN Observer Mission in Georgia, up to 2006, every summer we established that in South Ossetia there were skirmishes to a greater or lesser extent. The question is, when do you trigger a war? It was that trigger moment which is the headache for the Georgian side, a trigger for a sort of invasion by Russian troops, who, in fact, from a strictly legal point of view, had the right to protect their peacekeepers in South Ossetia. But that was the only force that had the right to be used in the region, so as to free the peacekeepers. They should have withdrawn immediately afterwards, instead of invading Georgia. Unfortunately, from a legal standing, the Tskhinvali shelling was the trigger mo-

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ment that led to the full-scale invasion. We can speculate a lot about what would have happened had Tskhinvali not been shelled on that night from the 7th to the 8th of August. But this was the trigger moment and that is why we couldn't have described it another way.

On the Russian peacekeepers – was it truly peacekeeping that they were doing?

Let me refer you to a part of our investigation report, which is called "observations". We intentionally did not make conclusions in our report, we made observations. One of the most important observations for us was when we stated that no party to a conflict, or party that is strongly supportive of any of the sides, should assume the position of "peacekeeper" as peacekeeping is founded on the notion of impartiality. We couldn't have said it in any better way, and that is the maximum we, as an independent fact-finding mission, could say. We can't say "it's forbidden" because even if you say it is forbidden, you won't stop it. That was not the purpose of our report. It was not going to result into a policy change in Russia.

Are they still peacekeepers if they aren't impartial anymore, if they have become party to the conflict themselves?

You can argue like that in legal terms. The report also admits that there were Russian non-peacekeeper forces present in Georgia, but that they did not have a massive influence, and therefore it could not be qualified as a Russian invasion.

So in that vein, if one single solitary Russian tank or soldier crossed the Swiss border, for example, would your country consider it an act of aggression or invasion?

You can't compare apples with oranges. We said everything in our report. We did not get any document from the Georgian side that would have proved that one tank was already in South Ossetia that was not attributable to the peacekeepers. That is one of the questions we asked the Georgian authorities at the time. We asked for documents to prove the Russian military presence, but what we got did not confirm with 100 per cent certainty that this happened. We were not in a position to get absolute clarity on this question.

I wanted to ask whether the established western dogma at the time – the belief that some common ground was needed with Russia in order to avoid having Russia as an adversary – inadvertently influenced the report?

No, absolutely not. When you look at the EU mandate, which you can find in the first volume of our three-volume report, it says that the independent international fact-finding mission on the conflict in Georgia could work in full independence. And this is exactly what happened. We worked in total independence. One of the purposes at the time was to get more clarity on what really happened. There was a cloud of propaganda surrounding the war and, certainly in the European Union, there was no clear idea of what had been re-

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ally going on. I was explicitly told: the purpose of the investigation is that we want to understand how to resume relations with Russia and Georgia. The purpose was to step back, look at what happened, look at what we could find, and then after the report, decide on how to continue relations. The post-war period was really an obstacle. You can't go on with daily business pretending nothing happened. And that was the main aim of the report.

Speculating now, had the report fully blamed Russia, do you think anything would have changed in the way the West approached Russia?

That is very difficult to say. I can certainly say the EU, in principle, wished to have normal relations with both Russia and Georgia. It is clear that it would have been a bit more difficult to go back to "normal" with a report that said no side is innocent in this conflict, that all bear the responsibility. The aim was to bring as much clarity on the crucial questions as we could. We were asked only to assemble the facts, facts that could be assessed as true or factual, and then not draw political conclusions, but merely describe. We were not preparing proceedings for a legal or political tribunal but were on a fact-finding mission in order to better understand the conflict and the underlying situation.

Thus, the report concluded that there is some blame to be attributed to each party involved?

No, I would say that's just one part of a much broader investigation. All sides made mistakes in the legal field, as I mentioned already. The fact that distributing Russian passports on a massive scale is considered contrary to international law; the fact that supporting separatism, as we called it, is not supportive of a peaceful coexistence; and, most importantly, that no party had the right to use force, except Russia in one very specific case, i.e. solely to free their peacekeepers. There are many other facts that could be mentioned. If you read the whole legal part it says enough about where a conflict can go and that it can be triggered by a side event. But the responsibilities are shared. We also stated that the Russian claims of Georgians committing genocide are not substantiated – we couldn't find any indications of genocide. But we did find signs of ethnic cleansing committed by the South Ossetians and that the Russian armed forces did not prevent it.

There is a whole range of findings which came out of this report, and they are all important.

In an interview several years ago, former President Mikheil Saakashvili told me that signing off on the report's findings was contingent to receiving humanitarian assistance from the EU, totalling over four billion euros. Could you shed more light on this?

I have absolutely no information of such a declaration on the basis of the report to the EU Council of Ministers. I presented the report to the EU Coun-

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cil in September 2009, and there was an ensuing discussion, but I have no idea what former President Saakashvili is alluding to.

Do you expect a similar investigation to be launched into the Ukraine war, whenever it ends?

It is very difficult to say. It depends on the outcome of the war. I believe every conflict, minor or major, should be thoroughly investigated to avoid any legends, wrong narratives and speculations. The problem is that you must have the parties agree, though you can still investigate if the parties do not cooperate. You will still have a very rich material basis on which you or future historians can work and try to establish what happened, but it will not have the same impact. I believe this is really important, especially in the times we are currently going through, where we often have difficulties understanding where the truth lies.

Heidi Tagliavini is a former Swiss diplomat. She was charged with leading the European Union's fact-finding investigation into the causes of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. She also represented the OSCE in the 2015 negotiations concerning the Minsk II agreement related to Russia's war in Donbas.

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

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Life on the front

Living and surviving in Russia's war in eastern Ukraine

JOSHUA R. KROEKER

Scenes of conflict from Ukraine continue to dominate reports concerning the ongoing Russian invasion. Despite this, the war moves at a rather slow pace at the front. This reflects the local population's adaptation to the conflict, with people stealing small moments of normalcy throughout their day-to-day lives.

On a cool, bluish-green river just minutes from the eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk, Ukrainian soldiers from a mortar brigade seek to relax. The dark green military 4x4 that brought them from the front now sits idle as they cast fishing lines into the water. The fishing is poor, yielding little more than ripples, but the catch does not matter. For these soldiers, the chance to grill meat, share drinks, and laugh in the open air is worth more than any fish they might pull out. Here, far from the war, time slows, and the simple act of being together in nature becomes a fleeting treasure.

For many, whether in the West or in the heart of Kyiv, the war remains a distant abstraction – a semi-reality, witnessed only through screens or heard in the brief phone calls from brothers, sons and husbands stationed far away. The true texture of life at the front line, the raw experience of those in the east of the country, feels remote, even unreal. In cities like Sloviansk, the people live with the war every day, its presence heavy and inescapable, yet in other parts of Ukraine, even within the same country, there is a divide. Many will never fully understand the weight of the conflict carried by those to the east.

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Media coverage, driven by statistics and analysis, often reduces the war to numbers: billions in aid, frozen Russian assets, tanks delivered, hundreds of thousands dead or wounded. The headlines count the toll of civilian lives – 22 killed in Kharkiv yesterday, tens of thousands lost in Mariupol – but these figures, as vital as they are for comprehending the scale of devastation, fail to capture the human dimension. They gloss over the individual stories, the faces and fates of the people who live with the war day by day, those who defend Ukraine, and the civilians who endure the horror thrust upon them.

Life in and around Donbas

It may surprise many to learn that the pace of Russia's war of aggression in the Donbas is quite slow. The military presence, however, is inescapable, weaving itself into the fabric of daily life. Soldiers linger on every corner – leaning against lampposts, smoking by the roadside, filling up their tanks at the local WOG petrol station, or stealing moments with their wives and girlfriends. Yet, for all their presence, actual combat is a rare sight. Among the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers braving the trenches to defend their homeland, only a fraction engage in battle at any given time. The rest, caught in the rhythm of war's rotation, retreat behind the front lines to rest, recalibrate and repair their gear. There, they form part of the everyday landscape, a constant yet quiet symbol of the region's unrelenting struggle.

> War statistics, as vital as they are for comprehending the scale of devastation, fail to capture the human dimension.

In the near-front cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, which have withstood the weight of Russian aggression since 2014, life clings fiercely to the notion of "business as usual". Despite the near constant barrage of artillery and ballistic strikes – claiming the lives of civilians and soldiers alike – these cities refuse to halt. Cafés hum with quiet resilience, serving soldiers, volunteers, journalists and locals. Sunlit terraces along the streets offer cheap cappuccinos, a simple but steadfast comfort. Under the morning light, caffeine becomes a lifeline, restoring energy after sleepless nights of relentless bombardment, sharpening the minds of Ukraine's defenders as the war grinds on toward its third year. And somehow, miraculously, the streets remain full – young and old, men and women, soldiers and civilians – moving through the ruins of war with a quiet determination that refuses to bend.

The nights in Donbas are a symphony of distant destruction – the deep thud of artillery; the sharp crack of outgoing shells; and the low, menacing rumble of Grad

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rockets exploding just 20 kilometres away. With alcohol banned and the streets locked down by a curfew that starts at nine o'clock, the cities fall into an eerie silence, broken only by the dull roar of war at the edges of consciousness. Russian attacks, relentless and indiscriminate, strike more often now, tearing into civilian homes, military depots and apartment blocks. Those lucky enough to snatch a few hours of sleep are often jolted awake by the tremor of another explosion.

Morning creeps in with a strange kind of rhythm. The streets, emptied and still under the veil of night, begin to stir as pensioners march to the markets, bags of homegrown vegetables in hand, and soldiers crank the engines of old European trucks, heading off toward the perilous "zero line". Yet the city never moves with urgency – there is no rush here. Donbas, like the war itself, crawls at a sluggish pace, as if time has thickened, its flow heavy with destruction. The war inches closer, its path littered with the remnants of a world the locals spent decades building, threatening to swallow the last standing cities with its slow, insidious creep.

Free time

For nearly three years now, though in some regions more than a decade, life in Ukraine has revolved around the relentless shadow of war, with Russia's brutal invasion casting its weight over everything. Yet for those who live with the war's presence every day, it is the rare moments of respite that offer true solace. In these fleeting pauses between battles and the grind of daily hardship, civilians and soldiers alike cling to the quiet spaces that exist beyond the front lines. They dream not of grand trips abroad, but rather of the simple in-betweens: a brief hour outdoors, the warmth of a family gathering, a swim in a nearby river, or an afternoon tending to the garden.

In Sloviansk, from the first warmth of spring until the crisp days of late autumn, the saltwater lakes become a gathering place for the city's residents and the soldiers stationed nearby. The lakes, shimmering under the wide Ukrainian sky, are dotted with people bobbing gently in the water, their movements slow and languid. Children race past on their bicycles, weaving through the crowds, while the more athletic soldiers swim steady laps across the lake, cutting through the water with purpose. Elderly men and women float on their backs, arms outstretched, savouring the rare sensation of weightlessness, their faces tilted toward the sun.

Along the shore, local entrepreneurs weave through the clusters of sunbathers, offering sodas and trays of homemade pastries, the smell of fresh-baked dough mingling with the salty scent of the lake. Conversations hum softly in the air, punctuated by the occasional laugh, as though the war beyond the city's edges was a

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Taking a moment to go fishing outside of Sloviansk. The fishing is poor, yielding little more than ripples, but the catch does not matter. For these soldiers, the chance to grill meat, share drinks, and laugh in the open air is worth more than any fish they might pull out.

distant dream. But it is not. The distant rumble of artillery, the sharp crack of explosions, and the occasional roar of a fighter jet remind everyone that the front is not far away. Yet here, in these stolen moments of peace, the people of Sloviansk, hardened by years of conflict, allow themselves to relax, to breathe.

Just a few kilometres from the city, along a quiet river that winds its way into Sloviansk, a group of soldiers gather around a small fire. The coals crackle gently as they sip Coca-Cola and Fanta, while the scent of grilling shashlik fills the air. Laughter rises between them, easy and unguarded, as they share stories from the front – tales of close calls, daily challenges, and the unshakable bond they have forged in the crucible of war. Dmytro, a 25-year-old soldier from central Ukraine, sits with a rod in hand, casting his line into the slow-moving river. As he shows pictures of

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his children, pride flickers in his eyes, though a quiet sadness lingers just beneath. "I haven't seen them in years," he confesses, his voice softened by the distance that separates him from his family.

But here, by the river's edge, with the sun casting its golden light over the water, there is little room for sorrow. Dmytro teaches us how to fly fish, demonstrating with patience. "It's easier here, in these shallow waters," he explains. Though the dangers of the "zero line" loom in their near future, the mood is surprisingly light. Dmytro and his comrades bask in the warmth of the summer sun, joking and trading stories as if the war were worlds away. For a moment, the beauty of the Donbas countryside holds them in a brief reprieve, offering a taste of normalcy amidst the chaos only kilometres away. Here, surrounded by trees and water, they are simply men enjoying the simple pleasures of life: a fire, a meal, and the quiet company of friends. Stories like these abound across Donbas and much of Ukraine's war-torn regions, woven into the daily fabric of life amidst the conflict.

Dreaming of the future

Despite the many horrors, joy still blooms in Donbas. Families continue to plant gardens, rebuild their homes, and dream of a future beyond the war. In the ruins of a small town 40 kilometres north of Sloviansk, just over the Kharkiv-Donetsk regional border, a family works tirelessly to restore what is left of their home and life. Kam'yanka, twice consumed by the front line of Russia's invasion in 2022, was reduced to rubble. Of its 1,200 residents, fewer than 20 have returned. Yet those who have, like Viktor and Larissa, harbour big dreams. They began by clearing their land of mines, usually without the help of professionals, and are now slowly rebuilding their home with no power or running water.

> For hundreds of thousands in Donbas, the future remains a distant dream as Russia continues to advance.

Viktor and Larissa, after fleeing in the early weeks of war, returned at the end of 2022 to find their village destroyed. Two years later, they have almost finished rebuilding their house, once shattered by Russian artillery. They have repaired their looted bathroom, put a new roof over their heads, and started to feel at home again. "We were born here, our parents and children were born here. We see ourselves nowhere but on this land," Larissa says. This summer, despite Viktor's fall from the roof and subsequent surgery, they have tended to their garden, harvesting pumpkins, corn and tomatoes. Larissa, with pride, serves homemade cabbage-filled buns to visitors. Amidst the hardships, they cherish the simple pleasures of life – being with their dogs, shar-

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ing stories with passing journalists, and embracing the hope that everything will be fine. "We will not give the Russians the satisfaction of driving us away from our land," Larissa tells *New Eastern Europe*.

