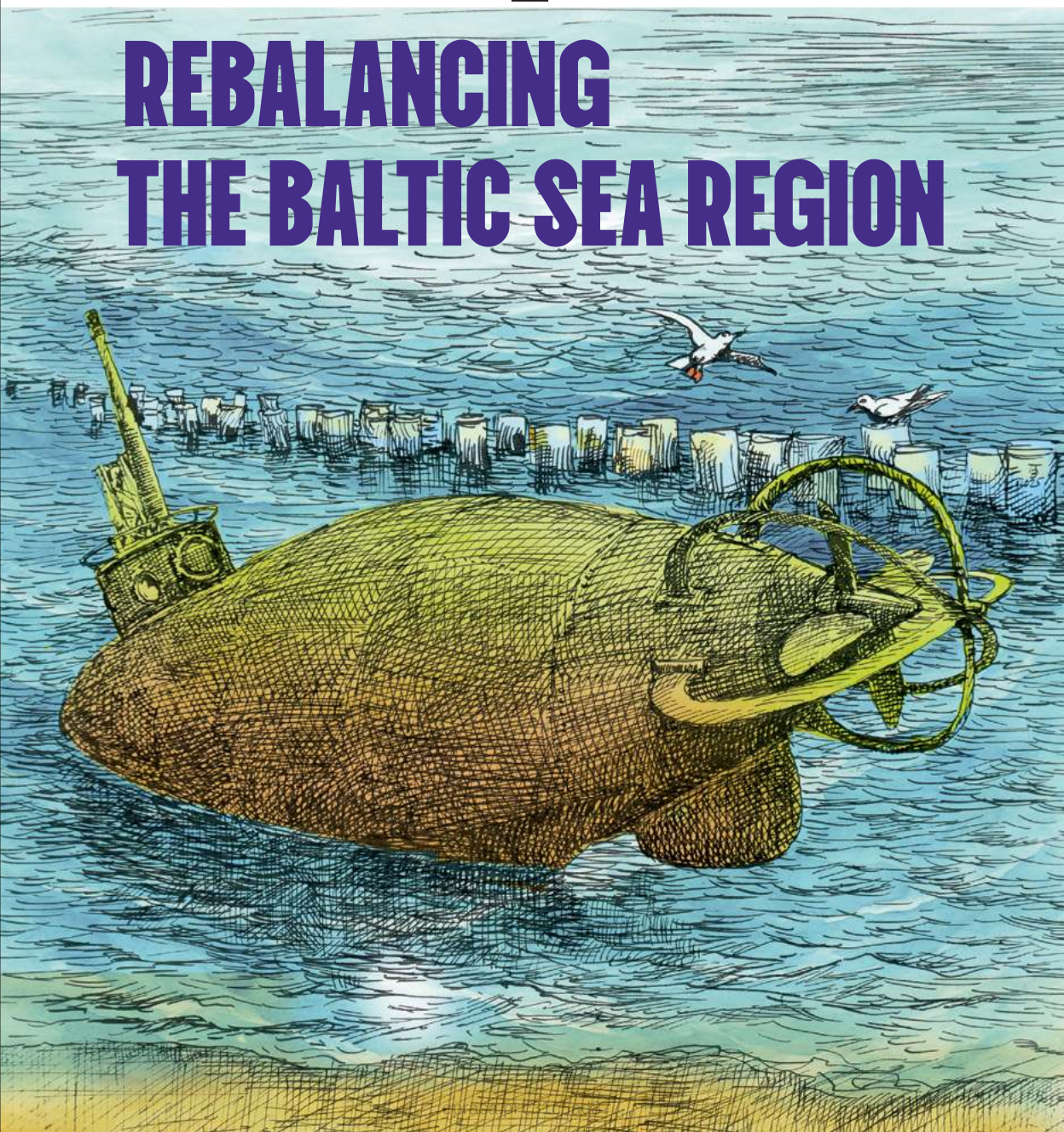
New Eastern Europe

Bimonthly **June-August** **No 4 (LXVII)/2025**
25 PLN (w tym 8% vat) | 15 EUR | 17.75 USD | 9.99 GBP
neweasterneurope.eu

ISSN 2083-7372

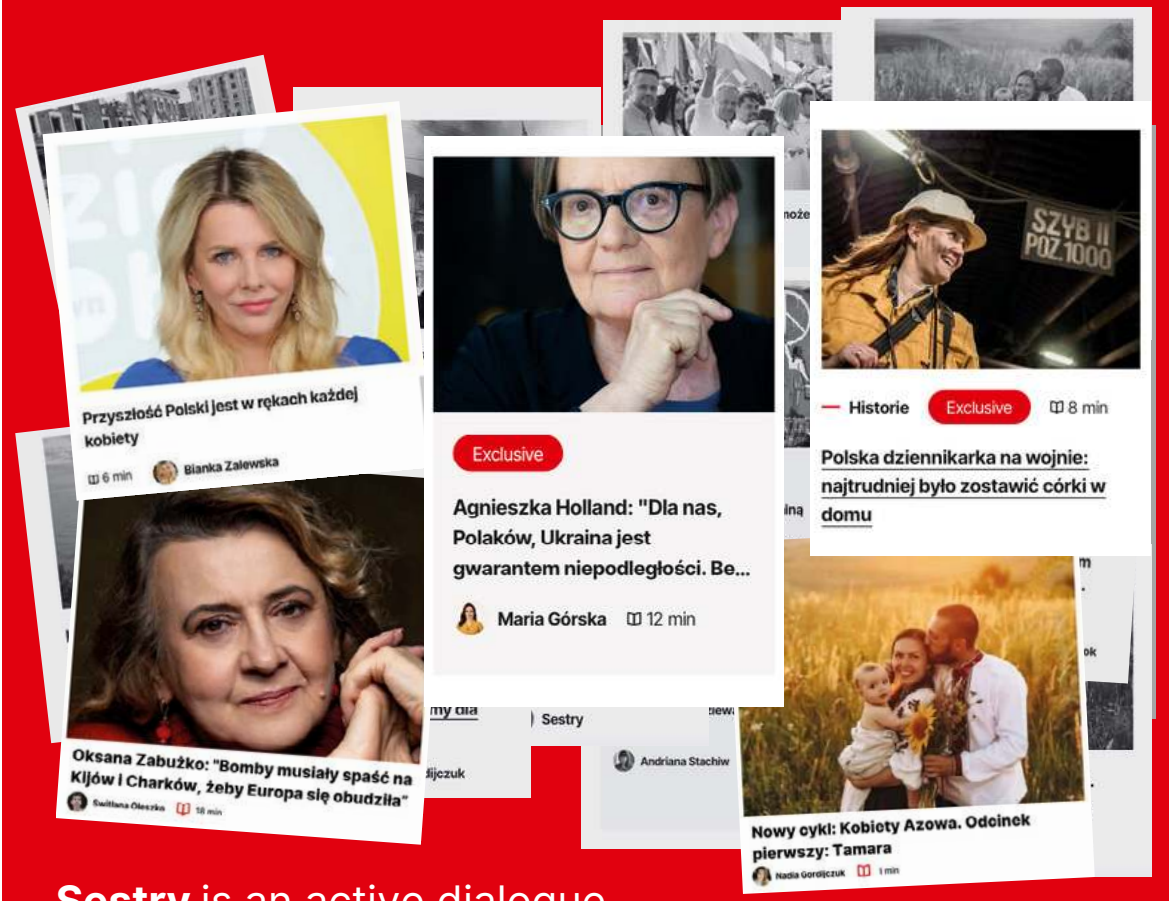
REBALANCING THE BALTIC SEA REGION



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DEAR READER,

Much has been said about how Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reshaped politics in Europe and beyond. Yet, for the societies of the Baltic Sea region, these shifts are more than security narratives and political statements. They generate fear and apprehension that is felt almost every day. Thus, with Finland and Sweden now members of NATO, which is the strongest defence alliance the West has created, the region finds itself at the centre of a major rebalancing. This new dynamic has seen the states around the Baltic Sea emerge as a new nexus in Europe's defence and security. Their proximity to the Ukrainian frontlines, combined with a deep understanding of the Russian threat, gives their voices greater weight in shaping NATO and EU responses. This also explains why these states have been investing in military capabilities, civil resilience, and regional cooperation more than other European states. Once located at a peripheral frontier, they are now a strategic core.

This issue of *New Eastern Europe* explores these changes taking place, from new defence strategies and alliances, to civil preparedness and social resilience. We open it with an interview with Andrius Kubilius, former Lithuanian prime minister and now EU Commissioner for Defence, who outlines the growing strategic relevance of the Baltic states in shaping Europe's response to the threats facing the continent. National perspectives offer further nuances. Thus, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO is analysed by Minna Ålander and Eric Adamson, while Nino Chanadiri reports on the experience of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia. Eóin McNamara investigates Estonia's defence and Nasta Zakharevich asks whether Latvia is truly ready for war.

Beyond the Baltic Sea, this issue explores other key developments in the wider region, including the South Caucasus, where Georgia is seeing a dramatic slip towards authoritarianism, while Armenia is pinning its hope on stronger cooperation with the European Union. It also focuses on Hungary where new and surprising political dynamics seem to be underway.

Finally, we are excited to announce the launch of a new membership programme aimed at supporting the development of *New Eastern Europe* and building a more engaged community around our publication. Stay tuned for updates on how you can get involved. We also encourage you to listen to our weekly podcast *Talk Eastern Europe* and subscribe to our exclusive newsletter *Brief Eastern Europe*. All links are available on our website. Wishing you a safe and restful summer!

Sincerely,
The Editors

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New Eastern Europe

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

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SUBSCRIPTION:
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EDITORIAL OFFICES
New Eastern Europe
ul. Szlak 26/12A, 31-153 Kraków
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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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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

The series of texts on the Baltic Sea region is co-financed by the Warsaw Office of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. The views expressed in the texts do not necessarily reflect the views of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

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If the EU wants peace, it needs to prepare for war

An interview with Andrius Kubilius, the European Union's Commissioner for Defence and Space. Interviewers: Joanna Maria Stolarek and Adam Reichardt

JOANNA MARIA STOLAREK: You are the very first European Commissioner for Defence and Space, which reflects how serious the European Union is taking the threats to the community's security. What is the aim of your position and mandate? Help our readers understand why the EU has elevated common defence to such a high level, and what priorities you are focusing on?

ANDRIUS KUBILIUS: Well as you rightly mentioned, the creation of my portfolio is in some way evidence that the European Union is placing security and defence on a much higher level of importance. If you read, for example, the political guidelines of the Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, which were approved by the European Parliament last summer, it is very clear that there are two key priorities. First is security and defence, and second is competitiveness. If you ask why security and defence is such a priority, I think that there is no need for a very long explanation – it is definitely because of the threats coming from Russia. And that is why it is not only a priority for the Commission, but also a priority for the Polish presidency, which has a very good symbolic title for the presidency – "Security, Europe!"

Of course, this is something new for the EU and for the Commission. Before now defence and security were mainly the prerogative of member states, together with NATO, to decide on all the defence plans, and defence capabilities needed for the implementation of those plans. The European Commission was not so much involved in those issues because, according to the treaties, they are very much related to the defence industry and the capabilities of that industry to produce what is needed for the member states. And this is where the EU is coming from, not as a competitor to NATO or to member states in their de-

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fence planning, but as a provider of added value to assist member states to develop their industries. The aim is to allow member states to implement their capability targets in a much more rapid way. Unlike NATO, the European Commission has possibilities according to treaties to implement industrial policy. It has possibilities to raise additional funds for defence, and that is what we are doing now.

ADAM REICHARDT: You've recently been tasked with preparing a special white paper for European defence, which is being debated quite a bit around Europe right now. Could you summarize the most important conclusions that are coming from this document for the EU member states?

The conclusions are quite clear. The threats which Europe is facing are defined by analyses coming from different intelligence services, for example from German or Danish bodies, that Russia could be ready to test NATO's Article 5. And some intelligence indicates Russia plans to start a new aggression against European NATO members, especially in the neighbourhood of Russia, before 2030. That means that until then, we need to ramp up our production and increase our defence capabilities to such levels that we would be ready to defend ourselves and deter any possibility of Russian aggression. We need to show Vladimir Putin that he will not be able to achieve anything if he decides to make another stupid, criminal act of aggression. What we need to do, as outlined in the white paper, is focus on several priority areas. First of all, of course, is the question of how we can increase our support to Ukraine, because the defence of Ukraine is the defence of Europe. That is very clearly shown by the white paper, where the defence of Ukraine is included in the defence plans of the European Union. Second, we are looking at how we need to increase our own capabilities, especially in several areas. The EU needs to very quickly ramp up its production and acquire weapons which are ready for both the war of today and the wars of tomorrow. This means not only how do we scale up production of what we are producing now – ammunition, missiles, heavy weapon systems like tanks or artillery – but also, based on Ukraine's experience, how new technologies are becoming a part of warfare, like drones, anti-drone systems, electronic systems and so on.

In addition, we need to address the systemic problems in our defence industry. Again, that is where we see very clearly that the EU can be of great assistance to member states to create a real single market for defence and avoid further fragmentation of the industry. This includes the so-called "ReArm Europe" plans, which were developed in parallel by the Commission. The Commission didn't announce them before the white paper was published, they are already at the implementation stage. Those financial possibilities are really of strategic importance. What is proposed in the ReArm Europe financial programme

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could allow member states to spend an additional 800 billion euros during the next four years on defence. And that will make quite a big impact.

JS: The big question when we are speaking about European defence is how the EU can coordinate with NATO and balance defence autonomy while supporting NATO structures. Can you speak more about how the EU strategy fits within the framework of NATO?

We are not competing with NATO and that was one of the basic principles which I said from the very beginning. We have really very good cooperation with NATO headquarters and with General Secretary Mark Rutte. NATO has a responsibility to develop the so-called military plans and also to set military capability targets. In other words, what member states need to have in terms of military force, how many tanks, artillery systems, etc. This process is taking place inside of NATO. NATO headquarters are negotiating with member states on precise numbers and what they can promise to deliver. We hope that this process will be successfully concluded by the NATO Summit in June in The Hague. After that, those numbers, those capability targets, will become a basis for us to plan with our industries on production and how much it will cost. We are planning to have what we call an industry output plan with a very concrete picture of the landscape, what European industries need to produce, what they still are not able to produce and where else we can procure certain systems. So in this way the EU complements, not competes with, NATO.

AR: We want to also gain a bit from your experience and get some reflections from you, since you have served in the Baltic states, in particular as a former prime minister of Lithuania. How would you say that your understanding of Baltic security has helped shape your approach to European defence at large?

It is well known that in the Baltics, in Poland, in our region as well as in Nordic countries, we perhaps understand the threats of an aggressive Russia better than other countries, which may have a larger distance from Russia. That's why we speak in clearer language. We perceive those warning signals from intelligence services as real signals which we need to take into account. And when we have such a warning from intelligence services the question is then very simple. Are we reacting to those warning signals in a serious way? Or do we expect nothing will happen and we can stay relaxed.

From the very beginning I was repeating this old Latin formula that if you want peace, you need to be ready for war. We continue that. Of course, there are perhaps still different approaches in different member states, but as we can see from recent decisions in the European Council, such as when the Council agreed with the commission on defence needs to be established, or that the Re-Arm Europe programme needs to be implemented; the governments in the EU

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Photo courtesy of the European Commission

"It is well known that in the Baltics, in Poland, in our region as well as in Nordic countries, we perhaps understand the threats of an aggressive Russia better than other countries… That's why we speak in clearer language,"says EU Commissioner for Defence Andrius Kubilius.

are quite united in their understanding of the threats which perhaps we, in the Baltics, were the first to start to speak up about. In addition, of course, we need to see that global developments also are pushing Europeans to take more responsibility for our own defence. We were looking into transatlantic developments with a lot of attention. And we understand that in the longer term, again, not maybe tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but perhaps the Americans will put more and more emphasis on the challenges to mitigate rising Chinese power, and that will be the reason why Americans will start to move more and more towards the Indo-Pacific with their resources. In that case, perhaps, they will diminish their presence on the European continent, and we need to be ready for such a development.

JS: Before we go to the US, one question about the threats, about what you said is

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happening in the Baltic region, threats like hybrid attacks, disinformation or border provocations. What can the EU do more to strengthen resilience in the region?

We are talking about all the different issues which now are called hybrid war or war below the Article 5 threshold. We need to understand that from the Russian side this is part of a new form of modern warfare. For them there is no big difference in how to proceed, starting with influence in elections, influence on social networks, acts of sabotage, provocations and maybe even real military aggression. So, this new generation warfare, as some experts are calling it, demands from us new generation defence strategies. While we have a better understanding of what we need to do with our traditional defence capabilities, it is less clear how we can defend ourselves and prevent the spread of Russian hybrid threats. And we see developments like sabotage in the Baltic Sea, or sabotage in Poland and Lithuania, or even in Germany and France, and so on. Yet in my view, this demands a more strategic approach from us.

AR: I wanted to follow up with something you said earlier about Ukraine. You said that the defence of Ukraine is the defence of Europe, and that the EU has to support Ukraine because it's basically defending Europe as well. And with US support to Ukraine coming to an end at some point – maybe in the coming weeks or months – how can Europe invest in its own security and help Ukraine defend itself simultaneously?

We are now planning to spend around 3.5 per cent of GDP on our defence. And to implement this, we are using all the possibilities which we as the European Commission are creating, not only with loans but also with the possibility of spending an additional 1.5 per cent of national budgets for defence, which will not be included in deficit calculations. Thus, for our own defence, we are ready to spend around 3.5 per cent. Now if we are looking into how much we and the Americans were supporting Ukraine in the military sense, we know the numbers that during the first three years of the war, EU member states were providing military support of around 50 billion euros, while the Americans gave around 60 billion. If you calculate the numbers concerning not only member states, but also all European countries, like the United Kingdom, in addition to Norway, then we are coming to very equal numbers on both sides, around 60 billion euros during the three years of the war from the European Union and 60 billion from the American side.

If we recalculate how much on average we spend during one year, it will be around 20 billion, both from the EU side and from the US. If we take our EU GDP and if you take American GDP, and you look at how much of our GDP is spent on military support, you will see that European Union assistance to Ukrainian defence was below 0.1 per cent and for the Americans, it was the same, below 0.1 per cent of GDP. As we are ready to spend 3.5 per cent on our

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defence, then we are able to still provide 0.1 per cent. My point is 0.1 per cent is not zero. However, it's not something which would be existentially impossible for us to increase. The question is how and in which way will our strategy support Ukraine and also what is our long-term strategy towards Russia. I hope that we will be much clearer in our strategic approach, which would allow us also to support Ukraine in a more effective way.

JS: Do you think Europe's defence industry will be able to produce at that speed and volume what we really need in order to meet the threats we currently face?

We have to acknowledge the challenge. The issue is how to ramp up our production and how we can take a lot of lessons from Ukraine. It would be good for us to learn lessons from Ukraine before we face a potential wider war, as Ukraine learned a lot of lessons about how to ramp up defence production. In 2022, the Ukrainian defence industry was able to produce weapons with a total amount of one billion euros per year. Last year, they were able to produce weapons with a total value of 35 billion euros. They've also developed their industry to produce very modern weapons, such as drones and anti-drone technologies, which we need to develop and learn how to use them.

I mentioned priorities and what we're doing now with the development of our defence capabilities, with support to industry, financial support and so on. We are also planning important steps forward with the so-called simplification regarding the "Defence Omnibus". In other words, these are our plans to review different regulations which, as industries are rightly saying, are not allowing them to follow this Ukrainian way of ramping up production.

AR: You mentioned this expression, if you want peace we should prepare for war. I think it refers to deterrence, strength in deterrence. In your view, do you think that the threat coming from Russia, but also Belarus, is continuing to grow? Is deterrence enough right now to stop Russia from using force to test NATO?

Well, as Mark Rutte is saying, at the moment, yes, we have capabilities to stop Russia. But if we do not look into the future, how things can develop during the next four or five years, then we will make a big mistake. Again, as Rutte says, in three months' time, Russia will be able to produce more weapons than all NATO member states – the US, UK and the Europeans – are able to produce during one year. So it means that the Russians are stockpiling weapons to prepare themselves for whatever, potentially the possibilities of the next aggression. We understand from those public warnings from the German or Danish intelligence services that Russia is considering their plans to test Article 5. We need to be very clear that in such case, if Russia will continue its war economy and capabilities to produce mass amounts of weapons, and we do not increase our capabilities, then definitely in three or four years we

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will face big problems. We cannot expect that Putin will read our white paper and decide, okay, so those guys are very strong and I will not attack them. Our deterrence can only be backed by real numbers. How many weapons we have, how large is our army, wider military, and personnel numbers, and so on. That is why we need to move now with our implementation as quickly as possible. EE

Andrius Kubilius is a Lithuanian politician who is currently serving as the European Commissioner for Defence Industry and Space. He previously served as a member of the European Parliament and earlier as prime minister of Lithuania from 1999 to 2000 and again from 2008 to 2012.

Joanna Maria Stolarek is the director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation's Warsaw office and a journalist specializing in foreign affairs with a special focus on Polish-German relations.

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Nordic-Baltic total defence

Easier said than done

MINNA ÅLANDER AND ERIC ADAMSON

NATO's newest members Finland and Sweden are already net contributors to Allied security. Well known for their military capability, the two countries also bring a new approach into the Alliance: total defence. While military cooperation is intensifying, civil defence and civil-military cooperation need to be better integrated into Nordic-Baltic regional defence.

Finland and Sweden are known for their so-called "total defence" approach to security, in which national defence is not only a task for the military but for the whole of society. The security concept was primarily developed for three reasons: their history outside of NATO, geographical proximity to the Soviet/Russian threat, and large territories with small populations.

Given that Finland and Sweden have not enjoyed NATO's collective security guarantee for most of the Alliance's history, they had to develop credible national defence systems during the Cold War. The ability to defend a large territory with little manpower meant that a conscription-based reserve system was a must to secure the necessary number of troops. But beyond that, civil defence and civil-military cooperation were also imperative. Civilian life needed to continue functioning even under wartime conditions, while it also could fulfil support tasks for the armed forces. Today, defending Finland and Sweden is still a nation-wide effort. Every citizen has a responsibility to contribute to their country's security. This ap-

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proach differs significantly from countries with a strategic culture where the military is a separate profession that does not necessarily rely on, or substantially interact with, the civilian population.

Finland and Sweden: security providers in NATO

Finland and Sweden both contribute capable armed forces to NATO and significantly improve the Alliance's military capability in the Nordic-Baltic region. Both have capable – and by European standards, fairly large – air forces. Importantly, Finland and Sweden have a decades-long and close bilateral defence cooperation partnership, known as FISE cooperation. The Finnish and Swedish air forces' dispersed basing strategy reflects the challenge of defending a large but sparsely populated territory. For example, both air forces regularly use highways for landing and maintenance in the remote areas of their countries.

Finland and Sweden's navies also have a longstanding and close cooperation agreement with each other. They possess amphibious and littoral warfare expertise relating to the specific conditions of the Baltic Sea's shallow waters and archipelagos. In addition, the Swedish navy has submarines, a fairly rare capability in the Alliance, and the Finnish navy is expert in mine warfare, which is a widely forgotten naval capability in NATO. Sweden's defence industry, with its own fighter jets, the above-mentioned submarines, and many more Swedish-made systems, brings significant industrial capacity into NATO. Finland, in turn, is one of the very few European countries with significant force generation ability, with wartime readiness encompassing 280,000 troops and a total reserve up to 870,000.

But what makes the two new allies particularly interesting for NATO is their way of integrating a civilian component with military defence. In Finland, the duty of all citizens to contribute to national defence is enshrined in the constitution, meaning mandatory military service for male citizens (with the option of a civilian service instead) and other potential wartime duties for female citizens who opt out of voluntary military service.

Finland's comprehensive security system was consistently maintained even after the Cold War. Sweden, by contrast, discontinued its total defence approach and is now rebuilding civil defence almost from the ground up. A selective gender-neutral military conscription system was reactivated in phases following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but as late as 2022, the Swedish National Audit Office found that the country's civil defence lacked the basic prerequisites to meet the deteriorating security climate. Only since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have sufficient investments in civil defence been made, with a number of institu-

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tional and structural reforms undertaken, that match what the security situation demands. Finland, thanks to its unbroken tradition, counts as the gold standard when it comes to whole-of-society preparedness. But Sweden's current process of rebuilding its civil defence for the 21st century offers some learning opportunities for other countries as well.

Finland's pragmatic pessimism

Among NATO countries, Finland is an odd one out in many ways. The country, with a 1340-kilometre-long border with Russia, never changed its threat assessment that Moscow is the most likely threat to the country's security, and that this threat is of a territorial nature. This was in stark contrast with NATO's prevalent post-Cold War doctrine of expeditionary warfare and crisis management operations far away from Allied territory. In the first post-Cold War decades, Finland's large conscription-based army looked hopelessly outdated compared to the small and mobile professional forces developed by nearly all NATO allies. One of the reasons why it was not in Finland's interest to join NATO 20 years earlier than it did was that the Alliance's doctrine and threat assessment were very different from those of Helsinki. Even in the optimistic early 2000s, the possibility of an armed attack against Finland's territory never disappeared from government reports on foreign, security and defence policy. The main task of the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) has therefore remained the defence of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the same time, however, the defence forces are also tasked with assisting other authorities, which is considered their social responsibility.

Finland's defence is based on the concept of comprehensive security, enshrined in the Security Strategy for Society.

Finland's defence structure is based on the concept of comprehensive security, which is enshrined in the Security Strategy for Society. It has two main principles: preparedness and foresight. Well acquainted with Russia's way of warfare that targets civilians in wartime and utilizes various sub-threshold and hybrid methods in peacetime, Finland emphasizes overall societal resilience. Preparedness measures therefore include contingency planning, continuity management, advance preparations, and training. The intention is to enable well-exercised and proactive measures that will in the best case anticipate a crisis, instead of reactive responses once the crisis has already hit.

Finland is known for its encompassing civil shelter structure that can protect up to 4.8 million of its 5.5 million population. Finland also maintains emergency

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reserves of critical supplies managed in public-private cooperation by a specialist authority, the National Emergency Supplies Agency (NESA). The agency states that "the focus of security of supply operations is being increasingly shifted towards ensuring the operating capability of critical infrastructure." Beyond the whole-of-society approach, Finland also applies the whole-of-government method. A Security Committee consisting of members and experts from various branches of government, other institutions, and the private sector assists the government in a coordinating role to keep up with the requirements of comprehensive security.