In many ways, Larissa and Viktor are fortunate. Their town was liberated in the war's first year. But for hundreds of thousands in Donbas, the future remains a distant dream. Russia continues to advance toward Pokrovsk, Kramatorsk and countless other towns and villages, forcing civilians to flee by train and car. Many remain, caught in the path of the approaching Russian army, their hopes suspended in uncertainty. These are the people for whom Ukraine's defenders fight, for whom the West sends billions in aid, and for whom the world must not forget. In the end, this war is not about tanks, jets or shells. It is about people – their freedoms, their yearning for democracy, and their unwavering resolve to reclaim their destinies. NEE

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Gender stereotypes break down as Ukrainian women step up

ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

With one million Ukrainians in the military, including hundreds of thousands on the frontlines, nine million displaced and thousands of men who once eagerly enlisted now hiding from military recruiters, the war shrunk and reshaped Ukraine's labour force. Indeed, it is likely to continue transforming society and women's place in it for decades to come.

After years as a quality control engineer with big supermarkets and housing construction sites, Natalia Myronenko had yearned for change. Passionate about fashion, beauty, makeup and harmony, she saw her maternity leave after the birth of her second child as the perfect time to pivot. But the war intervened, thrusting her into a field she had never imagined entering: humanitarian demining.

When she got the job as a quality control manager, she envisioned mostly office supervisory work. "Then I realized that war is my job, and I was shocked," says the 40-year-old. Like in her old job, she has to check other people's work. Only now, human lives are on the line. At stake is making the land safe again for farmers and people to live on, to survey each patch of farmland that had witnessed combat, carefully searching for and removing unexploded mines, missiles, artillery shells, bombs and other types of ordnance – all with the utmost caution. "It's all about safety," she says.

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High heels and hiking boots

"I like stylish things, beautiful spaces, but this job is much more interesting," Myronenko says on a recent autumn day in Peja, Kosovo, where she is attending further training at the MAT Kosovo demining school. Impeccable in the brown uniform of her employer, the six-year-old Ukrainian Deminers Assocation (UDA), she pours over an old Russian missile, learning how to defuse it. Her job is a mix of what she loves. Being in the office in Kyiv and in the field. Wearing high heels and hiking books. The bonding with girls in the office, the analytical complexity of the task: "I wouldn't want to do anything else." Mostly, she says, "it benefits my country."

Like Myronenko, Valentina Kastrenko never imagined herself in a "man's job – let alone thrive in it". But after Russian troops bombed her hometown of Mariupol, destroyed her home and stole her husband's truck – their sole source of income – she had no choice but to flee west. Like millions of displaced Ukrainians, she had struggled to reinvent her life following the full-scale invasion. In a Mariupol support group, however, she saw an advert for free truck-driving lessons.

Truck driving? That had been her husband's domain. At 57, she was close to retirement. Yet, with no home to return to and no prospects, she applied. Now a licenced driver for trucks weighing seven tonnes and more, she is making plans to partner with her husband on long truck trips, helping with the loading of goods. She knows how complicated the job is for women. "Ukraine is a traditional country; the traditional role of women is to be at home," she says. In Ukraine drivers are often gone weeks at a time, but the course gave her a boost: "I met a lot of girls who want to make a contribution to rebuilding Ukraine."

Like millions of displaced Ukrainians, Valentina had struggled to reinvent her life following the full-scale invasion.

The stories of Natalia Myronenko and Valentina Kastrenko reflect a larger societal shift underway in Ukraine. With one million Ukrainians in the military, almost nine million displaced, roughly a quarter of the population, and thousands of men who once eagerly enlisted now hiding from military recruiters, the war has not only shrunk and reshaped Ukraine's labour force; indeed, it is likely to continue transforming society and women's place in it, for decades to come.

In a series of "wartime surveys" for Gradus Research, a company created during the COVID-19 pandemic, sociologist Evgeniya Bliznyuk has taken the pulse of Ukrainian society since the first weeks of the war in 2022, documenting their different "mental stages". She says the role of Ukrainian women is bound to become increasingly significant, "not only to fill the gaps but also as a driving force in rebuilding Ukraine as an inclusive society".

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Filling in for absent men, Ukrainian women are stepping into roles once considered off-limits. They are becoming truck drivers, locksmiths, machinists, security guards and even firefighters. Underground, they work in coal mines. Above ground, they are running steel mills, factories and railways vital to the war effort. They are also joining the military in unprecedented numbers.

Exhausted, three years into the war that is lasting longer than anyone expected, yet determined, Ukrainian women yearn for stability and fulfilment. For many, this means pursuing new roles and professional growth, including in sectors linked to the war effort, industries crucial to Ukraine's future. They are the deminers clearing farmland from remnants of Russian explosives, the builders of drones helping soldiers fight, and increasingly, those healing soldiers' wounds.

As Ukraine confronts an uncertain future, women are emerging as key drivers of resilience and adaptability. Five million of them are now living abroad. Those who have stayed are helping shape the kind of society Ukraine wants to become. "Women are setting the tone for the future," says Myronenko, the quality control specialist who switched into humanitarian demining after the invasion. For her, strength comes from embracing her femininity while tackling the demands of a challenging job with lives on the line.

"Feminism is total support of our country"

Today in Ukraine, the question of gender roles has little to do with western ideals of gender equality, and "it would be wrong to say war is a motor of emancipation," says Anna Colin-Lebedev, a lecturer in political sociology at Paris University Nanterre, who has compared the role of women in Ukraine and Russia. In Ukraine, where the war is viewed as "everybody's fight," men and women are equally involved. "The Russian invasion is seen as an existential threat, not just a political one," she says. Ukrainian women have a track record of combining work and family. But now, "every mother views the aggressor as a danger to her children, her family and her future."

Tetyana Pashkina, a labour specialist in Kyiv who studies the impact of war on the economy, agrees. "For us," she says, "feminism is total support of our country". Today, there are 50,000 women serving in the Ukrainian army, including 10,000 on the front lines. That is three times as many as ten years ago.

For women, change came with war and long before the current conflict began. As Russian aggression escalated in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, women decided to fight back. But the army was depleted and the state was fragile. If they wanted their country to keep its sovereignty, they would have to do

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Photo: Isabelle de Pommereau

After years as a quality control engineer in the construction field, Natalia Myronenko dreamed of going into interior design. The war catapulted her into a field she never imagined going into: humanitarian demining.

their part. They went to the front, but without salary or veterans' pensions due to a Soviet-era law banning them from access to combat positions, as well as hundreds of other professions deemed "harmful to their reproductive health."

A group of women launched an advocacy campaign to raise awareness of gender inequality in the armed forces. A key tool was a documentary on Ukrainian women's role on the front called *The Invisible Battalion*. The film was instrumental in the government's decision in 2016 to begin overturning a series of bans on combat jobs. The move unleashed a sea of change. "If women can serve on the front lines – the most masculine job of all – they can do anything," says Hanna Hrytsenko, a gender researcher for the group Invisible Battalion. In 2018 the government began the process of lifting a ban on 450 professions previously deemed "harm-

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ful" to women's health, paving the way for women to become truck drivers, for instance. The full-scale invasion led to more openings, with women now allowed to work underground in coal mines and taking on other tasks crucial to keeping the economy running.

Women leading Ukraine's demining revolution

As operations manager for the Ukrainian Deminers Association, a non-profit group of 400 sappers created six years ago, Iryna Kustovska is at the forefront of a sector the full-scale invasion has caused to grow fast. Once closed to women, the field now counts women as a third of its humanitarian deminers. "It's expanding before our eyes," says Kustovska.

The need is vast. With up to one-third of Ukraine's territory estimated to be littered with unexploded mines, cluster bombs, trip wires, booby traps and shell fragments left by Russian forces, Ukraine has become the world's most heavily mined country. Increasingly, it is women who are stepping up to take on the dangerous task of helping to make the land safe for farming and habitation again. They do it each in their own way. There are young mothers like Natalia Myronenko, the quality control specialist who checks that the deminers' job is done properly. But also women like Galina Burkina, 55, who ended up leading a team of 12 deminers, all men, after fleeing Russian occupation, first in Debaltseve in 2015, and then Svitlodarsk in 2022, walking away from her old life as a power station worker. "Humanitarian demining will, unfortunately, be a priority for decades," Kustovska notes.

> Women are stepping up to take on the dangerous task of making the land safe for farming and habitation again.

Not only does this work save lives, it is also essential for Ukraine's agricultural sector. Often referred to as the "breadbasket of the world," Ukraine's fertile land plays a crucial role in global food supplies.

Before the war, 38-year-old Kustovska had little experience with bomb clearance. She worked in the strategic department of the Ukrainian aviation administration, focusing on drone regulation. But as the urgency of clearing explosives became apparent, she seized the opportunity. After the invasion started, a small group of Ukrainian women were sent to MAT Kosovo, an international demining school in Peja, for training. With men barred from leaving the country, Ukraine turned to its women, who began breaking new ground in the field. Kustovska applied to join a group of trainees and completed three rounds of training, graduating at the top of her class – the only woman in a course designed for military experts and weapons engineers.

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She went on to become the quality control engineer for Demining Solution, one of six private Ukrainian demining companies emerging in Ukraine alongside international non-profit organizations like Halo Trust and the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD).

"When I started, women in demining was hot news", Kustovska recalls. "People would say, "Women deminers? Really?" But attitudes are shifting. "Now, people just say, 'okay, your job is demining, as a woman.'"

"For women, demining is not just a response to war; it's also an opportunity for professional growth," she adds. "There will be lots of jobs – not only for ordinary deminers but also for the management positions."

When she hires recruits, gender is irrelevant: all deminers must follow the same complex yet clear procedures. But women often bring a unique perspective to the field, she says, referring to an ability to think "outside the box" and manage multiple tasks simultaneously. These skills are becoming ever more valuable as the number of explosives increases and new, more insidious forms of booby traps are discovered. Alongside older unexploded ammunition, Russian forces are leaving newly produced ordnance, with more creative and dangerous traps becoming commonplace.

"I wonder how many new ideas our enemy can bring to our land," Kustovska remarks, referring to the booby traps as "cruel fantasy." Though the danger is real, the motivation is clear: "When we ask applicants why they want to join, nearly all of them say, 'I want to help to make our country safe again.'"

Keeping Ukraine's supply chain running

On a crisp autumn day, 52-year-old Natalya Kolisnichenko attentively polishes the mirrors and headlights of her white 15-tonne Renault truck. "It's a woman's truck," she says with pride. The truck, with its automatic transmission and rear-view cameras, feels new and a bit adventurous. That day, she is preparing to transport washing machines and sportswear in the Kyiv region as part of her job with Zammler, Ukraine's largest logistics company. It is a dream she has harboured since her father took her on long road trips to the Carpathian Mountains and Crimea. But back then, her mother had said trucking was not a woman's job. She became a kindergarten teacher first, then an office worker and raised two sons.

It took the war to reactivate her dormant childhood dream. Reskilled into trucking by a Swedish non-profit, she testifies to a growing trend in Ukraine that is seeing women move into professions long considered harmful to them or frowned upon by remnants of Soviet ideology regarding the role of women. Driven by the

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necessity of keeping Ukraine's critical infrastructure alive, it has also helped shake up traditional gender stereotypes.

Beredskapslyftet, or "Shift Skills" in Swedish, was born during the COVID-19 pandemic to help flight attendants move into jobs like cashiers. Three years later, the group sought to help Ukraine recover from another crisis, and it identified and combined two urgent issues. With the ports and airports closed and logistics, a sector that everything depends on, paralyzed, trucking had become the Ukrainian economy's vital artery. But the war had drained the sector of its drivers. Women, meanwhile, desperately needed to work. Mixing theory and hands-on experience with modern trucks in Kyiv, the programme would get women to replace men on the job. It would especially target women displaced by the war, older women, and those who had lost their income or loved ones to the conflict.

It became a very successful project. Over 300 women have trained to drive Category C seven-tonne trucks since the inception of Reskilling Ukraine last autumn, with three times as many applying, says Oleksandra Panasiuk, the coordinator. Its success snowballed, inspiring a spate of new retraining initiatives. The "school of operators of construction equipment," for example, trains women to handle excavators. Internally, coal mines have retrained women workers to drive trolleys to carry coal around inside the mines. Businesses have tried to adapt their ways to women through higher salaries, automatization processes and mental health programmes.

> With ports and airports closed, trucking has become the Ukrainian economy's vital artery.

It was a Facebook ad for free truck-driving courses that prompted Kolisnichenko to make a change. "I said, ok, now I'm 52, it is time to change my life, make my dream come true," she says. The training was tough: two weeks of theory, three weeks of practice to obtain her licence to drive trucks over seven tonnes. "I met a lot of great, brave women who want to change their lives," she says.

Finding a job afterwards was easy. The reality of the job, though, proved challenging. At first, she took long trips across Ukraine in a Scania truck, navigating extended shifts, air raid sirens, and tense moments at deserted gas stations. She had to sleep at the stations, often without proper facilities, and sometimes had to ask strangers for an escort to use the restroom. "It was difficult," she admits. "But I'm grateful for the experience."

Kolisnichenko says it is too early to speak of major changes in gender roles in Ukraine. "A lot of people don't understand why women might want this job," she says. Adding, "I met a lot of amazing people around the country," and the looks of surprise in people's eyes as she parks her truck is, to her, a sign of a slow but noticeable shift in societal perceptions.

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Photo: Oleksii Filippov

Natalya Kolisnychenko, 55, from Kyiv, became a truck driver after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Now, transporting sports goods and clothing around the Kyiv region with Zammler, she only covers shorter distances. But she often helps unload the goods herself. "There aren't enough men," she says. "It's mostly women in the warehouses and stores where I deliver, and we unload the goods together."

As a child, she had loved everything about her father's road trips – the smell of gasoline at gas stations, the beauty of the mountains, the sense of freedom. Today, her job brings glimpses of those memories, though they are now filtered through the hardships of war. "I see how beautiful the country is with its green forests, but I also see how the Russians destroy homes and towns. I see burned cars on the roads, emergency cars with wounded soldiers."

"It's tough; it hurts," she says. "But I believe everything will be rebuilt if each person does their part." Today, driving a truck is more than a child's dream. "I'm needed," she adds. "I feel proud."

Learning to live with war

In the early days of Russia's invasion, as Ukrainians rushed to the front, women balanced a dizzying amount of challenges, kind of as they had done only years before during the pandemic. They kept their families safe, delivered aid, raised funds

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for soldiers, travelled thousands of miles to bring their children to safety and acted as advocates for Ukraine abroad – all while they had to take multiple jobs to stay afloat. They also went to the front. The prospect of a quick victory acted as adrenaline, keeping them going.

Yet what they thought would be a sprint has turned into a marathon. Ukrainian women have stopped expecting that good news will come tomorrow. With the adrenaline fading, they are trying to limit the "share of war" in their lives, focusing on basic needs, finding fulfilment in their professional lives, families, and themselves, but also their continued contribution to the war effort.

"They need some reason to believe that life is good and that they have a lot of things to be appreciative of in spite of the war," says Evgeniya Bliznyuk of Gradus Research. Exhausted and sometimes burnt out, they are "starting to take things more slowly, to take care of their emotions, and to communicate with other women, their family, and their children."

Women have been keeping the economy and society running in these years of war. They have also been making their marks in new sectors, often war-related sectors, clearing land, building drones, and preparing to help veterans heal and socially readjust. More than just "gap fillers," they are the "social connectors," bringing resilience, empathy, and understanding to a society facing immense challenges. "Because Ukraine now is very different than before the war," says Bliznyuk.

Living in the "new reality" of adjusting to prolonged war means something different for each woman. "I leave the children with Grandma, and I go to work," says Natalia Myronenko, the humanitarian demining quality control specialist. "That's the "new normal"." For Galina Burkina, it means making her land safe for her granddaughter. Natalya Kolisnichenko finds purpose in driving trucks.

Yes, for many women, the war has opened in Ukraine the chance to break into fields traditionally dominated by men. But most of them say the stakes are far too high to call it an "opportunity." Instead, it is a necessity. A necessity to survive, rebuild, and pave the way for a future where they and the land they love can finally be safe again. EE

This story was done in parts thanks to the support from N-Ost's Europe-Ukraine Desk grant programme. Yulia Surkova, a Ukrainian journalist covering war actions and humanitarian problems for AFP, UNICEF, and Ukrainian media and contributed to this story.

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Romanian community establishes roots in rural France

PAUL MAZET

Westward migration in Europe is often associated with settlement in urban areas. Despite this, many workers from the region have found employment in small rural communities. The French town of Gramat and its surroundings, for example, have seen the arrival of a few hundred Romanians over the past decade.

Since the 2010s, the *Causse* of Gramat in south-western France (part of a group of vibrant, shimmering limestone plateaus) has witnessed the appearance of a substantial Romanian population. At first, the newcomers came in response to recruitment for work positions in slaughterhouses. Then, opportunities diversified, relatives joined and the community grew. First believed to be a temporary movement, permanent settlement was just around the corner for many. Today, Romanians represent one of the largest immigrant communities (if not the largest) in the area, bringing an Eastern European facet and thus diversity to this French countryside.

New arrivals

Mici (skinless sausages made from different meats), *Sarmale* (stuffed cabbages), *Gogoșari* peppers, and many more of Romania's products fill the shelves of Romanasul – the Romanian grocery store in Gramat. "I had this idea for a long time,"

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explains Marilena Placinta, the store owner, originating from the Danube delta city of Tulcea. The thought became palpable in February 2019, just as much as the area's changing demography did through this new commerce.

Providing a precise figure about this Romanian population is complicated. Some speak of 200 to 300 people. Others raise the estimation to 500. Yet, all converge to say a "few hundred" now live in the town of about 3,400 inhabitants and its surroundings.

Coming to France from Romania's Banat region, out of personal fascination and pro-European attitude, the town's priest, Father Alexandre, thinks that Romania is "very Francophile". Notwithstanding, in numbers, France is, out of all the important destinations, by far not an obvious choice for Romanians, explains Remus Gabriel Anghel, a professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest and a researcher with the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities in Cluj-Napoca.

With about 130,000 members, according to official statistics, the French Romanian diaspora is much smaller than Italy's (estimated above a million) or Spain's (estimated above 500,000). Thereby, Placinta's grocery store vividly denotes an uncommonly extensive local Romanian population for such a small French town – a surprise to many when occurring in, as some would label, the "middle of nowhere".

As the owner of the Romanasul store notes, albeit somewhat exaggeratedly since not all Romanians arrived for the same reasons, the influx of Romanian workers in this remote area largely depends on job opportunities that are often rejected locally but welcomed internationally. In December 2009, as Hervé and Florence Quentin prepared to sell their small *Tabac* (cigarette shop) business, they vividly recall the sudden surge in demand for pre-paid phone cards from newly arrived Romanians – marking the beginning of a dynamic that has continued for nearly 15 years. Teodor Cristea proudly claims the title of being the first Romanian to settle in Gramat, arriving at the turn of the 2010s – alongside four others to work at the local lamb slaughterhouse.

The influx of Romanian workers in this remote area largely depends on job opportunities that are often rejected locally.

"All of this comes from a socio-economic problem," explains Hervé Destrel, a former executive at the slaughterhouse. In 1984 he and his brother took over the family business. At the beginning of the 2010s, the local economic cornerstone faced a "critical situation". Work was there but workers were hard to find. Following a recruitment call for about 200 people, roughly 30 responded. Very few came and zero signed a contract. The widespread lack of interest appeared obvious. The cold, the smells and the ultimate task of killing animals is "not really sexy", admits Martin Ostermeyer, the current

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head of the slaughterhouse. He complains that recruiting "locals is extremely difficult". There was, and still is, a gap (not a void, to cautiously underline the fact that numerous French people also do this hard work).

Following the example set by Brittany's meat industry, the Destrel brothers contacted Romanian temp agencies that, although not based in south-western France, were willing to operate in Gramat. These agencies provided a seamless setup for Romanian workers, offering shared housing opportunities and administrative support. This made it easy for workers to embark on foreign assignments while ensuring the temp agencies could quickly get their labour operations up and running. After the mid-2010s, Romania-based companies were either banned from operating in France or required to follow a new French legal status. Given that situation and due to concerns at a "human level", Hervé Destrel and his associate shifted from offering three- to six-month renewable contracts to providing permanent employment contracts for Romanian workers.

"A true relationship of trust" was to be built to convince their best workers to sign, as Destrel explains. Along this process, employees such as Laurentiu Donca and Mihai Butucaru, respectively recruited in 2011 and 2016, stayed in the area. They remain happy with their jobs to this day. "They saw potential in us," Donca points out. Since then, Romanians have represented around 30 per cent of the firm employees.

The Destrel case is not isolated, especially regarding local slaughterhouses. Still in Gramat, the landmark duck *foie gras* producer, La Quercynoise, has also recruited Romanian labour since the 2010s. Among the recruits was Marilena Placinta, now the grocery shop owner. Not restricted to the meat industry, the list of employers extends now beyond the sectors and town's limits: restaurants, hotels, the *SYDED* (recycling centre), the wood industry and other factories such as Andros, the department's industrial flagship, internationally known for brands such as Bonne Maman.

A double-ended migration phenomenon

The renowned historian Gérard Noiriel, in his work on the intense demographic shifts across France during the 19th and 20th centuries, introduced the concept of the *Creuset français* (French melting pot), which he argued had long been overlooked. This concept reflects the historical waves of migration, including those labour-driven often drawn to France's demanding industries in need of workers. For instance, in areas where coal mining once formed the industrial backbone, companies successively recruited Southern Europeans, Eastern Europeans and North Africans throughout the 20th century to work alongside French miners.

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Though coal was not a factor, a similar labour migration phenomenon took place in Gramat and precisely its local lamb slaughterhouse. The original owner, Destrel senior, recruited workers from the Iberian Peninsula. Later, under the management of his two sons, the foreign-originated workforce became predominantly Moroccan and Algerian. Today, the company has forged a long-standing relationship with Romanian workers, a bond that has remained strong despite changes in leadership and continues to be reproduced locally.

On the other side of Europe, Romania has significantly undergone a historical emigration phenomenon. Starting after the end of the Second World War, as Anghel indicates, with German-Romanian population relocations, the departure of Jews following the Holocaust, and even Romanians moving across the Eastern Bloc, a dynamic was taking shape. It continued even more so following 1989, after the revolutions that ended communist rule and with the fall of the Iron Curtain.

For numerous Romanians in Gramat, the picturesque French countryside is not the first stop.

"The door suddenly opened," explains Marius Barbat, a Romanian engineer who has lived in Gramat with his family since 2012. This marked a turning point, as the harsh transition to capitalism took a toll on societies accustomed to the socialist system, resulting in widespread suffering and social decline. "There was so much poverty," Barbat recalls of Romania in the 1990s. By the end of that decade, labour migration had increased, particularly to Spain and Italy. This trend accelerated after the 2002 agreement granting Romanian citizens free access to the European Union, which led to "a large outflow of migrants", says sociologist Anghel, with movements shifting toward Northern Europe in the 21st century. "In Romania, everyone knows someone who left," says Barbat, who was born in Râmnicu-Vâlcea.

In response to the Eastern European demographic movements, scholars developed the notion of "liquid migration", notes the SNSPA professor. These populations often appeared "not to stay in one place, but try different labour markets", unlike the classic pattern. For numerous Romanians in Gramat, the picturesque French countryside is not the first stop. After a few years in Spain's Basque Country working in the *foie gras* industry, Marilena came to work in the same sector at Gramat's Quercynoise. Meanwhile, Donca went shortly through Austria before joining Destrel's production lines. Similarly, his acolyte Butucaru worked in a Belgian slaughterhouse before they met in France and shared accommodation allocated by the temp agency. Cristea experienced a longer journey to Gramat. Starting in the late 1990s, he took butchery jobs across Germany (Dortmund and Stuttgart), Belgium and Spain.

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One destination, diverse motivations

During the 1990s and early 2000s, many Romanians emigrated "mainly due to strong economic reasons", says Anghel, citing the country's poverty and the collapse of communist-era industries. In this context, Teodor Cristea went to Germany. "To support the family," he explains, "you're forced to look for work wherever you can, even through temp agencies offering overseas contracts."

However, for younger generations starting in the 2010s, the reasons for emigration became more complex. Anghel stresses that oversimplifying the issue as just an escape from poverty is now misleading, as emigration in Romania is no longer a widely shared strategy to meet basic needs as it used to be. Instead, the motivations behind mobility have become increasingly diverse.

While the wealth gap between Eastern and Western Europe was striking 25 years ago, these inequalities have significantly narrowed. Living standards in Romania have improved, with average salaries beginning to approach those in Western Europe. Moreover, Western European wages are offset by higher costs of living, making the economic benefits of emigrating less compelling.

This raises questions about whether this narrowing gap will slow the flow of Romanian workers to places like Gramat. "We'll see," says Marilena Placinta, cautiously. For now, though, the flow continues, with no changes on the horizon, according to the head of the lamb slaughterhouse, who recently recruited more Romanians. Ostermeyer, who has worked abroad for 20 years and has extensive experience managing international workers, remains sceptical: "The idea that as living standards catch up there will be fewer people [emigrating] – I don't believe it."

"Everyone is different," emphasizes Laurentiu Donca, pointing out that motivations for leaving Romania are varied and often personal. Donca himself initially went abroad on a six-month contract to buy a car but admits that "curiosity" also played a role. At just 20 years old, he wanted to explore the newly opened European space, not just chase higher wages.

> While the wealth gap between Eastern and Western Europe was striking 25 years ago, these inequalities have significantly narrowed.

"Everyone has their reasons," he adds. Some seek experience, others need money and some are simply looking for change. Then there are those from disadvantaged regions, where jobs are scarce, much like certain areas in France. Instead of moving to Romania's larger and economically dynamic cities, these people often hear about opportunities abroad, especially through relatives or friends already settled in the area. This network of communication has been key to the growing Romanian community in Gramat. Both Mihai Butucaru and Laurentiu Donca ended

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up in this remote area because friends already there informed them about job openings. Recruiters often rely on this word-of-mouth process when they need more staff. Over time, more people from the same villages, neighbourhoods, or families joined these temporary missions, some of which turned into much longer stays.

To settle or not to settle

"I was surprised," admits Father Alexandre. He did his clerical formation in France and became the local priest of Gramat in 2016. After already a few years in northern France, Marius Barbat came to the town in 2012 as he found his desired engineering job with a French firm. Upon his arrival, he shared the same feeling. By setting foot on the *Causse*, both had no clue about the Romanian community nor how many had settled here.

After months or years, "many Romanians eventually leave," Donca explains, whether to return home or pursue new opportunities elsewhere, driven by a sense of accomplishment, new prospects or personal reasons. "When you see your parents just once a year, you notice they're getting older," he says, "and you start to wonder what to do". Aging parents or ill family members are common reasons for returning home, often accompanied by a sense of nostalgia.

In this context, the local Romanian grocery store has served as a small remedy for homesickness. "I thought it was a great idea," recalls Hervé Destrel, who, as a manager, saw first-hand the emotional toll of living far from home. Marilena Placinta, the shop owner, understands its impact, offering familiar tastes to Romanians who may only visit their homeland every few years as they settle in the region.

While some move on, others stay much longer than anticipated. "I thought I'd be here for one, two, or three years, but I'm still here," says Cristea, reflecting on his 15 years in the area. A clear sign of longer-term settlement is the increasing number of Romanians buying homes, often from elderly locals selling off their properties. "Romanians feel good when they own a home," Barbat notes, a sentiment echoed by others. Many are young couples in their 30s with children who attend local schools, representing a significant age-related demographic influx in an area where a part of the French youth heads to urban centres.

However, staying longer does not always mean abandoning the idea of temporary residence, especially for those who have not invested in property. Reflecting the "mobile phenomenon" of Eastern European migration, as Anghel describes it, Butucaru and Donca, despite their long stays, still view their time in the region as temporary and plan to move on eventually. Each individual decides whether to see a long-term residence as temporary or to fully embrace it as home.

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"I've been well integrated into the Gramat community," says Teodor. As a way of giving back, he hopes to organize a *marché gourmand* featuring Romanian dishes at the local fairgrounds – a way to celebrate the Eastern European presence that has become part of the area's fabric.

Beyond the Romanian and Eastern European communities, Marilena Placinta's store also draws tourists, including Germans, English and Dutch, who visit the region's popular attractions, such as Rocamadour and the Padirac Abyss. Seeing a Romanian grocery store in this rural setting often surprises them. Placinta humorously mimics their reactions: "Wow, a Romanian store … here!"

This scene reflects the broader significance of the new Romanian presence: challenging the typical divide between cosmopolitan cities and supposedly homogenous rural areas. "People assume that remote places don't have foreigners," Barbat points out, "but if there's a company that's struggling to hire, there are openings that need to be filled." In the context of a shared European space, Romanians have come to the *Causse* of Gramat for a variety of reasons, from a sense of adventure to a lack of job opportunities in certain parts of Romania, helping to sustain the local economy. Recruiting Romanian workers, Hervé Destrel explains, was initially about "keeping the tools that support the county's lamb production running", a lifeline that took on greater significance over time.