The Finnish experience has shown that the ability to act in a crisis requires well-established networks of relevant actors. A further core element of the Finnish total defence system are therefore the national and regional-level defence courses the FDF offer for people in relevant positions in society. The national-level courses were established in 1961 and take place four times per year. The participants engage with different crisis scenarios and learn about their individual and institutional roles alongside coordination mechanisms. The courses are an important way to socialize elites into the threat environment and tasks related to national defence. Most importantly, they also build a network of central security actors for times of crisis, consisting of business leaders, government officials, local administration, civil society organizations, media and cultural representatives, and providers of critical infrastructure. Defence courses are also offered to ordinary citizens. The courses' popularity surged after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – especially among women who are exempt from conscription. There are also 14 regional voluntary defence associations and more than 300 local reservist associations.

A concrete example of civil-military cooperation in Finland is the strategic partnerships the FDF have with a number of civilian companies. The FDF enables partner companies to maintain extra production capacity that would be activated in wartime and directed towards the military's needs.

Sweden's (re-)emerging civil defence

As Finland's example shows, even if consistently maintained, total defence is not so much an end goal but a continuous process. In Sweden, rebuilding civil defence capacity and capabilities is therefore not simply a matter of bringing back what the country once had during the Cold War. Certain aspects can be re-activated, but substantial basic (re)training of total defence duties is required. Civil conscription, reactivated in 2024, is one such example. All residents between the ages of 16–70, even non-citizens, with skills deemed vital for continued societal function (e.g. emergency services and healthcare) can be called up during crisis or wartime

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to conduct total defence duties. Other civil defence aspects, like telecommunications and critical infrastructure which were once state-owned and could quickly be repurposed for military use, are now in private hands and must be incorporated into Sweden's civil defence in completely new ways.

Investing in resilience and buying into public-private partnerships is thus a major challenge, but also an opportunity. For example, Sweden is directly implementing lessons from Ukraine, such as cell broadcast warning systems. Another urgent issue that all the countries in the Baltic Sea region have to address is how to better protect critical underwater infrastructure from Russian hybrid warfare – a capability now being strengthened by six Swedish government agencies.

As of 2025, Sweden's civil defence has four main objectives:

1. Safeguarding the most essential public services;
2. Contributing to the military defence's capability within the framework of NATO's collective defence and other duties;
3. Protecting the civilian population; and
4. Maintaining Sweden's will to defend itself and society's resilience to external pressure.

Sweden's civil defence is made up of 21 regional governments and 60 government agencies across ten so-called preparedness sectors. The overarching responsible agency for coordinating this vast civil defence sector – spanning energy, critical infrastructure, electronic communications, healthcare and agriculture – is the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB). This body will change its name to the Swedish Civil Defence Agency on January 1st 2026. This name change reflects the shifting focus of Sweden's civil defence since Russia's full-scale invasion: from responding to peace time crises (such as forest fires and floods) to acting in a wartime environment and supporting military operations, particularly NATO Host Nation Support (HNS). The agency is the publisher of the internationally well-known brochure "If Crisis or War Comes."

The shift is as much institutional as it is cultural. Much like the Swedish population has awoken to a new reality where an armed attack cannot be ruled out, so too are civil defence agencies adapting to the new demands of NATO membership and the deteriorated security environment. The civilian sector is demonstrating a high willingness to contribute to the defence of Sweden, but lines of responsibility amongst agencies contributing to crisis and wartime responses remain unclear.

For Swedish civil defence agencies, supporting NATO operations through HNS is an entirely new dimension. Sweden's geography lends itself to being a natural staging and transit area for NATO troops – both in the High North and the Baltic Sea region. This means that Sweden must make available what NATO requires to support its operations, including accommodation, healthcare, food and water,

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and fuel. Much of this infrastructure is in civilian and private hands, such as ports and railways to receive and transport Allied armies. Not prepared for war since the end of the Cold War, the responsible civilian agencies have lost institutional knowledge of civil-military cooperation over the past few decades, and have little experience in a NATO context.

Cultural and operational gaps between the civilian sector and military is not unique to Sweden, and building Allied resilience through strengthening capacities in the civilian sector is a growing priority for NATO. This is being done in order to meet today's full spectrum of threats and to uphold Article 3, which demands that each nation must have the capability to withstand and recover from a major disaster, crisis or armed attack. On resilience, relative to other NATO Allies, Sweden is a leading nation, exceeding and sharing best practices on NATO's seven baseline requirements agreed to at the 2016 Warsaw Summit. To facilitate better civil-military cooperation, Sweden has also appointed an MSB director with a military background and is conducting NATO training and exercises that include civilian agencies. Though it is widely acknowledged rebuilding is going too slowly, Sweden is making historic investments in its civil defence to build a robust total defence and live up to NATO's Article 3.

Nordic examples of regional civil defence cooperation

Finland's comprehensive security and Sweden's total defence models have similar logics born out the necessity of their non-aligned, demographic, and geographic circumstances. And while this Nordic model may have been viewed as more or less the same internationally, the differing chains of command, areas of responsibilities, operating procedures, legal bases, culture, and pure number of public and private actors involved makes cross-border civil defence cooperation arguably more complex than regional military cooperation.

Even for purely domestic crisis responses, there remains a lack of clarity with regard to responsibilities between local, regional and national authorities, as well as gaps in cooperation, proactivity and leadership. This was a conclusion MSB reached when analysing responses to three peacetime crises between 2023–24: "Joint crisis management capability has been hampered by the fact that, in some cases there has been a lack of consensus on roles and responsibilities, not a fully comprehensive situation picture, and a lack of joint direction and coordination of efforts and resources … there have been instances of shortcomings in proactivity or decisiveness." The picture becomes even more complex when international cooperation is required.

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While cooperation often works well on a lower level, national governments may lag behind. A good case in point is the cooperation between local communities in Norway, Sweden and Finland in the northernmost parts of the countries, called the Cap of the North. Due to the shared challenges all communities are facing in this sparsely populated but large area, marked by scarcity of infrastructure and a harsh climate, cooperation has been a more urgent necessity than in the southern capital areas of the countries. Cooperation on search and rescue, as well as security of supply, are relevant beyond the everyday peacetime needs of the region.

The Haga Agreements have been the most important civil preparedness cooperation format for all five Nordic countries. Traditionally focused on peacetime emergencies, Haga III, signed in November 2024, builds upon previous agreements by taking into account Russia's war of aggression and evolving hybrid treats. This seeks to strengthen Nordic cooperation through joint planning and exercises alongside information sharing. The agreement also helps to facilitate Nordic civil-military cooperation within NORDEFCO (Nordic Defence Cooperation) and involvement in NATO's Host Nation Support (HNS).

The successes and shortcomings in regional cooperation between the Nordic countries offer valuable lessons when trying to scale up total defence to a wider regional level, encompassing the whole Nordic-Baltic region. At the same time, the focus in specific measures should be on local needs. What works in the northern parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway may not be relevant in mainland Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Generally, joint civil defence efforts in the region should include at least the most important areas for civilian life that would profit from multilateral cooperation under wartime conditions, such as security of supply, medical care capacity, evacuation measures, and critical infrastructure protection. Coordination and cooperation measures in these areas have to be established, exercised and streamlined during peacetime, so that all parties know their role and responsibilities in crisis and wartime.

As the Nordic-Baltic region (re)builds and exercises its total defence model to meet today's security challenges and hybrid threats, the best practices and lessons learned can serve as a blueprint for all NATO allies. ΨE

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Estonia's road to comprehensive security

EOIN MICHEÁL MCNAMARA

Since regaining independence in 1991, Estonia has undergone a rapid and determined transformation, embracing modernization, democracy and western integration. Yet its path to NATO membership and security reform was anything but straightforward, as it was shaped by regional geopolitics, western hesitations, and the lessons of Nordic neighbours.

Social modernization has been unrelenting since Estonia restored its independence in 1991. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Estonia, like many other post-communist aspirants for European Union and NATO membership, was criticized by its western neighbours for following an overly "modernist" security policy outlook. Re-establishing the armed forces and consolidating border controls dominated its early outlook sometimes at the expense of civil defence, crisis management and cooperative security then prioritized in the West's shifting post-Cold War security mindset. This was an era when the western powers, the consent of whom was vital to enable both EU and NATO enlargement, no longer perceived Russia as a threat to European security. "Democratic enlargement" was a slogan synonymous with President Bill Clinton's US foreign policy. However, by the mid-1990s, the wider situation in Europe's east still presented many tricky dilemmas for US strategists.

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Role model

The Baltic states viewed their omission from NATO's 1999 enlargement round with disappointment, even if their inclusion at this time was never raised as a serious policy prospect. Nevertheless, as the geopolitical tide began to turn in their favour, this was also a time when the Baltic states' originally rigid "modernist" outlook on security began to evolve. For Estonia, the account that emerges over the next 30 years is an impressive success story where comprehensive security was established. This is a system allowing a small state with limited resources to make the most of all civilian and military capacities to benefit national defence and resilience. This was hardly Estonia's forte immediately after it regained its independence, but it certainly became one after it had learned some important lessons from others while matching this advice with policies best suiting its specific cultural strengths.

Owing to geography, linguistics and economics, Finland was an important "role model" as Estonia began to design its security policy in the 1990s. Finland had unexpectedly evaded the most oppressive rigours of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, running contrary to the experiences of the Baltic states and Poland. Finland had effectively mobilized its population and utilized smart military tactics to devastate Soviet encroachment during the Winter War from November 1939 until March 1940. The pragmatic peace Helsinki agreed with Moscow soon thereafter saw it cede territory in eastern Karelia and further north along its border with Russia, but it had crucially retained its sovereignty.

Geopolitical constraints imposed a strict neutrality on Finland during the Cold War. Despite this, Helsinki managed to avoid Sovietization, mixing some foreign policy accommodation of Soviet preferences with a strong independent defence capacity. Backed by conscription and its military reserve, Finland's conventional posture numbered 700,000 at its Cold War height. This model was termed "total defence" but is broadened to "comprehensive security" in Finland today. It had many admirers among Estonia's defence leaders in the 1990s and 2000s.

The 1990s were defined by Clinton's "Russia-first" policy aiming to accommodate Moscow's wish to remain an independent great power but with opportunities to partner closely with the West. A preference to avoid provoking Russia created reluctance in the US and Western Europe to provide the Baltic states with military training or arms purchases. A dearth in Tallinn's options for military modernization was even at the origins of the eventual collapse of the Prime Minister Mart Laar-led government that had jubilantly restored Estonian independence. US and European reluctance to sell defence equipment had left purchasing weapons from Israel as a rare option helping Estonia towards its distant aspiration of joining NATO through military compatibility with Western states. However, Laar's

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government was forced to resign in 1994 when some dubious payments were discovered in this transaction.

The same westernizing desire against some stern geopolitical odds is also evident in the turbulent tale of the Estonian government's efforts to find a chief of defence, or CHOD, to support its NATO ambitions during the 1990s. Aiming to dismantle the legacy of Soviet cultural influence on its military, the Estonian-born but retired US Army Colonel, Aleksander Einseln, was approached to assume the CHOD position as one of few Estonians with senior command experience in a western military. Einseln initially declined these advances, but, with the Estonian Defence Forces in desperate need of reform, he eventually accepted the offer in 1993.

The defence force was small, backward and feeble. Einseln's appointment represented an attempt to make progress in western integration. Nevertheless, his presence caused concern in Washington, with US diplomats aiming to pre-empt Russian complaints. The US government contemplated personally censuring Einseln for undertaking this duty, threatening to suspend his military pension and reactivate his US military service so that he could be disciplined or even have his citizenship revoked. The prospect of such punishment was eventually dropped and Einseln continued to lead attempts to reform the Estonian forces until 1995. This was thanks to the intervention made by some US senators, most notably Senator John McCain.

In a low-key manner, Finland stepped up to provide military training, aiming to assist the professionalization of Estonian forces to a level where a dysfunctional military would not be a risk to its reestablished state. Training was funded by Finland's ministry of defence and provided by retired Finnish military officers to active Estonian service personnel at facilities in Finland. This arrangement was formalized into the *Viro-Projekti* (the Estonian project) between 1996 and 2003. Overall, the importance of the *Viro-Projekti* has probably been overlooked in the history of Estonia's defence. This and broader security assistance from Nordic neighbours was a lifeline when additional western support for security modernization was in short supply.

Window of opportunity

Around the mid-1990s, this cautious western emphasis on managing relations with Russia risked leaving the Baltic states as a liability for security in Northern Europe. In Estonia, homicide rates were high, and organized crime was a blight on society. The Nordic states moved into this breach for realist reasons, not wanting to see destabilization spread from a neighbour. However, the Nordic "whole-

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of-society" approach to security proved a good match for long-term Baltic aspirations. Financial assistance and training provided by the Nordic states reaped dividends and improved Baltic capacities in civil defence, emergency response and border protection. The 1990s and early 2000s were high points for Baltic security cooperation, as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania combined their modest resources to demonstrate their suitability for EU and NATO membership. With support from western governments, the Baltic Air Surveillance Network was established. This became a vital enabler for NATO's Baltic Air Policing from 2004 onwards.

A joint Baltic Naval Squadron and a joint Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT) were less successful. While national units from BALTBAT were deployed for different overseas United Nations-mandated peacekeeping missions, it never deployed as a full battalion. However, under Nordic tutelage, BALTBAT was an important receiving point for western-standard training and donated defence equipment, helping to ease the West's geopolitical concerns about providing these resources to the Baltic states.

The Nordic "whole-of-society" approach to security proved a good match for long-term Baltic aspirations to join NATO.