Whether in France or beyond, this local story breaks stereotypes about rural areas, particularly in what geographers call France's *diagonal du vide* (empty diagonal). Though marked by low population density and fewer activities, this region is far from devoid of global connections and European energy. EE

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Hungary makes its mark at the World Nomad Games

AGNIESZKA PIKULICKA-WILCZEWSKA

The annual World Nomad Games is now challenging established western definitions of sport. As a result, it is interesting to note the strong Hungarian presence at these events. A pseudoscientific theory from the 19th century is now helping Budapest to pursue links with the East in more ways than one.

A group of men in ethnic garments stood in a row waiting for a sign to shoot, rays of early autumn sun falling on their sculpted shoulders. When the order came, they lifted their bows and shot at the shields in front of them, their arrows cutting through the air with unnatural speed. To the joy of his national team, the winner – a Hungarian called Làszlò Koczka – won the gold medal in traditional archery at 60 metres, a sweet victory here in Kazakhstan, a country famous for impeccable archers.

Amid the mighty Kazakh steppe, surrounded by the endless horizon, in the capital Astana, a formidable spectacle took place, whose subtle politics could not go unnoticed. In early September, the World Nomad Games brought together athletes from all over the world, for the fifth time in a decade, with the aim to compete in disciplines that few in the West know or play. The ethnic sports Olympiad saw players compete in horseback archery and bird hunting, and teams of riders fight for a goat carcass in a game called *"kok-boru"*. The world of ethnic sport often surpasses the limits of any western definition.

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Showcase of culture

While the games are primarily a celebration of traditional nomadic disciplines with roots in the steppes of Central Asia, Americans in boots and cowboy hats were as much a part of the games' cultural landscape as the Kyrgyz nomads. Importantly, the event also gave space to the competing nations to showcase their national cultures and in some cases a version of national identity that this or that government currently feels like promoting – all to the joy of the onlookers.

A decade ago, the then Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev managed to gather athletes from 20 nomadic nations for the first time in a place where majestic mountains meet the sacred Issyk-Kul lake. Ten years later, in 2024, the Nomad Games hosted 2,500 competitors from 89 countries including Angola and Zimbabwe, Argentina and Poland, and Turkey and Sweden. Participants were assisted by 1,600 multilingual volunteers, while over one hundred vehicles drove the spectators to and from the *"Ethno aul"* – or ethnic village – a space created especially for this occasion, where the games took place. It was a massive logistical undertaking on Kazakhstan's part, which showed to the world that it can organize grandiose events and make its culture an appealing sell.

Stalls sprinkled around the *ethno aul* sold souvenirs and local handicraft, with silver and metal jewellery coming to the fore as must-have Nomad Games accessories. They were supposedly inspired by the old Kazakh tales of nomad princesses, and noble beauties of the steppe covered head to toe in silver. The most popular piece, the headdress, covers the forehead and parts of the hair. Another one runs across the chest or back. Silver earrings hang over the shoulders, while large round rings crown the fingers. Ethnic jewellery has been in fashion for a few years now, but the peak of its popularity came after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In 2024, the Nomad Games hosted 2,500 competitors from 89 countries including Angola, Zimbabwe, Argentina and Poland.

"Some historians who study jewellery in this region will tell you that none of this jewellery is really Kazakh. It is a reinterpreted idea of Kazakhness. A lot of the jewellery looks more like traditional Turkmen, especially the headdress that everybody is wearing. It is a way of manufacturing the idea of Kazakhness," says Abigail Scripka, a PhD candidate at the Leibniz Center for Contemporary History who specializes in Kazakhstan.

"I think the invasion of Ukraine has forced the Central Asian states to push their Kazakhness or Central Asianness to a point that it's made a lot of ethnic minorities quite uncomfortable because if they are not as Kazakh as they can be, even if some of that is not necessarily historically accurate or true, then it may give Russia an

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excuse to invade Kazakhstan. Because everything Putin ever said about Ukraine, he also said about Kazakhstan. There's this underlying urge to make absolutely clear that "we are not Russian, that we have nothing to do with Russia.""

Turanism

This might be why Vladimir Putin did not make it to the games' opening, and instead sent a representative of the Sakha indigenous people. This year, the Russian national team also failed to send representations of different ethnic groups living on the territory of the Russian Federation, be it Tatar or Buryat. Before, Russia used to send a few indigenous teams, only this year they sent one team playing in tricolour garments.

Scripka notes that the decolonial rejection of Russia, coupled with the long-established fear of China and its growing economic prominence in the region, has opened the way for other regional players to extend their influence in Kazakhstan, most notably Turkey. The ideology of Turanism is slowly gaining ground. The idea – and the political movement – rests on a pseudoscientific theory of common Central Asian origins, as well as biological and linguistic proximity between various Eurasian peoples including Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic and Uralic ethnic groups. While it has been rejected by the mainstream scientific community, there are still groups who support the narrative and see it as a gateway for larger and more ambitious political projects.

Passing through the *ethno aul*, one feels as if lost on a historical movie set, or many different movie sets at once.

Passing through the *ethno aul*, one feels as if lost on a historical movie set, or many different movie sets at once, as the ethnic garments blur in a cacophony of shapes and colours. Two men with greying hair in hard to identify ethnic attire pass by. They look European but their garments suggest a Central Asian origin. The older one is wearing a fur hat with a cone, his chest adorned with a large silver necklace featuring a bird. "It is Turul," explains the younger one. He is 56 and lives in Budapest, Hungary's capital, where he works as a bus driver. He has been into archery for the past ten years. He came to the Nomad Games as one of the athletes but sadly, he did not win any competitions.

According to a Hungarian legend, the Turul is a mythical bird, likely based on a falcon, an ancient symbol of the Hungarians. It came to Emese, the daughter of one of the tribal leaders, in a dream when she was carrying the child of Almost – a great commander. Years later, the couple's son Arpad led the tribes in their con-

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Photo: Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska

Istvan Mihok (left) and Jozsef Szabo (right), from Hungary's archery team, at the Nomad Games in Astana.

quest of the Carpathian Basin, where the Hungarians eventually settled and created their historical homeland. The Hungarians at the Nomad Games are proud of their heritage.

"Turul showed us the way back in the day," says the younger one. His badge reveals that his name is Istvan Mihok. He explains that archery is part of Hungarian tradition and is becoming increasingly popular, also among the youth. "Archery teaches discipline. But it is also part of our return to the past. We came to the Carpathian Basin and settled there, but our roots are somewhere here. Near the Urals, from where all the Turkic nations expanded. Hungarians are the ones who went the furthest to the west," says Mihok.

The older man, the 68-year-old Jozsef Szabo, is the archery team's coach. He looks dignified with his white beard. Mihok says he was once a top-notch athlete. They both feel well in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia in general. "Blood is not water," says Szabo, which means that one cannot cheat nature. The body feels a genetic and spiritual connection with the steppe.

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Reconstructing identities

Theories about the Hun-Turkic or Central Asian origin of the Hungarians date back to the 19th century, when teams of investigators were sent to Asia to find proof of the nation's Asian descent. While evidence was scarce, theories were needed, and therefore they survived. Especially following the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, seen by many Hungarians as humiliating and unjust, reducing the great nation to a European pariah, Hungarians needed an idea that could restore their dignity and national pride. As a result of the treaty, signed between most of the First World War Allies and the Kingdom of Hungary, the post-war territory of Hungary was reduced to a fraction of what it was in the days of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Its army, too, faced a significant decrease.

Following the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, Hungarians needed an idea that could restore their dignity and national pride.

"Trianon was a proof that the Hungarians were abandoned by the West and therefore they started searching for a new theory that could provide them with a new source of identity. That was when a shift toward Turanism came in. It rests on the assumption that today's Hungarians descend from the nomadic peoples who now make up the Organization of Turkic States," says Dominik Héjj, a Polish-Hungarian policy analyst and author of a book about Hungary.

As Héjj explains, Turanism gained particular prominence after the coming to power of Prime Minister Viktor Orban's Fidesz party. The government began to pump vast sums of money into funding groups and organizations promoting the idea and establishing contacts with other Turanian nations, including the Central Asian states, Turkey and Azerbaijan. According to Héjj, no one has any doubts that this pseudoscientific idea serves a political purpose and has underlined Orban's opening to the East.

"It gives ground for foreign policy and economic initiatives, and places Hungary in a special position to understand and cooperate with Europe's eastern neighbours – Hungary's brothers," says Héjj. "There is a theory that Attila was Hungarian. While it may have little to do with reality, anything that helps Hungary regain greatness and influence is enthusiastically accepted, not only on the far right. As long as it helps project the country's economic and political power, and promotes its strategic position between East and West, the theory will be promoted by the minister of foreign affairs and Orban himself."

A large number of Hungarian organizations promoting the Turanian idea were involved in different stages of preparations for the World Nomad Games. The Hungarian Association of Kokpar and Traditional Sports dealt with the athletic

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element of the new identity and organized the "Turan" tournament – a qualifying competition before the Games. The Magyar-Turan Foundation is responsible for the annual "Great Hun-Turkic Kurultai", a tribal assembly of the Hun-Turkic nations, aimed at strengthening ties between them and celebrating ancient traditions. These nations include Azerbaijanis, Bulgarians, Buryats, Gagauz, Kazakhs, Mongolians, Uzbeks, Tatars, Turks, and Uyghurs among others.

The investment in the new identity has paid off. Having sent 47 athletes to Astana, Hungary won eight medals, which secured them seventh place in the table. Hungary secured a better performance than the Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Mongolia, which did not go unnoticed as *Daily News Hungary* proudly reported.

It is unclear whether the Turks, the Kazakhs and the other nomad and Turkic states believe in the Central Asian origins of the Hungarians. But as long as their Hun identity remains attractive and useful for partners in the region, who just like Orban do not shy away from authoritarian rule, Hungary's nomadic roots will remain an attractive sell. EE

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

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How the plight of Russian feminists demonstrates the totalitarian terror of the Russian state

AILBHE CANNON

Women attending peaceful anti-war protests have been subjected to violence and torture and also threatened with sexual assault while in custody. Those arrested are forced to confront a criminal justice system with a severe bias against defendants. The crackdown on feminist activism has forced numerous organizations to cease operations and their organizers to flee the country.

On August 1st 2024 aeroplanes touch down on a runway in Ankara, Turkey. The stage is set for the most extensive prisoner swap between Russia and the West since the fall of the Iron Curtain. The release of high-profile prisoners such as the *Wall Street Journal*'s Evan Gershkovich and US Marine Paul Whelan, both of whom were found guilty of espionage, was a diplomatic boon for the West. However, some were critical that in return for releasing journalists, opposition figures, human rights defenders and peaceful protestors, Russia received an unrepentant FSB agent turned assassin, as well as notorious criminals and spies. One of the cases in particular stands out not only for its absurdity but for how well it demonstrates Russia's draconian crackdown on dissent and protest. This is the story of the artist and musician Alexandra (Sasha) Skochilenko.

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On November 16th 2023, after months in pre-trial detention, Sasha Skochilenko was found guilty of "public dissemination of knowingly false information about the Russian Armed Forces". Her crime? Replacing five price tags in a supermarket with small pieces of paper printed with statements such as "Putin has been lying to us from television screens for 20 years: the result of these lies is our readiness to justify the war and the senseless deaths," and "The Russian army bombed an art school in Mariupol. Around 400 people were hiding inside." In a final statement to the court, Skochilenko highlighted the preposterousness of the claims that her actions had threatened Russian state security: "How fragile must the prosecutor's belief in our state and society be, if he thinks that our statehood and public safety can be brought down by five small pieces of paper?"

While Skochilenko's story may have drawn the attention of the international news media, she is just one of hundreds of Russian women that have suffered political repression in recent years. Skochilenko is an artist, feminist, peace activist, political prisoner and now a free woman. Her story illustrates both the growing feminization of resistance in Russia and the repression of feminist activism and anti-war protest.

The feminization of resistance

Skochilenko was not alone in using price tags to disseminate anti-war messages. The idea originated with the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, or FAR – a collective formed a day after Russia invaded Ukraine with the goal of protesting the war at all costs. While feminist activists in Russia have never had it easy, their persecution has accelerated rapidly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, likely due to the propensity of feminist organizations to also protest the war. This nexus of anti-war protest and feminist activism has meant that the women involved are viewed as doubly guilty in the eyes of the Russian state. Their feminist beliefs are incompatible with Russia's traditional values of conservatism and their outspokenness against Russia's military aggression makes them traitors to their country.

Russia has a long history of women protesting war or advocating for military reform on behalf of their enlisted husbands and sons. Today, this tradition is continued by Way Home and the long-established Union of Soldiers' Mothers. However, Feminist Anti-War Resistance is unique in that, as the name suggests, it puts feminist ideology at the centre of its activism. Founded immediately after Russia invaded Ukraine, FAR's manifesto declares that "feminism as a political force cannot be on the side of a war of aggression and military occupation." The organization calls on its followers to "actively oppose the war and the government that started

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it" and has continued to promote this call to action despite the increasingly dangerous circumstances and the risks to which protestors now expose themselves.

The Russian authorities' crackdown on feminist activism has forced numerous organizations to cease operations and their organizers to flee the country. Skochilenko herself was a member of one such feminist organization called Eve's Ribs (*Рёбра Евы*). The organization was founded in St Petersburg in 2015 with the goal of campaigning against discrimination and violence against women. Its activities were diverse, ranging from women's support groups and educational events to performative street actions protesting violence against women and militarism. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the organizers of Eve's Ribs have been forced to leave Russia due to threats of political persecution.

Innovation in protests

Women attending peaceful anti-war protests have been subjected to violence, suffered torture such as waterboarding and been threatened with sexual assault while in police custody. Those arrested are forced to confront a criminal justice system with a severe bias against defendants. In Russia the conviction rate is currently over 99 per cent, prompting some analysts to suggest that levels of political repression under Putin are higher than during Stalin's Great Purge. In addition to gross violations of the rights to protest and freedom of assembly, amendments to Russian criminal law promulgated in the weeks following the invasion of Ukraine make discrediting or disseminating "false" or "unreliable" information about the Russian Armed Forces and other state bodies a crime. These fake news laws render any form of criticism of the war a criminal offence punishable with up to fifteen years in prison.

Women attending peaceful anti-war protests have been subjected to violence and threatened with sexual assault while in police custody.

In response to this draconian censorship and the risks facing those who continue to protest, FAR have been forced to develop innovative forms of protest and civil disobedience in order to continue their mission. Protest methods include wearing yellow and blue to show solidarity with Ukraine or black to mourn those who have died in the conflict. Activists also write anti-war slogans such as "no to war" (*нет войне*) and "do not be silent" (*не мольчи*) on bank notes and coins. FAR have also advocated the use of graffiti and guerrilla art installations to oppose the war.

In addition to posting anti-war materials on their Telegram channel, FAR shares uncensored news about the truth about Russia's "special military operation";

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coordinates support for political prisoners; and discusses attacks by the Russian state on women and LGBTQ+ people, which have become all the more frequent in recent years. The group even provides free psychological services to activists in need. While FAR's leaders are largely anonymous and its decentralized grassroots structure makes the organization difficult for government authorities to target, it is not immune from political repression. FAR was named a foreign agent in December 2022, a label used to designate organizations that receive foreign funding. In April 2024, the Russian ministry of justice added the group to a list of undesirable organizations that are considered a threat to the country's national security. Undesirable organizations must halt all operations in Russia and the individuals involved risk jail time, with a maximum sentence of five years. Soon thereafter, an arrest warrant was issued for the exiled poet Daria Serenko, one of the only FAR leaders whose identity is public.

FAR's manifesto states that for a long time the Russian feminist movement was not perceived as a threat by the Kremlin and feminist activists were therefore less vulnerable to state repression than other political groups. This has clearly begun to change. In a country where traditional values have become an official ideology promoted by politicians, public intellectuals such as Alexander Dugin, and prominent figures in the Russian Orthodox Church, campaigning for gender equality and challenging patriarchal social norms is a dangerous affair. A recent study on protest in Russia found that protests involving large numbers of women are perceived as less dangerous than male-dominated protests. However, patriarchy-defiant female protestors are seen as immoral and more deserving of repression than those women who emphasize their femininity and comply with traditional gender roles, such as the mothers and wives of mobilized soldiers. In proudly asserting their disdain for traditional values and arguing for equal rights for all genders, Russian feminists attract the ire of state authorities and have been subject to increasing repression in recent years.

Traditional values

The most well-known case of the state repression of Russian feminist activists is, of course, that of the famous Pussy Riot group. While academics like Valerie Sperling have called into question whether Pussy Riot can even rightly be described as a feminist group, due to the misogynistic and homophobic nature of some of their past performances, the women have nonetheless been credited with drawing international attention to the woeful state of women's rights in Russia. In 2012 the Punk Prayer performance saw three members of the group, Nadezhda Tolokon-

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nikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Maria Alyokhina, dance on the altar of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, one of Russia's most sacrosanct places of worship. They wore colourful balaclavas while loudly singing their song "Mother of God, Drive Putin Away".

In reading the provocative lyrics, it is clear that Pussy Riot's performance was deeply political in nature, seeking to condemn the Kremlin's promotion of traditional gender roles and the cosy relationship between Putin and the corrupt Patriarch Kirill. However, after months on trial the women were eventually convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred and sentenced to two years imprisonment. Judge Marina Syrova regarded the group's feminist beliefs as a significant motivating factor behind their disruption of public order and noted that, although feminism itself is not a crime, its followers challenge norms of public morality, including family relations and standards of decency.

Since Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer performance, the joint attacks on feminism by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church have intensified in concert with the state's increasing authoritarianism, promotion of traditional values and weakening of human rights protections. For example, in 2013 Patriarch Kirill described feminism as a dangerous phenomenon that distracts women from their innate role in taking care of the home and raising children. In addition to pro-natalist family policies which encourage women to abandon their careers in favour of providing the state with as many children as possible, Russian women have been met with horrendous attacks on their rights. In 2017 the Russian State Duma decriminalized domestic violence. Unless a woman's injuries are so severe that she must be hospitalized, there are no criminal penalties for the abuse. This rollback in protections for victims of domestic violence occurred despite decades of advocacy by women's organizations such as *Syostri* (*Сёстры*), the St Petersburg Crisis Centre, and ANNA (listed as a foreign agent organization since 2016) for more comprehensive protections for women.

Attacks on feminism by have intensified in concert with the state's increasing authoritarianism and promotion of traditional values.

Women's reproductive rights are also under threat. While the Russian Soviet Republic under Lenin was the first modern state in the world to legalize abortion, since the resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet era, a woman's right to choose has increasingly been called into question. Prominent members of the church have framed abortion as both a moral issue and one of demographic importance. The late Priest Dmitry Smirnov famously described abortion as "worse than the Holocaust". More recently, in late 2023, Patriarch Kirill likened an abortion ban to a magic wand (*волшебной палочки*) with the power to remedy Russia's demographic crisis. The

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year 2007 saw the introduction of the Maternity Capital scheme, which provides financial incentives for Russian families to have more than one child. Since then, the Kremlin has continued to enact pro-natalist measures that frame maternity and childbirth as women's primary duty to the state.

In August 2023, Putin revived the Stalin-era "Mother-Heroine" award for women who have raised ten or more children. While abortion remains legal at the federal level, a number of regions have enacted more restrictive abortion legislation. The state has also introduced a number of measures designed to discourage women from electing to terminate pregnancy. These include the "week of silence" – a mandatory waiting period between a woman's initial request to terminate her pregnancy and the procedure itself during which she must attend pre-abortion counselling services often delivered by Orthodox priests or pro-life activists. Conservative lawmakers have begun to set their sights on private clinics, where around 20 per cent of abortion procedures take place. In December 2023, the legislative assembly of Nizhny Novgorod proposed a bill banning abortions in private clinics at the federal level to the Russian State Duma. This comes after private clinics in many regions including Russian-occupied Crimea have stopped performing abortions.

Lawmakers from Putin's United Russia have proposed to ban "child-free propaganda", materials promoting or discussing voluntary childlessness.

Most recently, on September 25th 2024, lawmakers from Putin's United Russia party proposed a bill to ban "child-free propaganda", materials promoting or discussing voluntary childlessness. In Russia, the child-free movement (in Russian, *чайлдфри*) provides a safe place for women who choose to not have children in a society where this choice might otherwise make them the subject of scorn or disapproval. Under the proposed legislation, individuals found guilty of spreading "childfree propaganda" will face a fine of up to 400,000 roubles (roughly 3800 euros), while legal entities or organisations face penalties up to five million roubles (around 48,000 euros).

The speaker of the upper house of the Russian parliament Valentina Matvienko echoed the views of many supporters of the ban when she described childfree ideology as having its origins in the feminist movement, which she claims has now become militant and radicalized by the West. Matvienko describes feminism as a movement which is both anti-men and anti-traditional values. Meanwhile, Russian legal experts warn that if the law is passed it could be interpreted very broadly and used to target the media, cinema and advertising industries. Lawyer Vladislav Gubko predicts that any woman over the age of 25 who mentions on her social

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media that she does not have children and does not plan to have them could be found guilty of spreading "childfree propaganda".

On 17th October 2024, the State Duma adopted the law banning childfree propaganda.

Feminism: an extremist ideology

Looking to the future, it seems increasingly likely that the feminist movement could be designated as an extremist or terrorist organization, just as the global LGBTQ+ movement was in November 2023. Already, 2023 saw multiple women accused of "radical feminism" in court which was likened to extremism. Theatre director Anya Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk were charged with justifying terrorism on account of their feminist play *"Finist the Brave Falcon"* which casts a sympathetic light on Russian jihadi brides who are lured by ISIS fighters to Syria. The play was said to glorify terrorism and contain elements of "radical feminist ideology". The pair were sentenced to six years in prison.

The arrest of 26-year-old Daria Trepova for the murder of the pro-war blogger and propagandist Maxim Fomin, better known as Vladlen Tatarsky, was a catalyst for a fresh anti-feminist frenzy in some conservative circles in Russian society. Duma member Oleg Matveychev unsuccessfully proposed a law which would recognize feminism as an extremist ideology shortly after Trepova's arrest, pointing to her social media posts about feminism as evidence that "in this feminist environment terrorists recruit their supporters".

The Iron Curtain may have fallen, but the dark shadow of totalitarianism has engulfed Russia once again. The experiences of Russian feminists, who have been thrown in prison for peaceful protest, accused of extremism and terrorism for their belief in gender equality, and harassed, assaulted, and threatened by the police, demonstrate the willingness of the Russian state to terrorize those who attempt to oppose its traditional values agenda and stand against the war in Ukraine. EE

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Repression and resilience

The voice of Belarusian culture

ALENA GILEVSKAYA

Since 2020 Belarusians have fled en masse from growing repressions inside the country. Civil society and independent culture are now only possible in exile. The stories of Belarusian artists and cultural activists illustrate the resilience and creativity of a community determined to preserve its identity and proceed aspiration for freedom.

Belarusian artists and cultural figures have found themselves increasingly targeted by a regime that views independent thought and creativity as threats to its control in recent years. As a result, the cultural sphere in Belarus has become one of the battlegrounds for the suppression of dissent. The government's efforts to control and politicize culture have led to censorship, forced closures of cultural institutions, and the persecution of artists who challenge or fail to align with the state's ideological narratives. Yet despite these obstacles, Belarusian culture continues to evolve, with artists voicing their messages at the international level; integrating into a new environment; forming new communities and connections; and spreading the culture.

Culture in general, and Belarusian culture in particular, is much larger and more voluminous than any system or framework of classification. It develops, expands and takes on new forms during specific times for all Belarusians. It can also find a new embodiment in new realities and at newer points in history.

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Growing repressive environment

If we look at the rights and legislative framework that concerns artists and all creators in the cultural sphere, then new challenges and difficulties in the new environment are emerging for Belarusians. This is happening alongside constant repression and the infringement of artists' rights by the government of the country. The challenges faced by creators also go beyond a lack of economic support and touch upon fundamental human rights issues. The restrictions imposed on freedom of expression, loss of cultural diversity, political persecution, censorship, and the threat of physical harm or imprisonment for creative works all add another layer of complexity.

> Since 2022, legislation concerning discrimination and censorship became a legalized mechanism for excluding people.

PEN Belarus, for example, is an international non-governmental human rights organization uniting poets, playwrights, editors, essayists and novelists. Today it also includes journalists, historians, writers, translators, screenwriters, bloggers and publishers regardless of ethnicity, language, colour, gender and religion. Since 1996 PEN Belarus has been a member of the Writers in Prison Committee established in 1960 by the Assembly of Delegates of PEN International.

PEN Belarus's work concerns two key themes: creative rights and human rights. They run literary prizes, organize festivals, lead an audio library and curate creative residencies and educational projects. All this helps creators realize their potential and form a community space conducive to the development of culture. In the role of a human rights defender, PEN Belarus monitors violations of human rights in the sphere of culture and cultural rights; creates a chronicle of violations of human rights in the sphere of culture; conducts analytical reports; and leads advocacy for human rights issues in culture at the international level in order to assist repressed cultural figures.

According to PEN's report on the Belarusian government's policy, the first trend in the cultural sphere in 2023 is the following: the role of the state in the sphere of culture is becoming increasingly controlling in line with ideologists and in essence, cultural workers should advance the agenda of the state. In 2022, the legislative framework in Belarus was significantly affected and legislation concerning discrimination and censorship became a legalized mechanism for excluding people from one or another type of service. The government now has control over cultural events, concerts and exhibition activities. In order to comply with the new laws, tour guides, craftsmen/craftswomen and farmsteads will need to be re-certified in addition to new requirements for the organizers of cultural events.

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Additionally, a new intellectual piracy law "On the Limitation of Exclusive Rights to Intellectual Property Objects" was issued, which allows the use of musical and audiovisual works, computer programs, etc. without the consent of the copyright owner, without payment of remuneration, and in fact, legalizes piracy of film, music, television and radio broadcasts from "foreign powers committing unfriendly acts".

These repressive measures have forced numerous Belarusian organizations, initiatives and artists to migrate to new locations, where they continue to develop and promote independent cultural activities that often focus on preserving Belarusian identity.

In addition to the statistics and legal facts, there are also the personal experiences of organizations, initiatives and the artists themselves. Their stories, some collected here, are different in their format of work, location and scale. However, they are united by very similar themes and values.

RAZAM

Let us begin with the Belarusian NGO called RAZAM in Berlin. This group helps Belarusians in exile; works on lobbying for the Belarusian agenda; collaborates with German organizations; and promotes Belarusian culture. Translated from Belarusian, RAZAM means "together". As the organization says itself, the name "promotes the idea of the peaceful Belarusian protests in 2020, which inspired and supported us".

RAZAM is an active Belarusian organization in Germany, which operates throughout the country. The main focus of their activities and the essence of the mission is to develop the Belarusian-German community, tell Germans about Belarus, and unite people around Belarusian culture.

Repressive measures have forced Belarusian artists to migrate to new locations to develop independent cultural activities.

"This is a very important part of our work. Often we must repeat the same thing, telling our whole story over and over again, but there is no way around it. We are engaged in advocacy and legal work, and interact with the broad civil community, lobbying for the current Belarusian agenda," says Maria Rud', the deputy head of the organization who works to represent the interests of Belarusians in Germany.

We met with RAZAM, and more specifically with Maria and Yauhen Fedarovich, the treasurer of the organization, in an unusual office in what, geographically, is the centre of Berlin. You need to enter by knocking on a corrugated fence. RAZAM is based in the Mitte district, and at present, while the restoration of the House of

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Statistics is ongoing, their office is outside in a temporary container village. The container village was organized for the main NGO organizations that resided in the building of the House of Statistics and now are also involved in supporting its restoration.

RAZAM was able to become part of the community created by the Berlin organization ZUsammenKUNFT after the memorable exhibition of the Belarusian artist Sergei Shabohin, which was held in November 2020 in the House of Statistics. RAZAM is pursuing work related to the building together with city activists, architects, urbanists, creative people and representatives of various NGOs. They formed after a group of Belarusians in Germany met at the elections in 2020 and decided that there was a need to start activism that would develop the community, help Belarusians and communicate the Belarusian agenda. They decided to register it in Berlin but work throughout Germany.

Active Belarusians from other German cities began to form and develop communities already on the ground across the federal states. Thus, the organization's representation in different cities was self-organized. At the moment, the team, consisting of nine people from different regions, is starting a project on organizational development and is active in targeting work within the community, including in the regions.

After almost five years of existence, RAZAM is already very well known in Germany and they constantly receive requests for collaboration from German organizations. This September, for example, several events were held with German organizations: a one-day programme titled "Women in prison. Then and now" and an event with a screening of a film about Ales Bialiatski, the Belarusian pro-democracy activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner. RAZAM is currently engaged in project activities which operate on a volunteer basis, such as supporting a shelter for Belarusians in Poland and collecting donations for the families of political prisoners. There is also a residency project for human rights defenders that RAZAM is operating in partnership with external funding as a host organization. Furthermore, there is a project to support the connection between media and civil society in exile.

RAZAM is already very well known in Germany and they constantly receive requests for collaboration from German organizations.

"In general, we wanted to be a cultural organization. We hoped that everything would end quickly and we would only do cultural events and talk about beautiful Belarus. And that's it. But something went wrong, so we are also a cultural organization, but we hope that someday in the bright future, we will simply do Belarusian-German cultural international projects and events, and we will not do anything else," Maria says.