Lennart Meri, president of Estonia from 1992 until 2001, often referred to a limited "window of opportunity" for Estonia to gain NATO membership. This "window" began to open slowly by the late 1990s. Perseverance with the hard political choices determining the Baltic transition to liberal democracy and market economics was now finally receiving serious attention in Brussels and in Washington, further galvanizing the "democratic enlargement" message.

The US-Baltic Charter was agreed in 1998. While not formalizing any security guarantees, the US signalled that it was willing to engage in a closer security partnership with the Baltic states. NATO's Membership Action Plan was first devised at the Alliance's Washington Summit in 1999, offering a roadmap for entry through criteria for political, economic and military reform. With the Baltic three receiving their action plan at the summit, it has been compared to a "final exam" to achieve safeguards from NATO membership.

Combining with strong Baltic domestic performances in meeting the criteria for this "final exam", global geopolitical realignment after the September 11th attacks on the US in 2001 was also briefly but crucially in the Baltic states' favour. A brief rapprochement followed in US-Russia relations. Aiming to make a clean break from Cold War hostility, Washington and Moscow attempted to focus cooperation on combatting transnational terrorism. NATO membership for the Baltic states scheduled for 2004 was confirmed at the NATO Prague Summit in 2002 without too many Russian protests. The flawed rewriting of history where

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NATO enlargement had been an existential threat to Russia was not unveiled to western ears until President Vladimir Putin's infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007.

Fast modernization

In its official security policy documents, Tallinn has subscribed to NATO's broader strategic agenda outlining that threats like global terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and destabilization in neighbourhoods proximate to the Euro-Atlantic area must be addressed. Estonia began contributing to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2002. Estonian forces were deployed alongside those from the US, the United Kingdom and Denmark in Helmand Province after 2006.

Violent Taliban destabilization soon spread to Helmand and Estonia suffered nine soldier fatalities by the mission's end. These troops were serving in an important part of this western mission to prevent Afghanistan falling back to a "haven" for terrorist networks. The overall Afghan operation failed, but participation held some benefits for Estonia's defence development. The experience put its defence forces on a fast modernization track in a "real" combat environment. It improved interoperability with the US, UK and Denmark – all important NATO allies for Tallinn. The return of NATO's deterrence focus to Europe might have been more abrupt than expected, as it happened with Operation Atlantic Resolve immediately in response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. This year coincided with the conclusion of International Security Assistance Force.

Ready to contribute to NATO's expeditionary operations, Estonia remained vigilant about threats emanating from an increasingly authoritarian Russia. The year of Putin's Munich speech, 2007, was also an early landmark in what has today been popularized as Russia's "hybrid warfare". A decision was taken to move a monument commemorating the Red Army in the Second World War, as well as the bodies of fallen soldiers buried underneath, from central Tallinn to a graveyard elsewhere in the city in April 2007. With over 20 per cent of Estonia's population classified as ethnically Russian, moving this Bronze soldier monument triggered several nights of rioting focused on that community. Tensions were stoked by Russian media propaganda and some brazenly subversive diplomatic interventions from Moscow. Estonia suffered a significant cyber-attack

In 2007 Estonia suffered a significant cyber-attack on its e-governance infrastructure, a landmark in modern warfare.

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on its e-governance infrastructure soon afterwards, a landmark in modern warfare sometimes referred to as "Web War One".

Russia's English-language propaganda outlet, *Russia Today*, was still in its infancy, but its platforms carried regular content distorting Estonian authorities as sympathizing with Nazis. Only three years after Estonia's accession to the EU, this was a Russian effort to play "divide and conquer" within the bloc, aiming to discredit and marginalize Estonia in the eyes of its new partners. Estonia prioritizes a technology-driven state and economy. This was key to its departure from its poverty during early re-independence. Estonian policymakers were more astute than others in understanding that cybersecurity would become a prominent 21st-century battleground involving non-state actors and even great power geopolitics. Plans for the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn were already afoot before the 2007 attack. This is where Estonia turned an important corner to being a producer of security and not just a consumer. An early arrival to this policy sphere, the astute knowledge and expertise held by Estonia's government has boosted NATO's readiness against evolving cyber threats, contributing to stability in the global cyber domain.

Developing national defence

Russia's military aggression in Georgia in 2008 is an understated landmark in Estonian defence transformation. As a very small state that must make the best of limited resources, Estonian policymakers had grappled with the dilemma to retain conscription for its reserve-based defence system or focus more investment on smaller but specialized and professionalized military forces to support NATO's collective defence.

Estonia wasted little time in strengthening its readiness after Russia's aggression in Crimea in 2014.

Events in Georgia settled this argument. Estonia's conscription system was revitalized. Remnants of Soviet military culture remained soon after independence where harsh and unfair treatment was rampant and where aimless but punishing exercises were common for conscripts. Military service was perceived as a waste of time by many. Estonia's military leaders had gradually reversed these impressions, but its conscription-based defence system has been strengthened at speed since 2008. Participation, motivation and morale supporting national defence have risen. In peacetime, Estonia's standing military numbers 7,7000 personnel with 3,500 being conscripts. This number can swell quickly to 43,000 in a crisis when rapid response units from the reserve are mo-

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bilized. Estonia's voluntary Defence League (*Kaitseliit*) has 18,000 members. This force structure combining active-service personnel, conscripts and reservists is integrated with NATO's multinational Forward Land Forces (FLF).

Estonia wasted little time in strengthening its readiness after Russia's aggression in Crimea in 2014, with major exercises, either *Siil* (Hedgehog) and *Kevadtorm* (Spring Storm), taking place each spring since 2015. With the latest edition in May 2025, *Siil* occurs every three to four years to test Estonia's rapid response mobilization and usually consists of around 16,000 personnel. *Kevadtorm* takes place every spring when *Siil* is not staged and focuses on both tactical manoeuvres and Estonia's interoperability with NATO forces. *Kevadtorm* also serves as an important passing out exercise for conscripts. *Siil* 2025 included a strong focus on crisis protection for Estonia's civilian population. Preparations for civilian evacuation, responses to cyber attacks on civilian infrastructure and medical support for evacuating civilians were practiced.

Concerns regarding the Russian-speaking community

The status of Estonia's Russian-speaking minorities receives consistently high levels of global media attention. A rudimentary narrative sometimes discusses these populations as a "fifth column" that might be mobilized by Kremlin propaganda against Estonian national interests. Such outlooks usually come with significant flaws.

Estonia's Russian-speaking populations are far from a uniform group. Some are fully bilingual Estonian citizens. Conversely, others, often from older generations, are less integrated. Economic prospects are substantially better in Estonia when compared to the directly bordering western regions of Russia. Nevertheless, some problems with integration remain. According to 2024 statistics, approximately 60,000 Estonian residents were non-citizens, numbering 4.5 per cent of the population.

Colloquially referred to as "grey passport holders", these residents moved to Estonia during the Soviet occupation but have not yet acquired Estonian citizenship. Moreover, approximately 80,000 Russian citizens reside permanently in Estonia. Concerned about the risk that these populations could potentially pose in the future, Estonia's constitution was amended in 2025 to remove the right of non-EU citizens residing in the country from voting in local elections, with "grey passport holders" receiving a grace period until October 2025.

The vote in the *Riigikogu*, Estonia's parliament, consisted of 93 in favour, seven against and one abstention, with many proponents of this change arguing that those wishing to vote in Estonian elections retain the opportunity to apply for Estonian citizenship. While many Russian speakers in Estonia might still follow Russia's

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propaganda through media consumption, most see improved economic and social benefits from living in Estonia. Some inter-community tensions are set to rumble on. This must be addressed as a concern even if it is not the severe risk that some foreign commentators exaggerate it to be.

Overall, the accomplishment of Estonia's sophisticated and specialized comprehensive security system reformed from the dire post-Soviet circumstances left immediately after 1991 impressively underscores its national resilience. Nevertheless, challenges remain, with social cohesion relating to Estonia's Russian-speaking minority a high priority.

This research is part of the Reignite Multilateralism via Technology (REMIT) project, funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 101094228.

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Is Latvia ready for war?

NASTA ZAKHAREVICH

Riga has found itself at the centre of questions concerning NATO defence for many years. However, in recent years, these issues have increasingly moved beyond the abstract. Latvia must now prepare itself for a potential confrontation with Russian aggression while also ensuring the effectiveness of long-term alliance commitments.

On January 13th, as dusk settled over Riga, Artur Savelyev, an employee at Riga Airport, glanced out the window and caught sight of a drone in flight. He promptly contacted security, who quickly discovered it was neither an airport drone, nor was there any record of its ownership. What was even more concerning was that the airport radar had failed to detect it. A few hours later, as state police officers patrolled the airport grounds, more drones appeared – again slipping past the radar. According to the director of the Civil Aviation Agency, this radar is actually not designed to identify drones. Months later, it is still unknown whether the state police found the drone operators.

Riga Airport lies just under 300 kilometres from the Russian border and recent years have brought a string of sabotage incidents across the country. In some of them Russian traces are found or Russian special services are suspected. The arson attack against the Museum of Occupation in Riga; the desecration of a monument in Džūkste; disruptions in the GPS system; Russian drones flying into Latvia; cyberattacks on business; other arson attempts – all serve as reminders of an environment where tension lingers. According to Latvian counterintelligence, the risks are only growing every year. It assumes that in 2025 we should not expect

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an attack by Russia on NATO countries, because its military is focused on the war against Ukraine. However, if that conflict freezes and NATO does not rearm, then an attack is quite possible in the next five years. Is Latvia ready for such a scenario?

Dragon's teeth and 303 million euros

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, interest in Latvia's *Zemessardze*, the national guard, sharply increased. This institution, an echo of Latvia's 20th-century volunteer traditions, allows citizens to continue working their jobs while attending military training in their free time. In 2022 three times more people joined the *Zemessardze* than in the previous year. The volunteers are diverse: not all of them are in good physical shape and are ready to literally fight in the trenches – some can do various administrative work, without which the direct fighting part of the army cannot function.

The form and function of Latvia's preparations have become a focal point for security thinkers. Retired General Karlis Kreslinsh is convinced that the emphasis should not be on the trenches and not on preparing for a war like the one we see in Ukraine – with bombings and missile attacks. According to him, Latvia needs to prepare itself for a war not of the 20th, but of the 21st century, where cyberattacks are performed, and drones and robotic systems are used. This would be a conflict where the enemy does not hit with missiles but makes a seemingly peaceful life chaotic and unbearable.

Latvia's leadership, while acknowledging these new risks, is primarily engaged in the physical fortification of the country's borders. In spring 2024 the Cabinet of Ministers set the country on a path to physically reinforce its eastern frontier. In Daugavpils, a city with its own complex historical links to Russia, a factory began turning out 75 reinforced concrete anti-tank "dragon's teeth" every day, with a goal of producing 4,500 in total. In constructing these lines, Latvia has joined the other Baltic states in a visible show of resolve, reminiscent of the concrete barriers etched into European landscapes during the 20th century's great wars. In total, the adopted anti-mobility plan envisages the allocation of up to 303 million euros over the course of five years.

This policy converges with other projects: the ministry of defence is stockpiling not only dragon's teeth and roadblocks in the border zone, but also anti-tank "hedgehogs", barbed wire, concrete blocks and baskets for Hesco bastions. This fortification should become part of the future Baltic defence line. It should have strongholds for the army with closed firing points, as well as obstacles for the enemy, anti-tank ditches, mines and ammunition depots. Michael DiChianna, a fel-

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Photo: Ajstudio Photography / Shutterstock

A military parade during Independence Day of Latvia in Riga.

low at the Institute of World Policy, contextualizes this layered approach: "Defence is now the major advantage. With modern technologies, the battlefield is visible from above all the time. Fortifications help resist and delay."

Yet these physical measures prompt a national debate. In an age marked by hybrid warfare, drone swarms, cyberattacks, and the distortion of daily life, is reliance on battlements – and more divisively, anti-personnel mines – the optimal strategy? The answer, in practice, seems ambivalent: both modernization and the reinforcement of old tactics proceed in parallel. This complexity only deepened recently, when parliament made a final decision to withdraw from the Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel mines. The head of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee, Inara Murniece, said that this decision was based on the opinion of military experts from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland and Finland, who believe that the possibility of using anti-personnel mines will additionally protect the security of Latvia and those living in the east of the country.

"Of course, the humanitarian aspect is also taken into account. If mines are installed, they will be very strictly guarded, these places will be marked, and everything will be done to prevent people from accidentally ending up in these minefields. By

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withdrawing from the convention, we are very clearly telling the potential aggressor – Latvia will defend itself," she added.

This decision sparked heated debate. Fourteen politicians from the opposition parties "Stability!" and "Latvia First" voted against Riga's withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention. Both of these parties are often accused of lobbying for Russian interests in Latvia. In total, 66 other deputies, including those from the Green Party, voted in favour of using anti-personnel mines again. The international response was unequivocal. Maja Brehm, a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross, expressed concern about the decision: "The vast majority of victims, more than 80 per cent of those injured or killed by anti-personnel mines, are civilians. People who are not involved in hostilities. Mines react to anyone who steps on them. Using anti-personnel mines is a destructive choice. Even if they are initially laid only on the front line, over time the mines can move, for example due to flooding. And the front line can shift too."

Latvia thus finds itself at the intersection of security necessity and its humanitarian commitments – mirroring the dilemmas that faced other NATO frontiers in past decades.