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The space of RazamKunst in Berlin where small Belarusian cultural events are organized.

Photo: Alena Gilevskaya

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The House of Statistics which is under restoration (as of August 2024) and was home to many NGOs including RAZAM. A container village was organized for the NGOs which resided in the building of the House of Statistics and are also involved in supporting its restoration.

Photo: Alena Gilevskaya

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The painted mural "Feast" in Tbilisi

Photo: Art Yard Community

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The mural in Tbilisi as a part of the "My Home" project, implemented by Belarusian and Polish artists who have created a series of murals in different cities. The mural in Tbilisi depicts a real Belarusian girl with a child, who immediately after giving birth, had to move to Tbilisi to live with her husband, who was forced to leave before her.

Photo: Art Yard Community

Anastasia Rydlevskaya's piece for the Capitol Theater Center in Wroclaw.

Photo: Alena Gilevskaya

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Art Yard Community – building a dialogue

Another Belarusian cultural initiative which focuses primarily on art is the public art project called Art Yard Community. This group is based in Tbilisi and was founded in 2022. Its mission is to promote cultural dialogue through the creation of public art and exploration of urban spaces. It also supports artists through educational opportunities. The community creates murals and other public art objects; explores the city through various immersive practices, such as quests, audio art walks and urban laboratories; and also periodically organizes educational projects and collaborates with projects and individual artists that share similar values.

During its existence, Art Yard Community has created 12 murals in Tbilisi, and another four in a new collaboration with a partner organization in Denmark and Sweden. They also conducted two educational courses for artists and art managers on creating murals and sustainable art and led three immersive experiences (quests, guided audio art walks and a city laboratory). In addition, the group has implemented three collaborative public art projects. In total, the community now has more than 50 active artists and more than 500 people who have participated in the initiative's projects.

In addition to the main audience of the project – Belarusian artists and art managers – the project works with everyone who is interested in public art and studying the city and themselves in it. Not a single project is complete without the active involvement of the local community and city residents in the work process.

"If we are talking about murals, it's because we agree on the sketches that will be implemented on the walls of their owners. We do not just make murals – we implement specific conceptual projects," explains the creator of the initiative, Volha Kavalskaya. "Last season we implemented a series of murals with artists who passed the open call on the topic of finding common themes in Belarusian and Georgian cultures. Through our projects, we want to build a dialogue between nations, speaking in the common, understandable and open language of public art."

According to the team, the mural in the courtyard of the old town area, Sololaki, is an example of one of the best collaborations with locals. The artists became part of the courtyard, dining with the residents and visited them regularly. In the end they organized a joint dinner for the entire courtyard community with an exchange of recipes for national dishes. The mural is part of the "My Home" project, which is being implemented jointly by Belarusian and Polish artists from Wow Wall Studio. These artists have created a series of murals in different cities that tell the story of people forced to leave their homes and find shelter. The mural in Tbilisi depicts a real Belarusian girl with a child, who immediately after giving birth, had to move to Tbilisi to live with her husband, who was forced to leave before her. She is wear-

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ing a dress with a painting of the Belarusian national *"dyvan"* on it (a hand-painted carpet that is given as a holiday gift). The background is made up of Georgian folk patterns from various fields of art: weaving, ceramics and jewellery. The mural was created in gratitude to Georgia for its hospitality and for accepting Belarusians.

One of this year's projects that was implemented in Tbilisi is by the artist Andrei Busel from the Hutkasmachnaa group in partnership with Art Yard Community. It is a specific example of a study of space and close interaction with local residents, with the artist literally becoming a resident of the house on Nutsubidze Street and helping with small improvements by implementing his projects. The project on Nutsubidze Street is a temporary "intervention" of the artist in the urban space. Andrei creates metro train installations on bridges between buildings in different cities. In fact, the famous bridge on Nutsubidze Street became the ideal place. As a result, Andrei opened a gallery right on the bridge for a month and together with the Art Yard Community hosted exhibitions of different artists, master classes and artist discussions.

> Not a single project is complete without the active involvement of the local community and city residents.

The success of the Art Yard initiative is demonstrated not in the numbers of implemented projects but rather in the specific success stories of the artists. For example, after working within the community, one of the artists was invited by a famous Georgian colleague to work on a joint large project, or even had a new experience doing a project as a curator. Another artist who painted her first mural also gained therapeutic experience. However, in a growing community the visibility and importance of projects for both artists and locals, and the need for a project at a certain time and in a certain location, are also very important criteria for success.

Art in exile

"I always imagined myself as a small dandelion growing through concrete on the rails. And every time I tried to grow, a train passed from above and cut me. Here there is no train. You, in principle, are no longer in concrete, but simply in the soil. Yes, the soil is heavy, but you grow," says Anastasia Rydlevskaya, a Belarusian artist and musician who currently lives in Gdańsk, Poland.

I met with Anastasia in Wrocław. She was invited by Krupa Gallery, or rather its sister organization – Krupa Art Foundation – to help with a project in which the artist was commissioned to make a giant art object for the opening of the new season of the Capitol Theatre Centre.

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"This project brought me an incredible amount of joy and an understanding of what kind of projects I want to do. The task was to connect the art object not quite obviously with the production of *"Romeo and Juliet"*, with which the season starts. At the same time, the object had to fully reflect my authorship. And this was simply the best task I have ever received in my life, because it has a lot of freedom and comfort," Anastasia tells me. The art object depicts two seven-metre huge masks with different emotions on both sides, with four faces.

When Anastasia returns to Gdańsk she plans to immediately start work on other projects in the same vein. The first is a collaboration with a friend to create metaphorical cards that have already been developed and it remains "only" to draw them. Another project is a musical one that will be Anastasia's third album. She truly feels like a part of Gdańsk and after we met Anastasia, she came back to the city and completed a mural project on an abandoned building to make it more colourful together with the art community of the Dzivne gallery workshop, which was also opened by Belarusians. This project was carried out on a voluntary basis as the artists aspired to give something back to the city and integrate further.

Her most important new project, which is taking place in November, is her concert in Nantes. "My hands and feet are still shaking out of excitement!" she was telling me. "I was invited to perform in Nantes. And my reaction now is "oh my God, this is crazy – I was invited somewhere." Well, for this, I have to, in fact, develop a concert completely. Finally, to take it seriously. This means I need to start working on a visual, on a musical concept … In short, I have to do everything. A whole concert!"

Overcoming trauma

Music appeared in Anastasia's life at a professional level precisely during the period of emigration. She says she is a "mega-introvert" but also believes that in the case of her music, when "you are afraid of getting lost like a grain of sand thrown far away," the support of a community plays a large role. That is how she met Sasha Korneichuk, a Belarusian DJ, activist, festival organizer and one of the founders of the independent Belarusian music Radio Plato. Thanks to Sasha's endless faith and training in the technical part of creating music, Anastasia began to realize this creative component of hers. After the release of her video together with the music studio KLIK, Anastasia got a manager for her musical project, Ilya Vorobey, who is helping to form the structure and is engaged in production and performances. All this is now done through altruism, and this also speaks to the power of the community.

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"Music appeared when I broke free from the shackles of who I was imagined to be by others and who I have actually become," Anastasia shares. She works a lot on different and new creative projects, implements new ones and is very happy with this experience. It is still very difficult to be an émigré, even at a trivial everyday level, facing constant anxiety regarding the possibility of paying for an apartment for next month. However, "personal rebirth" and this important and very difficult experience are very liberating.

"This constant stress exposes a lot," she admits. "It leads you to questions like who are you really? And what is really important to you?"

She was considering relocation even before the events of 2020 as she says she already felt the feeling of a "crushing ceiling". But everything happened as it happened and without a plan, she and her husband, like many Belarusians, escaped. At this point, Anastasia's depressive state grew into severe depression, and her self-harm worsened greatly. All this is now reflected in her work: taboo emotions, taboo manifestations, not socially acceptable – everything that the artist wrote about in her diary during a difficult depressive period. Anastasia's third album will be dedicated to the theme of recognizing her freedom and expressing herself in the best possible way.

Anastasia now dreams of freedom and empathy and "about a careful attitude towards each other". This is what she strives to express in her works. "I just want the projects to be free from now on, so that I can do what I want," she says. But she is not alone, every Belarusian thinks the same. EE

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Repressions, wounds and blood

Anti-regime culture in Belarus

MAGDALENA LACHOWICZ

In Belarus, discrimination in the cultural sector has been shown to be both institutional and systemic, with the Belarusian PEN Club reporting that cultural life is the area where civil liberties are regressing most rapidly. At least 105 cultural figures have now been imprisoned in Belarus for their commitment to democratic ideals and freedom.

In Belarus, protest movements have always drawn strength from some societal undercurrents that may not be immediately visible to all people. This latent power resembles similar movements in other parts of Europe and the post-Soviet states. Historically speaking, despite the constraints of the Iron Curtain, the societies living in the socialist states were never completely isolated from global developments, including the protest culture of the 1960s. Thus, throughout the history of protest actions, we have witnessed such significant events as the 1965 demonstrations at the Red Square; the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial of 1966; the Prague Spring in 1968; the Solidarity movement in Poland; and the Autumn of Nations in 1989–1990 across Central and Eastern Europe. This final event is closely connected with the Baltic Chain, the 1990 "Revolution on Granite" in Ukraine, as well as various "colour revolutions" that took place across post-Soviet states in the 21st century. Inspiration for Eastern European protesters has also come from other parts

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of the world and included such protest actions as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and different feminist movements. Collectively, these actions have created a global protest tradition that has influenced activists worldwide. This is also true in Belarus.

Alternative culture

Despite its authoritarian regime and stereotypes around marginalized activists, Belarus has never been in an informational vacuum or isolated from the horizontal networks of NGOs and cultural sectors in Western Europe, especially those concerned with human rights. Russian non-conformist groups and organizations have also influenced Belarusian activists. Consequently, when Belarusians took to the streets in 2020 to protest electoral fraud and demand political change, they showcased the power of solidarity and a shared national identity that includes Belarusian language, traditions and cultural heritage. As a result of these protests and the consequences they have brought for people, the anti-regime culture in Belarus has now become synonymous with alternative culture.

> When Belarusians took to the streets in 2020, they showcased the power of solidarity and a shared national identity.

As we remember from media coverage, the 2020 Belarusian street protests featured a significant number of dynamic, engaging performances organized by informal groups and grassroots initiatives. In social sciences, these activities were often referred to as "spontaneous mobilization". However, the tradition of alternative cultural practices is not new in Belarus, and comes from the previous century. It is now only being continued through the work of various groups, collectives and more formalized structures. These artists have now been using different forms to give Belarusian resistance and revolutionary efforts a long-term impact and to reach broader social groups.

For example, since the 2020 protests, Belarusian history and elements of national identity have become deeply integrated into the social dialogue of everyday resistance. This is true even though social memory and national myth-making have been integral to numerous artistic projects in Belarus for much longer. Belarusian "artivism" (i.e. socially engaged artistic activities) is a trend that is also rooted in Eastern European street traditions. Examples include street theatre in Lviv that imitated broken cobblestones in the final phase of the Soviet Union; the aforementioned human chain in the Baltic states; tent cities in Ukraine; the "Automaidan"; choir songs sung in Minsk shopping malls; women's marches; and balconies decorated

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in the red and white Belarusian national colours. These forms of protest allow ordinary people and passers-by to become participants in the protests, which foster active citizenship and make indifference difficult.

Continuously under censorship

Until the fall of the USSR, the Belarusian generation of the 1960s – the "Sixtiers" – and their followers were marked by radical, socially critical activities and a clandestine resistance to authority. This often manifested in subtle, indirect protest embedded in daily life. During the post-war period, Belarusian cultural initiatives persisted despite frequent prohibition and censorship, including self-censorship, systemic censorship and economic restrictions. Artists and activists, whether during the socialist era or under Belarus's current authoritarian regime, have consistently faced obstacles like financial barriers; low social trust; and pervasive surveillance and multi-layered repression, including physical violence by the authorities.

After the Second World War, the dominance of Socialist Realism stifled new artistic trends in Belarus and severed its artistic community from foreign influences. However, even after the Soviet Union's collapse, censorship persisted in Belarus. For instance, the Belarusian Council for Morality, established in 2009, has been prosecuting artists for violating moral norms and insulting the dignity of the Belarusian people. As a result of its work in 2009, several paintings were removed from an art exhibition at the Yanka Kupala State Literature Museum in Minsk.

Restrictions against artists were further reinforced in 2012 when Belarus enacted the Law on Internet Content Control. As a result, Belarusian artists, especially those exploring the so-called socially controversial topics, started to face publication bans, top-down pressure and interference in their projects. Such was the case for the Pagonia group, which was detained, in September 2012, for organizing action dedicated to the memory of the anti-Soviet resistance hero Rascisláŭ Lapícki. The artist Mikhail Gulin was also imprisoned for his personal monument project, as well as the photographer Yulia Doroshkevich, the co-organizer of Belarus Press Photo 2011. Her album was said to include images of potential extremism. In 2013, Doroshkevich was interrogated by the KGB on extremism charges. The court ordered the destruction of 41 copies of the 2011 edition of the Belarus Press Photo book, and ordered Doroshkevich and two other photographers to pay a fine.

Belarusian political prisoners include artists and NGO activists dedicated to promoting the Belarusian national identity.

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To this day Belarusian political prisoner lists include artists and NGO activists dedicated to promoting the Belarusian national identity. Among them are the painter Ales Pushkin and cultural manager and blogger Nikolai Klimovich. In 2023 they both died in prison for their commitment to democratic ideals and freedom. The Belarusian PEN Club has monitored repressions since 2019, documenting human rights violations against artists and the suppression of cultural rights across Belarus. Discrimination in the cultural sector has been shown to be both institutional and systemic. In the opinion of PEN Club Belarus, one of the areas where civil liberties are regressing most rapidly is the right to participate in cultural life. As of late June 2024, Belarus held 1,413 political prisoners, including at least 105 cultural figures.

In 2021, Belarusian lawmakers passed a bill on extremism, fast-tracking court cases for organizations labelled as extremist and classifying certain media and symbols as extremist materials. For tracking purposes, a list of "persons prone to extremism" was created, profiling citizens engaged in activities that are perceived as threats to the regime. These activities range from such grave acts as the revealing of state secrets to the most fundamental civic right, that is participation in protests. The dominant group on this list included artists, activists and historians.

The July 2024 list of "extremist materials" was 1,160 pages long. It contained names of publications considered hostile to the regime. Among them was the book *Belarusian Donbas*, which exposed Belarusian services and businesses cooperating with Russian separatists. Individuals sharing or engaging with banned content, such as readers of such publications or supporters of Telegram channels like NEXTA or other bloggers, face prosecution.

Anti-Soviet and anti-regime

In the 1960s in Belarus, members of the so-called "Golden Youth", to use Viktar Ledenev's term, gathered in art studios, theatre back stages, private apartments and parks to discuss history and culture, which they often did in Belarusian. In Minsk, popular meeting spots of this group included the park by the Yanka Kupala National Academy Theatre and the park across from the KGB headquarters, near the Young Spectator Theatre. These young cultural activists felt it their duty to be anti-Soviet, often resorting to underground activities to express their dissent. In 1962, three students of the Belarusian State University – Viktar Ledenev, Volodya Khalip and Sergei Budkevich – were charged with anti-Soviet views. They were also accused of the production and clandestine distribution of banned literature (*samizdat*).

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In addition to their arrest, in various university departments showcase meetings were organized by the Komsomol organizations to publicly single out individual students who had contacts with "anti-Soviet" activists. One of the results of such actions was the trial and sentencing of Eduard (Edik) Goriachev, who was accused of initiating an "anti-Soviet collective". On June 6th 1962, together with Kim Khadyev, he was found guilty of gathering youths together and encouraging them to engage in anti-Soviet agitation. Through their contacts with Russian dissidents, Khadyev and Goriachev obtained materials containing anti-Soviet messages, including anecdotes and poems, which they compiled into collections to read among their peers.

Belarusian history became a vibrant theme for artistic work in Belarus in the 1970s.

One of these collections, titled *Anti-Asarkan, or a Court Jester Without a King* [*Анти-Асаркан, или Шут без короля*], contained overtly anti-Soviet poems, including "Communist Symphony" and "The Fate of a Writer" [*Коммунистическая симфония* and *Судьба писателя*]. They promoted such radical ideas as overthrowing the Soviet authorities or arresting those at the 21st Party Congress.

Another significant figure in Belarusian resistance culture from that time was Larysa Genius. Repressed and deported to Siberia, she remained devoted to Belarus's pursuit of freedom. In her book *Confession*, which is a deportation diary comparable to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, she wrote that thinking about Belarus helped her get through the trials of life, as well as stay resilient and true to herself. In 1954, she wrote: "Christ rose from blood and pain, so that the candle of truth would not be extinguished. He rose for the Krivite villages, He rose, brethren, also for us. Thus we will remember, in our chains, lifting our hearts up, that just as God was crucified, Our Belarus will be reborn!"

Belarusian history became a vibrant theme for artistic work in Belarus in the 1970s. Among the most well-known works from that period are paintings and prints by Vladimir Basaliga, Jaugen Kulik and Mikola Kupava. They portrayed such national heroes and heroines as Euphrosyne of Polotsk, a popular saint among Orthodox devotees; Frantsisk Skaryna, a philosopher who printed the Bible in the Old Belarusian language in 1517; Barbara Radziwiłł, the Queen of Poland and Duchess of Lithuania who was the heroine of many legends and literary works in Belarusian; and Konstantin Kalinovsky (or Kastus Kalinoŭski), an icon of Belarusian nationalism. However, in 1972, the painter Liavon Barazna, who published *Engravings of Francis Skaryna*, was killed under mysterious circumstances. The fate of Uladzimir Stelmashonok, the People's Painter of Belarus, who portrayed Belarusian cultural history in his painting *Words about Belarus* (*Слова ара Беларусь*), was yet

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very different. He passed in 2013 at the age of 85. His works are still on display at the National Art Museum in Minsk.

Folk culture

In the 1970s, when Belarusian intellectuals and artists were operating under a façade of freedom strictly subject to censorship and surveillance, folklore and ethnography provided limited space for freedom of expression. However, even this area was subject to Soviet standardization, which reduced its diversity and imposed simplifications of cultural expressions. Thanks to the researchers and activists who have managed to document, and thereby preserve, the uniqueness of Belarusian folk culture, a large collection of archival materials has been put together. It includes such treasures as the *Belarusian Folk Art* (*Беларуская народная творчасць*) series, which until today has been inspiring alternative artistic projects in Belarus.

The revival of traditional and folk Belarusian culture is most evident in the organization of festivals and ethnographic expeditions, as well as the re-creation of folk rituals, often intertwined with political activities. References to folk traditions also appear in protests, alternative cultural projects, performances and visual arts. A database documenting these cultural initiatives, among others, can be found at the website "#ЭТНАЎСЁ" or "ethnoby.org".

Today, young Belarusian artists are also using folk art to shape the language of anti-regime protest. Rufina Bazlova, for instance, uses traditional Belarusian embroidery to vividly illustrate the chronicles of resistance. Since the protests began in 2020, she has depicted demonstrations, rallies and the repression of political prisoners in works like "The History of the Belarusian Vyzhyvanka", "Political Prisoners", "Luka and His Retinue", "Saga of Protests", and "SOS_BY_2020". These works portray the tears, blood and torture that define life under Lukashenka's regime.

> Today, young Belarusian artists are also using folk art to shape the language of anti-regime protest.

Bazlova captures the suffering of the repressed through Belarusian folk art motifs, which are the work of Belarusian women. It was the great-grandmothers and grandmothers of today's protest generation who, through embroidery, recorded Belarusian identity and women's resilience, visually expressing what they could not write. Her work continues the centuries-long struggle for the emancipation of Belarusian women as mothers, wives and patriots.

The symbolic series "Woman in the Circle" ("*Zhenokol, Feminnature*", 2012) portrays "how women are born". Along the hem of a skirt, an embroidered comic

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strip depicts a woman climbing "the hill of man" and conquering it with the help of a magic potion. Love enters her life, awakening a dormant energy. She then places the sun within her bosom and gives birth to "a new woman". The cycle then repeats, with women's strength passed down through generations in the embroidery on a woman's skirt. This series unmistakably references the diverse forms of female resistance in contemporary Belarus.

Belarusian embroidery is also featured prominently in the work of Cemra (Daria Siamchuk), an artist from Grodno dedicated to preserving Belarusian cultural heritage while promoting aesthetics, empathy and humanity. In her pieces, blood-stained bandages serve as canvases, their surfaces evoking the image of a wounded, exiled and homeless figure. Her works emphasize themes of feminine care and healing power, portraying nurses and caretakers as symbols of resilience for the wounded but enduring Belarusian people.

Artist Rozalina Busel explores grief and trauma through imagery of black cornflowers, coffins and mourning.

The theme of the wounds was also present in Ales Pushkin's paintings, where cornflowers – a traditional symbol of Belarusian folk art – embody the enduring spirit of the Belarusian people. His cornflowers bleed and face death, yet persist. Likewise, Rozalina Busel explores grief and trauma through imagery of black cornflowers, coffins and mourning. Her work includes ceramics, videos, photography and texts, including the 2024 exhibition *Life in Suspension*, which examines themes of boundaries and limitations.

The oil painting *Belarusian Venus* by Jana Chernova is a striking portrayal of a Belarusian woman. It became a symbol of resilience during the 2020 Belarusian revolution. The painting depicts a soft, feminine figure lying on a red canvas, yet her body bears bruises, abrasions and blood, reflecting the violence inflicted by Lukashenka's regime on protesters. These artworks have become emblems of contemporary Belarus and its struggle for autonomy.

Artivism

To make Belarusian identity more accessible to western audiences and present an independent narrative, the Belarusian cultural code needed reimagining. This shift counters the *Russkiy mir* concept and the propaganda-driven portrayal of Belarusian-Russian unity, propagated not only for political reasons but also as a denial of Belarusian national self-determination.

The use of history and myth has indeed become a powerful and dangerous tool in Vladimir Putin's war propaganda. In contrast, alternative cultural projects that

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use the universal language of art and which are promoted across Europe at galleries, museums, festivals and public debates, enable active resistance to Russification while seeking meaningful support for an independent Belarusian voice. This movement draws strength from a sense of unity and solidarity in a democratic and anti-regime resistance movement. The newly established First Congress of Belarusian Culture in Exile thus serves as an integrative platform, fostering the exchange of best practices and functioning as a democratic institution outside Lukashenka's regime, thereby sustaining the continuity of Belarusian artists and cultural activists. This concept of "community" extends beyond traditional art associations. It engages the public in artistic processes in which "participant-citizens" become active agents for social dialogue. They are creative, educative and impactful. This engagement lays the foundation for developing "artivism" as a powerful and transformative movement within Belarusian culture. EE

This text was prepared within the framework of the NCRD project titled "Culture and alternative art of Belarus and Ukraine XXI: image of society" or ALTKULT. This programme is conducted under the scientific direction of Dr. Magdalena Lachowicz of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

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New documentary features memories of Srebrenica

JP O'MALLEY

A new documentary directed by Ado Hasanović called *My Father's Diaries* brings a new perspective to the Bosnian War and the Srebrenica massacre. The film includes original footage captured during the war, as well as the reciting of passages from the diary of Hasanović's father. It sheds new light on the extremely difficult times faced by those trying to survive the brutality of war.

Ado Hasanović does not remember every detail of the Bosnian War (1992–95). But certain memories he cannot forget. Watching his family home burning. Leaving Srebrenica. It was 1993. He was seven years old. On a UN food truck, with his mother, brother and sister, Hasanović travelled 100 kilometres north, to the city of Tuzla.

"The war in Bosnia was really terrible," the 38-year-old Bosnian filmmaker explained from central Sarajevo. "Once we escaped, we became refugees. But my father remained in Srebrenica until [July] 1995."

Those two years that Bekir Hasanović spent in Srebrenica, a small mountainous town in eastern Bosnia, is the subject of a new documentary directed by Ado Hasanović, *My Father's Diaries*, which was shown at the 30th Sarajevo Film Festival in mid-August.

"We're shooting [a film] here in Srebrenica during this long period of war," a youthful looking Bekir tells us in the opening minutes of the documentary. "There

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is no power here. But we are somehow managing to create an image of us and our warriors."

War diaries

In early 1993 Srebrenica had been declared a UN Safe Zone. Bekir, along with his two best friends, Izet and Nedzad, formed an amateur film crew. The three Bosniak men, who were fighting a war with local Bosnian Serbs, took turns shooting videos of daily life in Srebrenica. Roughly half of the documentary consists of this footage. The other half sees Hasanović interviewing his parents in their home in Srebrenica more than two decades after the war ended.

"This documentary is not some kind of political project though," Hasanović explained. "In fact, my father was the guy who always found a way to avoid going to battles and to avoid conflict, and I really loved that about him."

During the Bosnian War Bekir kept a diary too, writing things down that he dared not say in front of the camera. Hasanović first discovered his father's war diaries in 2011, which contained a dark family secret. Bekir had an affair with another woman in Srebrenica, while Fatima, his wife, and their two children, sought refuge from the war in Tuzla.

"At one stage my father wanted to burn the diaries, and he used to fight with my mother about this issue of the other woman that he had in Srebrenica," Hasanović, who is currently based in Rome, Italy, explained. "My mother told me she hated the diaries and asked me to take them away. But I was curious, so I began reading them. In doing so, I learned a lot about my father's struggles, fears, and the suffering he went through."

Hasanović first discovered his father's war diaries in 2011, which contained a dark family secret.

Hasanović reads from his father's diaries several times during the documentary. "Thursday, November 11th 1993. More than two months have passed since we moved into an apartment in Srebrenica," one diary entry reads. "The situation here is worse than in the village where we stayed before. Loneliness is devastating me. There seems to be no way out of this hell."

The film footage that accompanies these diary entries is less personal. We see the three men and their fellow Bosniak soldiers training for war. In one scene a man gets shot by a sniper. We also hear minute details about daily life in Srebrenica, such as the queues for water, the rising price of cigarettes, and the violence. Another diary entry documents the aftermath of a massacre that Bekir witnessed at a local soccer field. "A total of 57 people were killed and the same amount injured," we learn.

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Life among suffering

But it is not all doom and gloom. There is a lot of light-hearted banter and humour to relieve the war's tensions. In one poignant scene, two of Bekir's friends are filmed dancing to the 90s pop classic "Rhythm is a Dancer" by the German Eurodance group Snap!

"I wanted to show the ordinary life that my father captured on film in Srebrenica," Hasanović explained. "Even amidst suffering, war, and situations where people didn't have enough food to eat, they were still finding time to laugh, smile and make jokes."

Hasanović said his documentary was an attempt to humanize and personalize life in Srebrenica: "These people were human beings and they wanted to live. Most directors who have made films about Srebrenica are not from Bosnia and they only focus on what happened there in July 1995."

Hasanović says his documentary was an attempt to humanize and personalize life in Srebrenica.

At the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), 20 individuals were tried for crimes committed in Srebrenica in July 1995. The evidence presented in these tribunals – and in the Courts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia – has sentenced more than 50 people to over 700 years in prison for these war crimes. Of the 20 ICTY verdicts pertaining to Srebrenica, seven include verdicts for the crime of genocide.

My Father's Diaries is not exclusively focused on these events or the legalities that followed. But it does address them. One disturbing scene, for instance, shows actual footage of the killings. It was filmed by the notorious Scorpions unit, a Serb paramilitary unit active during the Yugoslav Wars. On July 17th 1995, the Scorpions unit carried out an extensive search to capture Bosniak men and boys fleeing from Srebrenica. Among those killed were four Bosniak males at Baljkovica, two near the town of Snagovo, 39 in Bišina, and six near the town of Trnovo. In this footage (which has been presented as evidence at the ICTY) we see a group of young Bosniak teenagers with their wrists bound by ligatures and blindfolded. First, the Serb militants shout abuse at their victims in Arabic. Then they start kicking them on the ground. One Serb militant complains that the battery from his camera is running out and he wants another one to make sure he can keep filming. The Bosniak teenagers are then marched around the corner and taken into long grass, where Serb militants shoot them in the back at close range.

"Each time I watch that scene it makes me think that one group considers another group as nothing. These [Serb militants] were proud of the fact that they are

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filming these execution scenes," said Hasanović. "I felt putting that scene in the documentary was necessary so that people understand what happened with the people who were captured [in Srebrenica], most were killed, and only a few survived, including my father, who survived the Death March."

Death March

The so-called Death March began on July 11th 1995 when the Bosnian Serb army, led by General Ratko Mladić, took control of Srebrenica, even though the United Nations had designated it a safe area for civilians. Thousands of Bosniaks took refuge in a UN base in Potočari, near Srebrenica. Between 10,000 to 15,000 Bosniak men, meanwhile, fled to the mountains, attempting to escape Srebrenica. They feared they would be killed if they went with their families back to Potočari. The intended destination of these Bosniak men was the free territory of Tuzla, one hundred kilometres away, which the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina held. This perilous walk became known as the Death March because more than half of the Bosniak men who set out on foot did not survive. Thousands were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces.