Emergency suitcase and shelters

While military planners build new lines in the forests and fields, public campaigns focus on civilian resilience. Shortly after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the "72 hours" campaign was launched in Latvia, with officials, NGOs and the media urging residents to be ready for a crisis by packing an emergency suitcase. Recommendations were familiar: stock up on drinking water; know local sources; and purchase purification tablets, non-perishable food, medicines, disinfectants, bandages, scissors, flashlights and other essentials. The idea behind the campaign is to equip people to survive the first three days of a major emergency without outside help, the window officials need to make further recommendations based on reality.

> While evacuation plans exist for Riga, their details are naturally confidential.

Such preparedness reflects both realism and the limited promise of rapid state intervention. In 2023 the state fire and rescue service surveyed public attitudes toward possible evacuation. Forty-seven per cent of respondents said they planned to go to relatives or friends, while 31 per cent said they were ready to use the housing offered to them by the local government. At the same time, five per cent planned to stay at home, four per cent would move to a hotel, and another 13 per cent said

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that other accommodation options would be available to them. Rescuers are convinced that this survey should help local authorities understand what residents plan to do in the event of a crisis and what resources the state should best use so that its proposals coincide with what citizens are ready for.

Beyond individual plans, structural vulnerabilities remain glaring. In autumn 2024, evacuation drills took place in Riga, with volunteers bussed from two city districts across the Daugava river to a new accommodation site. While evacuation plans exist for Riga, their details are naturally confidential. However, Latvia's shelter infrastructure is woefully inadequate. Riga has shelters for just over 200,000 people, leaving over 450,000 with nowhere to go.

This stark shortfall is not accidental. Latvia's situation is the result of a 2008 decision to abandon and liquidate many shelters. The ministry of internal affairs claims that they were not created for the general public: "They were not created so that the public, ordinary people could save themselves. The main target is the army, the elite, it was not for the public," said the minister's adviser Linda Curika.

However, in 2022, when Russia began a full-scale war against Ukraine, it was even worse. At that time, the representative of the Riga municipal police Toms Sadovskis said that there was not a single functioning bomb shelter in the city. The remaining historical shelters were mostly resold into private ownership and used as warehouses. This year, seven million euros have been allocated for equipping shelters in Riga. It is expected that this money will be enough to equip about 150 shelters in the city in the coming years.

Such figures, in a capital of nearly 650,000, illustrate the profound challenge Latvia faces in translating lessons from Ukraine into viable urban protections. Even as new funds are mobilized, experts point out that full coverage remains a distant prospect.

The government is not trusted

Physical preparedness is only effective with public engagement and trust. A recent survey commissioned by the state chancellery showed that 74.9 per cent of Latvians believe that the country is in a serious crisis. However, only 16 per cent agreed with the statement "I believe that the government makes the right decisions in crisis situations." In the previous similar survey, this figure was 28.3 per cent. The government is currently trusted by 25 per cent of respondents, parliament by 21.7, the president by 58.2, and the police by 62.2.

The sources of this scepticism are many. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, inflation in Latvia spiked to 17.3 per cent in 2022, well above the 3.3 per cent reg-

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istered in 2021. Any confidence gained in 2024 is offset by lingering anxieties over economic resilience. The same survey, conducted by order of the state chancellery, showed that 41 per cent of respondents feel a threat to themselves while living in Latvia, and 53 per cent feel a threat to the country. This is unusual for Latvia, but the questions of people identifying themselves as Latvians by nationality were practically no different from those who called themselves Russian. When specifying what kind of personal threats people feel, more than 70 per cent answered that they are talking about economic problems. More than 55 per cent said political threats, while 46.1 per cent said threats to direct security. The same number of respondents are afraid of environmental threats.

Civic trust in government and elites, it turns out, is not a foregone conclusion in Latvia's liberal democracy. A separate survey by the Latvian Transatlantic Organization (LATO) found rising pessimism, especially among Russian speakers. Only 30 per cent of respondents said that they are ready to cooperate with the government in the event of a crisis, while 70 per cent are ready to cooperate at the community level. Incidentally, in other Baltic countries, local residents trust the authorities much more. According to LATO Secretary General Sigita Struberga, there is not much trust at the interpersonal level in Latvia either, but this is not the government's fault: "The reasons for this are deeper, they are connected both with our history and the war in Ukraine. Mistrust of those who have different political views, nationality or religion from yours is constantly growing in our society."

The dynamic between state and society in Latvia complicates defence. Resilience in the Baltics, as recent history shows, cannot be engineered solely through legislation or infrastructure. It is built, or undermined, through daily interactions between communities, institutions and political leaders.

Will the US help?

Meanwhile, Latvia's national security rests heavily on international alliances – alliances unsettled by political turbulence in Washington. The results of the US presidential election and the decisions of the Donald Trump administration are dramatically and unexpectedly changing many structures around the world. Latvia, located next to Russia and with a population of less than two million, may find itself in a particularly vulnerable position. However, President Rinkevich is convinced that "The end of the world has not come, a new light has not risen, and NATO is not dead."

Foreign Minister Baiba Brazhe recently stated that every resident of Latvia should take care of their resilience, critical thinking and the development of new

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skills, noting that the foreign ministry is working to expand the presence of NATO allies in Latvia. Currently, Canada leads the international NATO contingent in the country. Allied guarantees have, in recent years, come into sharper focus. In late March, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio reaffirmed Washington's commitment to ensuring the security of the Baltic states and welcomed the increase in defence spending in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. A month later, Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth said that the guarantees are changing: "The time of the United States to be a sole guarantor of European security has passed."

There is, consequently, growing US pressure for European NATO partners to increase defence spending to at least five per cent of GDP. In 2025 Latvia will spend 3.45 per cent of GDP, and in 2026 it will increase the military budget to four per cent. According to Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina, in the following years, Riga plans to increase this budget to five per cent of GDP.

These shifts raise new anxieties among officials and the broader elite. Latvian politicians are cautiously optimistic about the new challenges associated with Trump's policies. In general, US allies under the new administration are increasingly doubting whether they should trust the old agreements. The most important reasons for these doubts were the White House's unclear positions on support for Ukraine and the organization of peace negotiations, as well as the trade war declared by Trump on the vast majority of countries, including uninhabited islands where only penguins and seals live.

Beyond strategic reassurance, the new economic measures by Washington carry concrete risks for Latvia – a small, open economy deeply tied to transatlantic commerce. According to current estimates, if a 20 per cent import tariff is applied to Latvia, it could lead to a decrease in GDP by 0.5 to one per cent. According to Uldis Rutkaste, a representative of the Bank of Latvia, the country's exports to the US make up slightly less than four per cent of total exports. However, the tariff will affect more than just this volume of goods and services. The fact is that Latvia exports raw materials to other countries in the EU, which in turn sell their own products to the US. Thus, the Latvian economy could face a double blow – both in direct exports and in exports to EU countries. The question of whether Latvia should count on military support from the US in such circumstances if it has to repel Russian attacks remains open. EE

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Latvia's path to becoming Europe's drone powerhouse

MACIEJ MAKULSKI

Motivation remains high in Latvia to continue efforts to aid Ukraine, with the country's small size encouraging specialization. This is best seen in the recently announced Drone Coalition, which will see Riga lead allied efforts to deliver much-needed unmanned systems to Kyiv.

The Baltic states have been at the forefront of supporting Ukraine since the onset of the Russian invasion. Beyond financial aid to the Ukrainian military, these nations are striving to create innovative solutions, drawing from their experiences as small economies that must seek niches and specializations. They are now finding ways to amplify their impact despite relatively limited resources compared to larger countries. In this context, Estonia initiated the IT Coalition, leveraging its strengths in new technologies and digitization. At the same time, Lithuania, together with Iceland, leads the Demining Capability Coalition. Latvia's unique contribution is the establishment and co-leadership (with the United Kingdom) of the Drone Coalition, aimed at supporting this increasingly significant sector of the defence industry.

On May 28th in Riga, the Latvian Prime Minister Evika Siliņa and Minister of Defence Andris Sprūds inaugurated the Drone Summit – an international conference that brought together over 1,000 participants and approximately 100 companies from dozens of countries. The conference served as a platform for knowledge exchange among experts, policymakers, business representatives and academics,

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providing an opportunity to summarize the achievements of the Drone Coalition to date.

Initiation

On February 14th 2024, during a meeting within the Ramstein format, an alliance of 50+ countries aimed at assisting Ukraine's defence, Latvia and the United Kingdom initiated the formation of the Drone Coalition. Throughout the course of a year, additional countries joined: Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Poland and Ukraine. In total, the coalition is made up of 18 countries. It remains open to new members who may join at any time. The goals of this new initiative were defined as ensuring a stable supply of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Ukraine that meet battlefield requirements; supporting drone production in the West; and enhancing capabilities in this area.

However, during the Drone Summit in Riga, it was repeatedly emphasized that the coalition also serves as a platform for knowledge and experience sharing, and for establishing contacts (including business links as the conference was accompanied by equipment exhibitions) that will help western countries develop their own unmanned systems sectors and counter-drone systems.

In January 2025 the Drone Coalition announced that intends to supply Ukraine with 30,000 drones this year.

The initiative does not impose specific reporting requirements on participants regarding activities within the coalition. When it comes to the total number of drones delivered to Ukraine under the coalition, available data are limited. Nevertheless, individual announcements and information from member states provide a general insight into the scale of each country's involvement. During the conference in Riga, Sprūds stated that coalition member states are reluctant to share information about the number of drones supplied to Ukraine. However, it is estimated that approximately 100,000 such devices may have been delivered. Plans are in place to deliver one million FPV (first-person view) drones to Ukraine, the most commonly used now in combat.

In this context, Latvia stands out for its transparency, publishing data on its achievements within the coalition on the official website of the ministry of defence and in ministerial communications. The Latvian government plans to allocate ten million euros annually to the coalition. However, in the first year of the coalition's operation, this amount was doubled. A similar sum is planned for 2025. Accord-

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ing to the defence ministry, Latvia delivered 5,000 drones to Ukraine in 2024. In January 2025, it was announced that the coalition intends to supply Ukraine with 30,000 drones, 12,000 of which will be made in Latvia. The country's support is valued at 17 million euros. Overall, these drones are expected to reach Ukraine in the first half of the year.

Sprūds believes that the Drone Coalition is continuously evolving and is one of the most dynamic formats supporting Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression: "The international Drone Coalition is becoming increasingly stronger, we will be able to deliver more drones to Ukraine while simultaneously strengthening the defence industries of Latvia, the EU, and NATO countries." Evidence of the coalition's growth includes interest in joining from additional countries. Belgium (present at the Drone Summit) and Turkey are expected to become members soon, bringing the coalition's total to 20 countries.

Division of responsibilities

While the overall coordination of the Drone Coalition remains a shared responsibility between Latvia and the United Kingdom, each country has taken on distinct roles to ensure the coalition's effective functioning and the delivery of results for Ukraine. Latvia oversees the day-to-day management of the coalition's activities and contributes significantly through direct drone deliveries, training ranges for testing, and facilitating local production capabilities. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom plays a key role in driving procurement and operational frameworks essential for scaling up support to Ukraine.

As part of its responsibilities, the UK launched an industry competition on behalf of the Drone Coalition to develop and procure drones. The first competition attracted 265 bids from various manufacturers, demonstrating strong interest. Two Latvian manufacturers were among the winners of the competition. Following this successful tender, at least three more were organized – two in 2024 and another in 2025. Ukrainian manufacturers were allowed to participate in subsequent tenders. Each tender focused on specific criteria. For instance, one targeted the production of large FPV drones, while another focused on tactical-level multirotor reconnaissance drones encompassing all ground elements. In addition, the UK has spearheaded the establishment of the Drone Coalition Common Fund, a mechanism designed to enable the joint pro-

The overall coordination of the Drone Coalition remains a shared responsibility between Latvia and the United Kingdom.

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curement of drones for Ukraine. This fund aims to ensure the efficient and timely delivery of equipment while harnessing industrial capacities across coalition member states. Initially, the Netherlands, the UK, Latvia, New Zealand and Sweden pledged over 45 million euros to the Common Fund, with further contributions expected. On the occasion of the first anniversary of the Drone Coalition, it was announced that the Fund had allocated 80 million euros.

Additionally, on July 10th 2024, the British Defence Secretary John Healey joined coalition partners in signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that defines the coalition's core activities, governance structures and procurement mechanisms. This MoU formalizes the commitment of coalition members to streamline processes and increase the scale of drone support to Ukraine.

Latvia – Europe's drone leader?

Latvia's activities within the Drone Coalition are not the extent of its efforts in this sector. During the Drone Summit, Sprūds confirmed the establishment of a Competence Centre for Autonomous Systems, commonly referred to as the Drone Competence Centre, which is set to open this autumn: "Strengthening the 'drone army' and enhancing drone capabilities within the national armed forces is one of

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the top priorities for Latvia's defence sector," Sprūds emphasized. The centre aims to promote the wider integration of unmanned systems in Latvia's defence strategy, foster domestic drone production, stimulate technological innovation, and deepen international partnerships.

The Drone Competence Centre is envisioned as a platform that bridges the operational needs of the armed forces with industry capabilities and international supply chains. Notably, its mandate extends across the entire spectrum of unmanned systems – encompassing air, land and maritime drones, as well as various counter-drone solutions. The long-term ambition is for the Drone Competence Centre to evolve into an internationally recognized, European-level institution, attracting experts, funding and partnerships from across the continent. Modris Kairišs, Commander of the Air Force Training Centre, was announced as the head of the newly established centre.

Despite progress Europe and Ukraine lag behind Russia technologically regarding drone development and production.