The so-called Death March began on July 11th 1995 when the Bosnian Serb army took control of Srebrenica.

"I can still see certain scenes of that march," Bekir tells us in one moving interview in *My Father's Diaries*, where he walks through the same woods where the actual march took place. "You walked without a destination or without knowing where to go," he tells his son, looking directly into the camera. "There were ambushes and traps everywhere. Blood. Dead bodies. Wounded. Frightened people."

In Pobuđe, a village 30 kilometres north of Srebrenica, Bekir was hit by a toxic bomb and inhaled the poisonous chemicals that followed. On July 16th 1995, he arrived at the village of Nezuk, further to the north. Reaching that territory meant freedom. Some of his comrades were not so lucky. Izet, one of the amateur film crew who features in much of the documentary's footage, surrendered to the Bosnian Serb army. His body was found several years later. Today he is buried at the Srebrenica memorial.

In June 2020, Bekir Hasanović died, aged 58, from a heart attack. "His death was the greatest pain I ever felt in my life," said the filmmaker Hasanović. "My father was the first person who taught me how to hold a camera. After the war my father never laughed and he never smiled into the camera. Many people who survived the genocide in Srebrenica died of strokes and stress-related heart attacks, including my father."

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Disappearances

In the 1991 census the Srebrenica municipality had a population of roughly 36,000 people. By 2013 that population had shrunk by 63 per cent, to 13,409. Once a Bosniak-majority town, Srebrenica was later officially incorporated into the territory of Republika Srpska, a complex Serb-majority political entity, with limited autonomy, that evolved from the US-brokered Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian War. Since Bosnia and Herzegovina has not had a census for more than a decade, the exact number of residents living in Srebrenica today remains unknown. But the 2013 census figures gave an indication of how much the genocide had affected the Bosniak population there. According to the 1991 census data, 27,572 Bosniaks lived in the greater Srebrenica area. In 2013 that ethnic demographic had dwindled to just 7,248.

Today, the remains of many of the individuals killed in the Bosnian War remain missing, including around 800 victims of the Srebrenica genocide. "My mother is still searching for her father and her brother, who were killed back in 1995," Hasanović explained.

In the closing scenes of *My Father's Diaries*, we witness the director's mother, Fatima, chopping down a tree. She then walks through a meadow, as euphoric music plays in the background. It momentarily feels as though the landscape of Srebrenica, and its surrounding environs, enters the transcendent and the mythical.

"Capturing the nature of Bosnia was my intention with this scene," said Hasanović. "Because when I look at all of these beautiful rivers and forests of this country, I always ask myself: how could it be possible that these people were massacred in such beautiful surroundings?"

"Most of the people who were killed at Srebrenica never wanted to make war in the first place," the Bosnian director concluded. "They didn't actually care to which part of the land they belonged to." EE

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The forgotten beginnings of US-China diplomatic relations

KONRAD SZATTERS

In the shadow of Cold War tensions, covert diplomatic talks took place in Warsaw from 1958 to 1970 between the United States and the People's Republic of China. These talks, today largely forgotten, laid the foundation for a rapprochement that would change the course of global politics in the 1970s.

The 1950s were an immensely complex decade for global geopolitics. Numerous African and Asian nations started to regain their independence, redefining the old colonial world order and thus weakening past colonial superpowers, such as the United Kingdom or France. Above all, however, the new world order was emerging, dominated by the duopoly of the United States and Soviet Union and a visible division of spheres of influence between them.

While US policymakers were mostly focused on the actions of the USSR, the Soviet Union was not the only Eurasian country present on their radar. Even further from the US, another emerging power started to capture the attention of US policymakers – the People's Republic of China (PRC). In its early years, the PRC was seen as a mystery to the West, and US officials in Washington were unsure about how to approach this newly formed communist state led by Mao Zedong. Little did they know that the diplomatic steps vis-à-vis the PRC that they were about to take would reshape the global order, and their effects would still be felt today in 2024.

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The Cold War context

Following the Japanese surrender in 1945, China was "left devastated and divided" in the immediate post-war years. The country became a theatre of clashes between nationalists and communists, both of which aspired to seize power over the state. At that time, US policymakers and the public largely sympathized with the Chinese nationalists, the Kuomintang (KMT), led by Chiang Kai-shek. On the other hand, the Soviet Union decided to "keep its options open" and officially recognized China's nationalist government. At the same time, the socialist state maintained supplies of weapons to the communist party, led by Mao Zedong. The tensions between the nationalists and communists kept growing. Thus, the US proceeded with its diplomatic efforts of conciliation, personified first by Patrick J. Hurley, the US Ambassador to China, and later by General George Marshall.

However, the American idea of urging a coalition between Chinese nationalists and communists failed and a civil war broke out, with the communists emerging victorious in the mainland in 1949. The nationalists were subsequently forced to retreat to the island of Taiwan. This development set the stage for early Cold War diplomacy, with the US supporting the Republic of China on Taiwan and the Soviet Union backing the People's Republic of China on the mainland.

After this development, as Kissinger states in his book *On China*, the US was left with "second thoughts about its passivity when confronted with communist victory in the Chinese civil war". For US policymakers, China became a symbol of the possibility of communism spreading in East and Southeast Asia. When the tragic Korean War started in 1950, the US and allied United Nations troops physically entered the war on South Korea's side and fought for almost every centimetre of Korean land, against the communist North Korean troops supported by the PRC and USSR. These events were followed by the establishment of ANZUS ("Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty") in 1951 and SEATO ("Southeast Asia Treaty Organization") in 1954. Both US-backed treaties were created in order to contain the spread of communism in the region, which was also an objective officially shared by the US when invading Vietnam in 1965. All of these events seemed similar to a chain reaction of falling domino pieces in the form of US foreign policy defeats, with the first domino piece coming in the form of China becoming communist in 1949.

The American idea of urging a coalition between Chinese nationalists and communists failed and a civil war broke out.

However, in the US government, there was one man who had a prophetic vision of US-China relations that was, at the time, not shared by any of his contemporar-

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ies. This was Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State in Truman's administration. When all of his colleagues were deeply immersed in the ideological struggle against China, in 1950, Acheson postulated grounding relations with China on national interests and asserted that "the integrity of China was an American national interest regardless of China's domestic ideology." As Kissinger states, these views would not be shared by any other senior US official until Richard Nixon came to power almost two decades later.

Warsaw talks

During his time in office, Acheson managed to push some of his ideas through, which was reflected in the first significant, albeit largely forgotten, diplomatic talks between the US and China that started in 1958 in Warsaw, Poland. These were continued all the way until 1970, briefly before the official rapprochement between the US and China.

Although the vast majority of these covert talks were carried out in Warsaw, the truth is that they started a bit earlier, in 1955 in Geneva, but turned out to be problematic and inconclusive. Kissinger writes that the only success of these talks was that China and the US permitted citizens trapped in each country by the civil war to return home. That is why these talks were mainly remembered for the incident that occurred between John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State in Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration, and Zhou Enlai, the first Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs of China. In 1955, during one of the meetings in Geneva, probably due to his strong ideological beliefs and opinions regarding China, Dulles refused to shake Zhou's hand, which was well-remembered and mentioned even in the 1972 talks between Nixon and Zhou. Since the Geneva talks were not bringing any much-needed developments, in 1957, the US sent an official of lower rank (without ambassadorial status) to continue talks with the Chinese side. This became a pretext for both sides to suspend the talks for nine months.

> The first significant, albeit largely forgotten, diplomatic talks between the US and China started in 1958 in Warsaw.

Therefore, the most important issue was still lying unresolved on the table: the question of Taiwan and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis that occurred between 1954–55. Wanting to prevent escalation, both sides knew very well that talks must be resumed. After the Geneva failure and due to the eruption of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, it was decided that the diplomatic efforts of the US and China would continue in Warsaw.

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But why Warsaw and why Poland? The reason for it is rather trivial. Poland was one of the few countries (aside from its "allies" in the communist bloc) that recognized the PRC in 1949 and hosted both US and PRC embassies and diplomats. Poland also gave itself some diplomatic credibility when, on the power of the Korean Armistice Agreement that ended the Korean War in 1953, it joined the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission. This was meant to supervise and observe the armistice on the Korean peninsula. These were the factors that pushed US and Chinese officials to choose Warsaw for the continuation of their diplomatic efforts. This development is now known as the Warsaw Talks, which constituted the crucial first step in the diplomatic relations between the US and China.

The question of Taiwan

From the outset, the question of Taiwan dominated the Warsaw Talks. As previously stated, the main pretext for convening them was the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, during which China shelled the islands of Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu, which were controlled by Taiwan. The US responded by sending the US Navy 17th Fleet to the area, heightening tensions and bringing the two powers to the brink of war. For China, reunification with Taiwan and "liberating it" were non-negotiable issues, while the US, which was reiterated by John Foster Dulles, remained committed to the defence of this island. Taking into account the strength of both sides' stances, an open conflict would have probably been unavoidable, which would be detrimental to both the US and China at that time. That is precisely why they decided to reconvene the diplomatic talks in Warsaw.

Throughout this period, the Warsaw Talks served as a crucial diplomatic backchannel. Although the talks often stalled over the question of Taiwan, they provided a means for the US and China to manage their differences without resorting to military conflict. Both sides used the talks to send signals to one another about their intentions, testing the waters for potential areas of compromise and even cooperation. For China, the talks also provided an opportunity to assert its independence from the Soviet Union, demonstrating that it could engage in diplomacy with the West on its own terms.

These issues seemed to have had an almost immediate effect on what was about to happen within the next two decades. The 1960s were meant to be a groundbreaking decade for Sino-American relations. Throughout the talks, the US started to realize that China was not a normal type of Soviet proxy (as was the case with the Central European countries), and that it was willing to craft its own path in international affairs. Thanks to the Warsaw Talks, the US started also to more gradually

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and decisively pursue the ideas of Dean Acheson, which were later remade and adjusted by figures such as Henry Kissinger, who would build his approach towards China on the foundations laid by the Warsaw Talks.

The Sino-Soviet split

The 1960s brought about a development that became one of the engines for change within the paradigm of Sino-American relations: the Sino-Soviet split. After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, so de facto the leader of the country. He started the process of the de-Stalinization of the USSR and its Central and Eastern Europe allies, which culminated in his now famous, but then secret 1956 speech titled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences". This speech, criticizing Stalin's rule and his methods, was a great shock to numerous communist leaders, including Mao Zedong.

He perceived Khrushchev's ideas of de-Stalinization and refreshing relations with the West as "revisionist" and not following the application of true Marxist-Leninist ideology. The tensions between China and the USSR were so high that in one of the meetings, Zhou Enlai allegedly called Khrushchev, a miner's son, a "traitor to his class". The 1960s, therefore, were the stage for the Sino-Soviet split, a crucial development that did not go unnoticed in Washington. In accordance with the old proverb "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," when China became an enemy of the USSR, suddenly, US policymakers were presented with a gift on a silver platter: the chance to establish a strategic alignment with China.

This is precisely where the Warsaw Talks came into play. They remained one of the most important channels of communication between the US and China in the 1960s. The talks continued throughout this period, but progress remained rather slow as both sides remained cautious. In fact, some sources state that both sides were so cautious that parts of the communications during the meetings were written on paper, rather than spoken. This was because both sides were afraid to say certain things out loud as they feared being listened to by the Soviet or Polish communist authorities. Nonetheless, the talks remained a venue for the exchange of grievances and ideas, albeit with little tangible progress on major issues like Taiwan. However, the sheer existence of this communication channel helped prevent conflicts and provided a precious foundation for future diplomatic breakthroughs that were about to take place.

Apart from the Sino-Soviet split, the 1960s were also a stage for numerous other developments, such as the Vietnam War, which consumed the attention of

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US policymakers, or the Cultural Revolution, commandeered by Mao in China. Both of these developments at some point started being problematic to the respective governments and this pushed them, independently from each other, to start exploring the possibility of Sino-American rapprochement.

Rapprochement

As the 1960s progressed, both the US and China started gradually looking more and more towards each other. As Kissinger writes, during one of the Warsaw Talks in March 1966, the American representative at the talks offered an olive branch to China by stating that "the United States government was willing to develop further relations with the People's Republic of China." Kissinger adds that it was the first time an American official had used the official post-1949 appellation for China in any formal capacity.

Soon thereafter, in 1969, Richard Nixon won the elections, became the President of the United States and, along with his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, started processes leading up to what Kissinger calls a "revolutionary moment in US foreign policy". This was Nixon's announcement that the US had a strategic interest in the survival of the biggest communist state on earth: China.

Since 1958, all 136 meetings have offered a framework for exploring possible breakthroughs in US-China relations.

That was precisely the moment in which the Warsaw Talks started to slowly fade away as they would be "too low-level to present a view of such magnitude". Since 1958, all 136 meetings have offered a framework for exploring possible breakthroughs in US-China relations. With the work of Nixon and Kissinger, all the efforts put into the Warsaw Talks by both American and Chinese diplomats finally came to fruition.

After 1969, the developments in relations between the US and China were changing at an overwhelming pace. In 1971, Kissinger had a secret visit to China and in 1972, after all these years, Nixon finally met with Mao and agreed to the joint "Shanghai Communiqué". Although it was perceived as a success back then, little did Nixon and Kissinger know, but one sentence from the communiqué would create an issue that is visible and tangible not only in US-China relations, but also in global affairs today. This sentence is "the United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China." This idea soon became known as the "One China Policy" and the rest is history.

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The heritage of the Warsaw Talks

Throughout all the groundbreaking developments between the US and China described in this article, and all the events that virtually forged the present global status quo and the shape of US-China relations, the Warsaw Talks were always in the background. Throughout their existence, the talks remained rather unseen and in the shadows, yet proved immensely important for all the developments leading to rapprochement between the US and China.

The Warsaw Talks represent a forgotten chapter of Sino-American relations, overshadowed by the dramatic and groundbreaking diplomatic breakthroughs of the early 1970s. Yet, without these quiet efforts between American and Chinese diplomats that took place in the Myślewicki Palace in the Łazienki Park in Warsaw, the eventual rapprochement might never have occurred. The Warsaw Talks were the secret silent whispers that preceded the loud official steps taken toward Sino-American reconciliation that would eventually reshape the global order.

Today, as the world is once again witnessing rising tensions between the US and China, the heritage of the Warsaw Talks remains relevant. The most important lesson that could be learned from these talks is that diplomatic efforts and dialogue, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable differences, are essential and effective to maintaining peace and stability. The heritage of the Warsaw Talks reminds us that in crucial moments of history, diplomacy, often criticized for being too slow, frustrating or even irrelevant, is absolutely indispensable in shaping the peaceful, prosperous and beneficial course of global and regional events and developments. EE

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