Attending an event like the Drone Summit, one might get the impression that both the EU and Ukraine are gaining an advantage over Russia, and the general situation in this sector appears good or even very good. While there are assurances that greater effort and investment are needed, it is important to acknowledge statements and observations that provide a more comprehensive picture.

Ukraine's deputy minister of defence, Valerii Churkin, pointed out that perceptions pointing to Kyiv winning the drone war are "only partially true". Despite progress made in this field (with allies' support), the deputy minister stated that "Ukraine lags behind Russia technologically regarding drone development and production." The challenges are multifaceted in this area. For instance, Ukraine depends on component supplies from other countries and will require significant time to achieve independence in this sector.

Another issue is the scale of needs. "Ukrainians are very, very smart engineers; their soldiers are resourceful and innovative, but the scale just isn't there," Jonathan Lippert, the president of Defense Tech for Ukraine, told me at the Drone Summit. "Western governments are sending a lot of money to Ukraine, even the spending for just 155mm artillery shells costs a fortune. With the scale of this war, supplying everything costs huge amounts of money, so sometimes there's just not enough left over to fund innovation at the level we'd expect. There are also a lot of non-Ukrainians innovating in Ukraine. There's a whole ecosystem of people trying to help Ukraine, and people in Ukraine are developing new technologies. I'm sure there are improvements that can be made. But they're developing a robust ecosystem of incubators that's evolving to support this process, and it's getting better."

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Logic of war or peace

Discrepancies persist regarding the perception of threats among various Western European countries. Belgium's minister of defence, Theo Francken, stated during the Drone Summit that in Belgian society "there is no sense of urgency regarding the war and there is still hesitancy to spend two per cent of GDP for defence."

Is the Drone Coalition doing enough to support Ukraine? It makes little sense to forcibly argue that it is, especially when representatives of member states acknowledge that the needs are significantly greater than what the coalition has delivered so far. However, its significance extends beyond merely providing equipment (which is crucial). The coalition serves as an additional means of pressuring national, EU and international structures to improve the situation concerning procedures, procurement issues and investment efforts. Experiences and conclusions from such initiatives should translate into actions in other areas and collectively change the approach of EU and NATO members.

The knowledge and experience flowing from the Ukrainians to EU member states and the western industrial sector are also of immense value. During the Drone Summit, the Dutch defence minister, Ruben Brekelmans, remarked that "we are currently neither in a wartime nor a peacetime logic," while Ukraine's deputy prime minister emphasized that what is needed is a "full-time-war logic". Which of these logics ultimately prevails will be as decisive for Ukraine's victory as progress in developing new drone technologies. EE

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Breaking ranks or building resilience?

The role of women in the Latvian and Estonian armed forces

SIGITA STRUBERGA

The steps taken by both Estonia and Latvia demonstrate a strong commitment not only to implementing comprehensive defence, but also embedding robust gender equality policies as an essential component for their armed forces. While notable progress has been made, especially in Latvia, where female participation rates are among the highest in NATO, persistent structural gaps remain, particularly in leadership representation, gender-sensitive planning, and strategic vision.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and its continued hybrid operations have fundamentally reshaped the security environment in Europe, particularly for the Baltic states. The region now finds itself on the front line of a broader confrontation between authoritarian aggression and democratic resilience. This shift has forced both NATO and the Baltic nations to reassess their strategic posture and reinforce defence preparedness across all domains. NATO has responded by strengthening its Eastern Flank, enhancing forward defence and incorporating hybrid threat response into its overall strategic planning. In parallel, the Baltic states are intensifying their national efforts, treating the situation as an ongoing hybrid conflict. While

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NATO membership remains the cornerstone of their defence, ensuring collective protection from the very first centimetre, all three countries are implementing whole-of-society, or total defence, approaches. These efforts include expanding the manpower and combat readiness of their armed forces. This means also promoting the broader inclusion of women across all security and defence sectors.

Intensifying defence

Latvia's national armed forces consist of three main components: the regular forces, the National Guard (*Zemessardze*) and the reserve. Together, they form a militarily organized, trained, and armed segment of society tasked with the defence of the state. As of 2024, Latvia has approximately 7,870 professional service soldiers and 10,000 active members of the National Guard. In addition, the country maintains a reserve force of around 38,000 individuals, made up of 12,000 officially designated reserve soldiers and 26,000 trained reservists, who completed compulsory military service before its suspension at the end of 2006.

This tripartite structure ensures both operational readiness and the capacity to scale up defence in times of crisis. Latvia reinstated mandatory military service in 2023 as part of broader efforts to modernize its armed forces. Men aged 18 to 27 must serve 11 months or join the reserve for five years, while women may participate voluntarily. The national armed forces development plan for 2025–2036 sets a long-term vision for adapting Latvia's defence capabilities to current and future threats. A central objective is expanding the force to 61,000 personnel, including 31,000 active-duty troops and a 30,000-strong general readiness reserve for crisis response.

The Estonian Defence Forces are structured according to the principle of a reserve force, which means that the main part of the defence forces of the state are units in the reserve. In total, the Estonian Defence Forces are made up of about 230,000 persons who are enrolled in the mobilization register. The current system allows the state to bring the total to 43,000 uniformed individuals in case of crisis. More than 4,000 persons are in permanent readiness. This is complemented by the Estonian Defence League, which is a voluntary, military-structured national defence organization under the ministry of defence. Armed and engaged in military training, it is designed to strengthen Estonia's readiness to defend its independence and constitutional order, relying on citizens' free will and initiative. Founded as a self-defence force, the Estonian Defence League operates as a public legal entity governed by the Estonian Defence League Act. Today, it includes around 18,000 members, and together with its affiliated organizations – the Women's Voluntary

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Defence Organization (*Naiskodukaitse*), Young Eagles (*Noored Kotkad*), and Home Daughters (*Kodutütred*) – it mobilizes over 29,000 active volunteers.

Estonia maintains a constitutional obligation for all physically and mentally fit male citizens to serve in the defence forces. As for 2024, 3,500 conscripts served in the service. Conscription lasts eight or 11 months, depending on the role and training assigned and focuses on preparing conscripts to serve as specialists in wartime units. The system operates on a territorial basis – men from the same region serve together, forming reserve units led by commanders trained alongside them. After completing their service, reservists are regularly called up for training to maintain readiness and adapt to new equipment and procedures.

Estonia is considering extending compulsory military service to up to two years and introducing mandatory service for women to address demographic challenges and strengthen force readiness. Additionally, plans are being discussed to develop a trained civil defence reserve, aiming to better integrate civilian crisis response into national defence.

As Latvia and Estonia intensify defence reforms – scaling up conscription, expanding reserves, and strengthening force structures – they face a parallel imperative: ensuring that this transformation reflects the full potential of society. While efforts to bolster conventional capabilities are advancing rapidly in response to Russia's aggression, the integration of women into the armed forces remains uneven and underdeveloped. Despite rhetorical commitments to gender inclusion, practical implementation often lags behind. In the context of growing security demands, demographic pressures, and the shift towards whole-of-society defence models, the question of women's participation is both timely and strategic. The following sections explores how Latvia and Estonia are addressing this challenge, where progress has been made, and where gaps persist.

Advancing gender inclusion in Baltic defence

In Latvia, women's integration into the armed forces represents both a statistical achievement and an ongoing structural challenge. As of 2024, according to data from the ministry of defence, women made up approximately 18 per cent of Latvia's national armed forces personnel with around 16.5 per cent in professional service and 20.5 per cent in the national guards system. This share places Latvia among the leading NATO members in terms of female representation in the military, and well above the Alliance average of around 12 per cent. However, when this headline number is unpacked, deeper issues of operational integration, policy coherence, and institutional support come into focus.

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Women serve across various branches of the Latvian military. Female participation in international missions such as NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and EU or UN peacekeeping operations has been consistent, and women have risen to hold some prominent positions. However, female representation in top military leadership remains disproportionately low and there is limited data on retention, promotion rates or the share of women in strategic planning roles. While the Latvian ministry of defence supports the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda, gender mainstreaming remains largely confined to formal statements and fragmented initiatives.

The reintroduction of the Latvian state defence service in 2023 was a critical moment for gender inclusion.

The reintroduction of the state defence service in 2023 – a major policy shift intended to strengthen national resilience and conventional force capacity – was a critical moment for gender inclusion. However, Latvia chose not to include women in this renewed conscription framework. This decision has implications beyond personnel numbers. By keeping female participation voluntary, Latvia effectively upholds a gender-segregated model of national defence that clashes with the "whole-of-society" approach promoted in its strategic documents. Positive change can be seen in the fact that the minister of defence, Andris Sprūds, has announced his political will and strong commitment to support positive change and to push for female inclusion in compulsory military service by 2028.

From a cultural standpoint surveys suggest that approaches based in traditional gender roles persist in societal attitudes towards the inclusion of women in compulsory military service and the national armed forces in general, while a more positive attitude among Latvians is slowly but steadily increasing. However, informal institutional cultures, particularly within command structures, continue to reflect gendered stereotypes. Female soldiers report challenges ranging from career stagnation and inadequate access to leadership roles, to unequal treatment in deployment assignments and training opportunities. Furthermore, there is no mandatory gender training across all ranks, and policies addressing sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination remain insufficiently implemented. The defence ministry has designated gender advisor roles and developed basic gender equality strategies, but these often lack enforcement mechanisms and are not tied to performance indicators or budgeting priorities.

The underutilization of women's potential also has broader strategic implications. Latvia's adoption of a total defence model requires the mobilization of all societal capabilities – human, institutional and civic. Excluding women from full participation undercuts the very logic of resilience-building and undermines the credibility

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of Latvia's international commitments under the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda and EU gender equality frameworks. Moreover, with a shrinking conscription-age population and ambitious force expansion targets, projected to reach 61,000 personnel by 2036, Latvia cannot afford to neglect half of its population.

Estonia focuses on voluntary service

Estonia has made notable progress in integrating women into its national defence structures, but the key challenges persist not only in increasing the proportion of women in armed forces, but also in transforming numerical inclusion into meaningful participation. As of 2024 women constituted approximately eight per cent of the professional personnel in the Estonian Defence Forces.

A key platform for female military engagement is the Women's Voluntary Defence Organization (*Naiskodukaitse*), an affiliated women's corps that includes nearly 4,000 active members. Operating across 15 districts alongside the Estonian Defence League, *Naiskodukaitse* equips women with skills in leadership, civil defence and emergency preparedness. As a result, it has become a vital element in Estonia's whole-of-society defence strategy. Yet, participation through this volunteer organization does not translate into equivalent representation or influence within formal military hierarchies.

In terms of high-level commitments, Estonia is among the leading countries in the region in aligning with the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda. It has adopted multiple national action plans with the most recent (2023–27) focusing on cross-sectoral coordination, data collection, and international cooperation. Nevertheless, implementation at the institutional level remains uneven. Gender perspectives are inconsistently integrated into military education, strategic planning, or crisis management exercises. While a gender advisor role has been designated and gender training modules introduced in the Baltic Defence College and other institutions, there is no systematic requirement for commanders and planners to incorporate gender analyses into operational planning or risk assessment.

Estonia is among the leading countries in the region in aligning with the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Estonia's conscription model – universal for men but voluntary for women – also creates a structural disparity in defence obligations. While female conscripts have the same training and deployment opportunities as their male counterparts, their participation remains low and highly selective. Defence policy debates have increasingly acknowledged this imbalance, and there is an ongoing discussion

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about introducing gender-neutral conscription, particularly in light of demographic trends and growing force requirements. However, no legislative steps have yet been taken to mandate equal conscription obligations, and public discourse on the matter remains cautious.

The retention and promotion of women in the Estonian Defence Forces also reflect underlying institutional barriers. Despite strong political backing for gender equality from the ministry of defence, women remain underrepresented in command positions and are disproportionately concentrated in support rather than combat roles. Moreover, while Estonia has a legal framework for addressing gender-based discrimination and harassment, enforcement and reporting mechanisms remain weak. The current approach relies heavily on individual initiative rather than systemic safeguards, and there is little gender-disaggregated data published on career progression or workplace climate within the forces.

Similarly to Latvia, from a strategic perspective, Estonia's emphasis on total defence and resilience offers a natural pathway for more integrated gender inclusion. The logic of whole-of-society defence, especially under conditions of hybrid warfare, requires leveraging the full potential of the population, something that cannot be achieved without institutionalizing gender equality across the military and civilian defence structures. The COVID-19 pandemic and regional crisis response activities demonstrated that women are not only willing but capable of contributing significantly to national defence across multiple domains.

Window of opportunity

The steps taken by both Estonia and Latvia demonstrate a strong commitment not only to implementing a comprehensive defence – or the so-called whole-of-society – approach, but also to embedding robust gender equality policies as an essential component for the effective implementation of resilient, inclusive and operationally capable armed forces. While notable progress has been made, especially in Latvia, where female participation rates are among the highest in NATO, persistent structural gaps remain, particularly in leadership representation, gender-sensitive planning, and strategic vision. Due to the limited resources and lack of previous experience, as well as other political and social factors, there are several steps to be taken to have significant further progress. The inclusion of women in the armed forces of Latvia and Estonia must evolve from fragmented efforts into fully integrated, institutionalized policy frameworks.

Both countries now face a critical window of opportunity. As they scale up force structures, modernize capabilities, and embrace whole-of-society defence

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approaches, embedding gender perspectives at every level of military development is both timely and necessary. This means moving beyond numbers to address systemic issues. These steps may include, but are not limited to, the creation of relevant vocabulary, transparent promotion pathways, integrating gender into operational planning, and military education.

Future success also hinges on stronger regional coordination in data and research- based policies and sustained political leadership. Baltic-level cooperation, targeted recruitment and training in emerging security sectors, and meaningful engagement with civil society can help translate stated ambitions into measurable, meaningful outcomes. Ultimately, ensuring that women are not only present but fully empowered in the military strengthens operational effectiveness, democratic legitimacy, and national resilience. Gender inclusion is not some kind of secondary consideration; it is a strategic imperative.

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GDAŃSK

GDAŃSK AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MEMORY

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

In Gdańsk, memory is not a passive act of remembrance, but a call to action. As the city where the first shots of the Second World War were fired and where the Solidarity movement emerged decades later, Gdańsk embodies both the tragedy and the hope of Europe's 20th century. Our historical experience obliges us to ask not just how we remember, but what we do with that memory today.

The dual legacy of Gdańsk – 1939 and 1980 – reminds us that memory must lead to transformation. Like other cities deeply marked by war and resistance – Marzabotto, Dresden, or Dunkirk – Gdańsk sees remembrance not as an end, but as a means: a force for peace, dialogue, and civic engagement. Cities with their proximity to citizens and their capacity to build inclusive communities are uniquely placed to make memory meaningful and active.

This belief shapes our city's approach to historical policy. We work closely with veterans' organizations, not only to honour their stories but to embed their experiences in intergenerational education. The creation of the Veterans and Patriotic Education Centre in 2024 was a milestone in this effort. Through events like Veterans Concerts and school partnerships, we ensure that memory is not confined to memorials or anniversaries, but lives on in our classrooms and community centres.

We also understand that historical truth is fragile and that remembrance can be manipulated. Gdańsk has experienced first-hand the dangers of politicising history. In 2019 the central government stripped the city of its role in organising ceremonies at Westerplatte, accusing us of being "too European". Yet, we see no contradiction between being proudly

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Polish and firmly rooted in European values. Since the change in government, Gdańsk has resumed its role in commemorations, but the episode was a painful reminder of how easily history can be weaponised for political ends.

This experience is not abstract. In 2019, Mayor Paweł Adamowicz was murdered in a politically motivated act of violence – an event that shook the city and revealed the real consequences of a climate saturated with hate. Since then, Gdańsk has adopted a systemic approach to combat hate speech through education, legal action, and civic mobilisation. "Silence is not an option" is not just a slogan, it is our operational principle.

Our response has been multifaceted. The "Gdańsk Civic Lessons" programme equips young people with the tools to identify hate, resist manipulation, and speak out for justice. These efforts have gained recognition across Europe, even inspiring a visit by European Parliament President Roberta Metsola, who met directly with our students. This is civic education in action, not just teaching about the past, but preparing the next generation to defend democracy.

To honour Mayor Adamowicz's legacy, Gdańsk co-established the Mayor Paweł Adamowicz Award with the European Committee of the Regions and ICORN. The award recognises individuals and

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cities that stand up for freedom, solidarity, and equality, often under immense pressure. From Michałowo to Kyiv, these laureates exemplify the moral courage needed in today's turbulent world.

The Cities of Remembrance Network, of which Gdańsk is a proud member, is not just a historical forum. It is a platform for shared responsibility. The Dunkirk Appeal, adopted at our recent gathering, affirms our joint commitment to memory as a tool for democracy, peacebuilding, and global solidarity. It is a reminder that the tragedies of the past carry a mandate for action today, especially in a time of resurgent nationalism, disinformation, and war on our continent.

In the face of these challenges, national governments cannot defend democracy alone. Real resilience is built locally – citizen by citizen, city by city. Through city diplomacy, international cooperation, and grassroots initiatives, we must act. Cities are the new frontlines in the struggle for democratic values.

Gdańsk's motto, "Never Again War," resonates from Westerplatte each year. But it is more than a historical echo – it is a contemporary imperative. Peace is not self-sustaining; it must be defended. We must have the courage to stand up for truth and dignity, even when it is difficult.



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In the end, remembrance is not about looking backward, it is about shaping the future. If our generation is to leave a meaningful legacy, let it be this: a living memory rooted in moral clarity, civic responsibility, and an unyielding defence of human dignity.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt • Maciej Buczkowski is the deputy director of the office of the Mayor of Gdańsk, Poland

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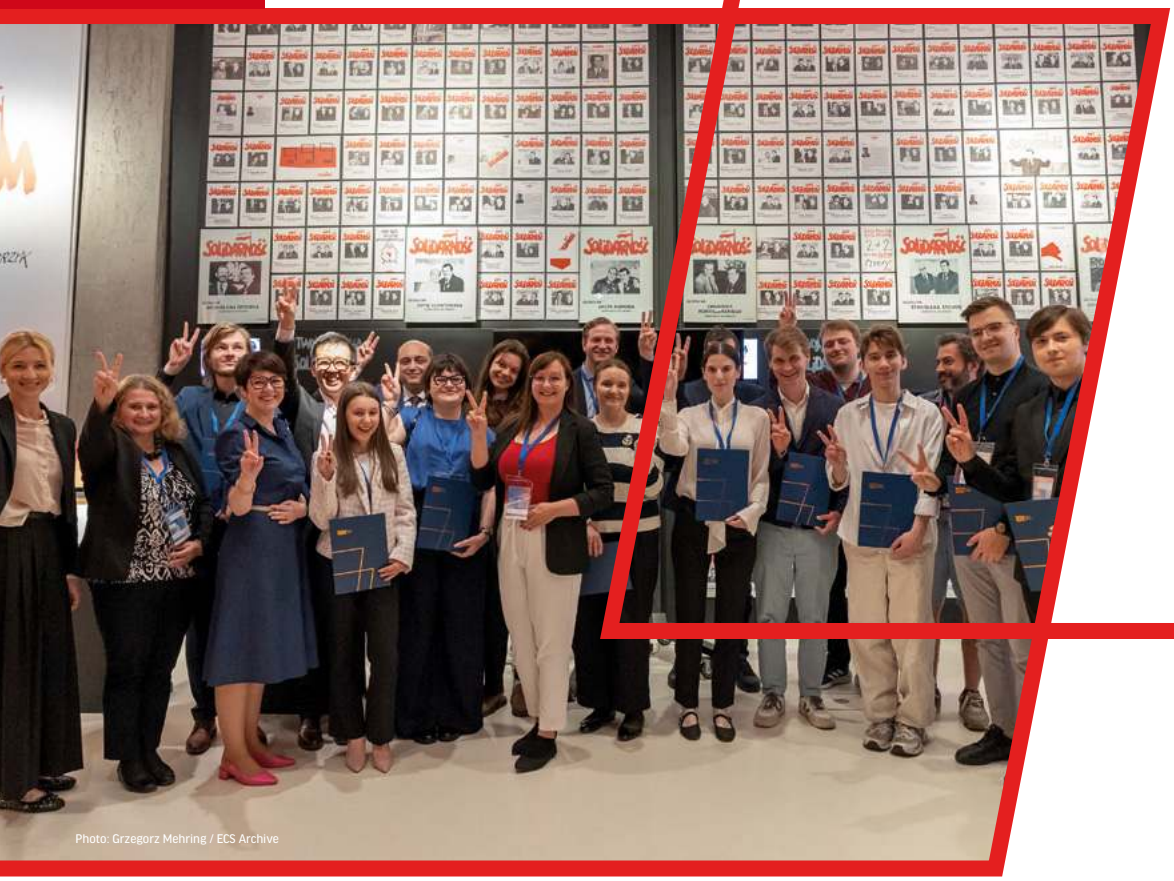


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With a view to the Baltic Sea

PIOTR LESZCZYŃSKI

Our geopolitical imagination, which until recently was stretched along the East-West axis, has now gained a new dimension – the North. This new perception is becoming the impetus for economic as well as demographic changes that are taking place along the Polish coast.

The city of Gdańsk, one of the largest port cities in Europe, reached the height of its power at the turn of the 17th century. During this period, it held the prestigious status of a royal city, enjoying extensive autonomy and maintaining its own naval fleet. In return for loyalty and financial support, the Polish kings granted the city numerous privileges. Thanks to its location on the Baltic Sea and at the mouth of the Vistula river, Gdańsk controlled the trade in grain, timber and salt. It was the main port of export for the First Polish Republic. Gdańsk was also famous for its multiculturalism and religious tolerance. It was inhabited by different ethnic and religious groups who lived in the city, side by side. These included Poles, Germans, Dutch, Scots, Jews and Kashubians.

The period of the city's prosperity was ended by the wars and crises that happened in the second half of the 17th century. They included the Swedish Deluge as well as conflicts with Prussia and Russia, which all led to the decline of Gdańsk's position. However, the proud motto of the city's 17th-century merchants, which in Latin reads *Nec temere, nec timide*, and which in English means "neither cowardly, nor timidly," is still printed on the city's coats of arms, reminding us of the greatness of this Baltic port.

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A new dimension

In 2025, General Rajmund Andrzejczak, the former Chief of the General Staff of the Polish army, while analysing Poland's national security strategy, noted that today its principle of operation is to be found at the Baltic Sea, with Gdańsk, Gdynia, Szczecin and Świnoujście as key points. This approach is naturally the result of the full-scale war that Russia has been carrying out against Ukraine since 2022. Of course, a great amount of damage has been caused by this war on land, with subsequent military activities appearing in the Black Sea. The great diplomatic efforts made to allow for the transport of grain show that when it comes to moving goods, nothing can replace sea routes.

This perspective allows us to better see the importance of such port regions as Gdańsk–Gdynia and Szczecin–Świnoujście. That is why the plans for a container terminal on Wolin Island and the expansion of the port in Ustka are now considered necessary.

In the energy sector, northern Poland also offers unique opportunities. The natural gas terminals in Gdańsk and Świnoujście, as well as the Baltic Pipe that delivers natural gas from Norway, are already recognized as being of great strategic importance not only for Poland but also for the entire region, especially Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

The region is growing in importance also internationally. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has turned the Baltic Sea into what is called a "NATO lake". There has also been an increased assertiveness from Norway and the Baltic states towards Russia, coinciding with a leadership crisis in the West and growing ambivalence among the Visegrad partners – particularly Slovakia and Hungary – towards Moscow. All this explains why the Baltic Sea states have become the key partners in Polish security. As a result, our geopolitical imagination, which until recently was stretched along the East-West axis, has now gained a new dimension – the North. This new perception is becoming the impetus for economic as well as demographic changes that are taking place along the Polish coast. We can compare them to the earlier mentioned golden period in the history of Gdańsk.

Investments

A state-of-the-art installation terminal for the offshore wind industry is currently under construction in Gdańsk. Offshore wind energy refers to the generation of electricity using wind turbines located at sea. The development of the Baltica 2 wind farm, situated off the coast near the port of Ustka, will thus mark a significant

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step forward for green energy in Poland. It is estimated that 107 wind turbines will be installed by 2027. They will be located over 20 kilometres offshore, thus out of sight from the coastline. This project will create new jobs and foster a network of cooperating companies. Once completed, the wind farm will supply electricity to approximately 2.5 million households.

Another important investment is the construction of a floating storage re-gasification unit terminal, or FSRU, which will be located in the southern part of Gdańsk Bay. This is in the immediate vicinity of the Baltic Hub container terminal and the waterway leading to the port of Gdańsk, at a distance of approximately

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three kilometres from the shore. The FSRU will be moored permanently to the quay. This is a vessel adapted for the in-process storage of LNG gas collected from methane carrier ships, all with the aim of changing the state of aggregation from liquid to gas. In this form, the gas will be transmitted, via an offshore pipeline, to the national transmission network.

The construction of the jetty in the Gulf of Gdańsk is expected to begin with dredging works, which are scheduled for the second half of 2025. The FSRU terminal is scheduled to be operational by the first quarter of 2028. This is a strategic investment as it ensures security and diversification of supply. The new gas terminal under construction will make it possible to cover almost one-third of Poland's total gas consumption.

The next investment in northern Poland is the construction of the country's first nuclear power plant – Polskie Elektrownie Jądrowe, or PEJ. The nuclear power plant is planned to be built with the use of Westinghouse AP1000 technology at the Lubiatowo-Kopalino site in Pomerania. The engineering development agreement signed in April sets the framework for cooperation over the next few months between PEJ and the contractor consortium. The signing of the so-called "bridge agreement" opens up the next stage of cooperation, which will allow for the design and subsequent construction of this key facility for energy security to begin. According to PEJ, this is a milestone for the project and, according to the current schedule, the pouring of the so-called first nuclear concrete for the reactor is expected to take place in 2028. The start of the commercial operations of the first unit is planned for 2036.

Container "throughput" at Polish ports is steadily increasing. This dynamic growth, along with rising competition, requires port managers to adopt long-term strategic planning and investment approaches. In response to the geopolitical and energy challenges facing Central and Eastern Europe, ambitious port infrastructure development plans are being pursued. As critical nodes in the logistics and energy networks, and as gateways to international trade and industrial hubs, seaports are thus now taking on an increasingly vital role. They are evolving from mere transit points for goods into strategic partners in strengthening Europe's economic and military resilience.

Vulnerabilities

At the same time, vulnerability around these areas is increasing. In the current security situation, seaports may become a target for destabilizing activities in the region. This makes it all the more important to discuss their security, moderniza-

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tion and future. This of course also applies to the port of Gdańsk, which is the most important Polish port. It is also the main container hub for the Baltic Sea, serving the largest container ships in the world. In 2024, the port of Gdańsk handled more than 3,500 ships and more than 77 million tonnes of cargo. It is also the only port on the Baltic Sea to regularly serve container ships from the Far East.

The growing demand for handling strategic cargo, ranging from containers and liquid fuels to offshore wind farm components, has been driving the need for continued infrastructure investment. This includes the expansion of key projects such as Naftoport, a company specializing in the "transhipment" of oil and petroleum products, both onshore and offshore. The planned expansion involves the construction of a new liquid fuel transhipment facility, along with all essential supporting infrastructure.

Today, investment in maritime infrastructure is not just an element of transport policy, but the foundation of the raw material, energy and economic security of Poland and the region. Structural investments planned many years in advance are a response to current market needs. Above all, however, they respond to changing global conditions and the growing importance of the Baltic Sea as the key trade and energy route for this part of Europe.

Ports such as the one in Gdańsk play a crucial role in ensuring military, food, economic and energy security.

Ports such as the one in Gdańsk play a crucial role in ensuring military, food, economic and energy security. In this way, they meet the European Union's objectives for security and sustainable development. Baltic ports are not only a cargo transit point, but an element of the European Union's frontier infrastructure, directly supporting its resilience to the challenges of competitiveness.

In terms of economic and energy security, the Baltic ports allow for the diversification of raw material imports – such as gas, oil and alternative fuels. Gdańsk is also preparing for the implementation of an onshore power system. This technology will allow ships to connect to the onshore electricity grid while at berth in the port, so that they can use energy from land instead of running their own polluting auxiliary engines. The city also hopes to develop low-carbon bunkering infrastructure. This will help with essential parts of the energy transition, such as the provision of fuel used to power the ship's engines and on-board machinery.

Security

Infrastructure security in the Baltic is overseen by the navy. In January 2025, NATO launched an operation codenamed "Baltic Sentry". Announced at the Baltic

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Sea Summit in Helsinki, it is a joint initiative to intensify operations and the presence of allied vessels in the Baltic Sea.

The Polish navy has also been conducting an operation codenamed "Zatoka" (Bay) for the last two years. As part of it, Poland conducts continuous monitoring of its territorial sea and exclusive economic zone, putting particular emphasis on the protection of underwater critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. The aim of the operation is to counter potential sabotage incidents and detect suspicious activities in key areas where marine infrastructure is concentrated. It is a response to the growing threat of provocations occurring in maritime waters. The impetus for its launch was, among other things, the damage to the Nord Stream gas pipeline. Polish vessels monitor the situation in the Baltic Sea, focusing primarily on facilities, such as gas pipelines, undersea telecommunications and power cables, as well as drilling platforms, oil and gas terminals.

Over the past three years, Russia has been sailing a number of unregistered vessels on the Baltic Sea, known as the "shadow fleet".

Over the past three years, Russia has been sailing on the Baltic Sea a number of unregistered vessels, known as the "shadow fleet". The purpose of using these vessels is to hide the illegal nature of the oil transports that Russia undertakes, thereby evading western sanctions. However, their presence on the Baltic Sea has been linked to a number of sabotage incidents and hybrid operations.

For example, in October 2023, when the Baltic connector gas pipeline between Estonia and Finland and the Baltika power cable were damaged, "shadow fleet" vessels were present near the site. In November 2024, two submarine data cables between Germany and Finland and between the Swedish island of Gotland and Lithuania, were damaged. It is suspected that one of the bulk carriers in the vicinity at the time, working with Russia, may have been involved in these incidents. In December 2024, a cable connecting Finland to Estonia was damaged. The trail leads to one of the tankers belonging to the shadow fleet, which deliberately dragged its anchor along the seabed so as to cause the failure. The ship's crew was detained by the Finnish authorities on suspicion of an act of sabotage.

In May 2025 there was another dangerous incident in the Baltic. This time it happened near the Polish coast. A tanker listed on the shadow fleet list was performing worrying manoeuvres, not in Polish territorial waters but over power cables. The infrastructure was not damaged, but a Polish navy hydrographic ship was dispatched to the site to check whether any explosives had been planted in the area. An Interpol investigation that followed this incident revealed that a shadow fleet was being used to smuggle weapons into Africa. Specifically, the old ships sup-

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plied illegal weapons and military equipment to Marshal Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya and supported military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

In response, the European Union has approved the 17th package of sanctions against Russia. They are also targeted at nearly 200 vessels from the shadow fleet. These sanctions are designed to limit Russia's ability to circumvent international restrictions and counter threats to European energy security.

Today Gdańsk is again a maritime gateway and an important hub in global logistics. Thanks to the investments that have been made and its convenient location, it is regarded as an important player in the region. Its port, which is also a large employer in Poland, is of great significance not only to Poland but also the whole region. It is one of the largest and fastest growing ports in this part of the continent, one that also stimulates economic development in northern Poland.

Piotr Leszczyński is the managing editor of the Gdańsk-based magazine *Przegląd Polityczny*, an editor with the Polish-German bimonthly *Dialog* magazine, and a member of the Polish PEN Club. He is also a native of Gdańsk, where he resides until today.

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Expert Survey

Changing context in the Nordic-Baltic Sea region



German warships "Hamburg" and "Hessen" at the Baltic Sea port in Riga in 2023.

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Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik	**A Baltic triangle**
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Putin's gift to NATO

The rise of the "New Nordic Shield"

INGA SAMOŠKAITĖ



Photo courtesy of Inga Samoškaitė

When former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö said, "You caused this. Look in the mirror" in 2022, he really hit the nail on the head. That simple statement perfectly sums up the massive shake-up in European security. Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was meant to fracture the Alliance and stop NATO from growing. Instead, he accidentally helped us build a stronger, united front – a truly formidable "double-sized wall" against aggression. It is now clear that the centre of European security has shifted to the North-East. Within the Baltic Sea region, there is now clear political resolve and robust military means for deterrence. This transformation, driven by Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, has fundamentally reshaped the Nordic-Baltic security landscape and established a vital new frontline for European defence.

For us here in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the weight of this change feels immediate and immense. Our security has always been a primary concern within NATO, given our direct proximity to Russia and that famously exposed stretch of land known as the Suwałki Gap. Now, with Sweden and Finland on board, some of those long-standing strategic dilemmas, the ones that kept us up at night, are finally being tackled head on.

The Baltic Sea is now almost entirely a "NATO lake". Apart from Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast and a small coastal strip around St Petersburg, virtually every inch of its shoreline belongs to the Alliance. This is not just a map change; it is a game-changer for daily life and strategic thinking. NATO's direct border with Russia in the north has effectively doubled overnight, now extending into the Arctic region with Finland's lengthy frontier. This dramatically expanded front line means vastly more opportunities for allied forces to manoeuvre, as well as far simpler defence planning. Crucially, it also provides NATO with the unprecedented opportunity to control vital maritime routes. This comprehensive control is absolutely vital, especially when considering the murky "grey zone" threats that have been on the rise.

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Indeed, these are not theoretical concerns. For us, they are part of our daily reality. In the past year, we have seen worrying reports of a "shadow fleet" operating in these waters, using a variety of physical and electronic measures to mask their identity (or even try to hide from authorities entirely), alongside alarming incidents of undersea cable damage right across the Baltic. Just in late May 2025, Finland's defence minister, Antti Häkkänen, mentioned that new developments are now being seen, as Russia has started to protect its shadow fleet in the narrow passage of the Gulf of Finland with military escorts and the wider presence of armed forces. This new, aggressive posture follows recent events like suspected Russian airspace violations in Finnish territory. Estonian patrols have also been actively inspecting suspicious, uninsured vessels, leading to tense encounters, including a standoff in May where a Russian fighter aircraft reportedly entered Estonian airspace after a tanker refused inspection. These vessels, sometimes changing names multiple times in a matter of months to obscure their identities, highlight the lengths to which these operations go. A unified NATO presence across this vast new maritime front allows for a much more effective, coordinated response to these hybrid tactics, shoring up critical infrastructure from Tallinn to Vilnius and defending the fundamental right to freedom of navigation against those who would exploit it. For ordinary citizens, this means a greater sense of security in the very infrastructure that underpins our modern lives.

This is not just about static defences; it is about dynamic power projection. With Swedish positions and capabilities, particularly the strategically vital island of Gotland in the middle of the Baltic Sea, which is now a NATO asset, the Alliance gains an unprecedented ability to project air and sea power into and across the central Baltic. This fundamentally transforms the ability to receive rapid reinforcements, something that weighs heavily on the minds of those who remember a more vulnerable past. Furthermore, Finland's potent ground threat forces Russia to dilute any forces it might otherwise concentrate on the Baltic states, whose fundamental lack of strategic depth in terms of land remains a challenge. Sweden and Finland's accession offers a critical hedge strategy: the collective capabilities now available can effectively shut down the Baltic Sea if necessary. This would involve coordinated naval operations, including potential offensive mining capabilities around key areas like Kaliningrad, ensuring maritime dominance and preventing hostile access.

Sweden and Finland bring serious new muscle to NATO's Northern Flank. Finland, for instance, boasts one of Europe's largest reserve armies and unparalleled expertise in total defence, significantly bolstering NATO's ground defence. For us in the Baltics, this means any potential Russian ground aggression would now face a more expansive, integrated and

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incredibly resilient front. It is like having new, incredibly tough neighbours in our corner. This enhanced integration is already evident. Sweden, for example, deployed troops to the Multinational Brigade in Latvia earlier this year. This marks a historic first with Swedish land forces contributing to collective defence on another NATO member's soil. This is a powerful, tangible sign of Stockholm's immediate commitment to Baltic security, something we deeply appreciate here.

Beyond the hardware, the courage of these nations' leaders to move away from decades of neutrality simply wipes away any lingering strategic ambiguity Russia might have tried to exploit. Their unwavering commitment to NATO's Article 5, the collective defence clause, sends a clear, undeniable message: any aggression against an allied country will be met with the full force of the entire Alliance, including the considerable military and intelligence capabilities of Sweden and Finland. This absolute clarity dramatically strengthens deterrence across the region. It is a loud and clear "don't even think about it," a message that resonates deeply with our historical experiences.

Crucially, the Baltic states themselves are leading by example, putting our money where our mouths are when it comes to defence. Lithuania, for instance, has pledged to significantly boost its defence spending to a remarkable five to six per cent of GDP from 2026, aiming to become one of NATO's highest per capita defence spenders. Estonia and Latvia are following suit, with Estonia committed to reaching at least five per cent of GDP by 2026, and Latvia targeting five per cent by 2028. This incredible commitment, coupled with consistent and vocal leadership in stressing security threats, means the Nordic and Baltic nations are increasingly stepping into a pivotal leadership role within Europe. Our first-hand understanding of geopolitical dynamics and our proactive embrace of NATO integration offer invaluable insights for the entire continent. We are at the forefront, pushing for robust deterrence, unwavering support for Ukraine, and comprehensive resilience against all types of hybrid threats. Our collective voice and shared strategic perspective are now playing a much more central role in shaping Europe's broader security agenda.

Ultimately, Sweden and Finland joining NATO is far more than just an expansion: it is a fundamental recalibration of power in the Baltic Sea region. This dramatic shift aligns with the desires of key allies, particularly the United States, who seek a concrete and swift sign of Europe's transition toward a hard defence posture. Washington will increasingly look to its Nordic, Baltic and Polish partners – nations demonstrating proactive commitment – rather than waiting for slower, more painful changes across the broader European core.

While this new reality has transformed an area once fraught with vulnerabilities into a cohesive zone of collective strength, forging a true "New Nordic Shield", the journey is far from over. For Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, this new

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reality means significantly enhanced security, far less strategic uncertainty, and the tangible promise of collective defence against any future threats, allowing us to stand firmer than ever on NATO's reinforced Eastern Flank. However, the path ahead requires sustained effort. Beyond the political will and budget plans, there is still immense work to be done in developing very concrete military capabilities, ensuring interoperability, and adapting to evolving threats. This new chapter demands continuous investment, innovation, and unwavering determination to translate resolve into resilient defence. EE

Inga Samoškaitė is a security policy analyst specializing in national security, hybrid threats and human security.

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Never before have we been so secure as today

ELIZABETE VIZGUNOVA-VIKMANE



Photo courtesy of Elizabete Vizgunova-Vikmane

"Two major developments have significantly strengthened Latvia's security: its own accession to NATO and, more recently, the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance." This comparison was made by the former commander of the Latvian armed forces, Raimonds Graube (1999–2003, 2010–2017). Similarly, Latvia's former defence minister, Imants Lieģis (2009–2010), remarked on the anniversary of Latvia's accession to NATO – and on the eve of Finland and Sweden's membership – that "never before in Latvia's history have we been so secure as today".

These statements reflect the monumental significance of Latvia's northern neighbours joining the only credible counterweight to Russia's revisionist ambitions in the post-Soviet space. By contributing to the development of a "deterrence-by-denial bubble", the Baltic region is now supported by two strategic pillars: one in the North and one in Warsaw. In these turbulent times, Riga finds reassurance in knowing that if Latvia ever needs protection, its geographically closest allies are now treaty-bound to come to its aid.

Even before joining NATO, Sweden and Finland – along with other Nordic countries –were considered Latvia's closest partners. Sweden, in particular, has played a crucial role in promoting democracy, good governance and economic development in Latvia since it regained independence in 1991. Like their Baltic neighbours the Lithuanians and Estonians, Latvians have increasingly identified with Northern Europe, viewing it as the only viable alternative to Eastern Europe – the so-called "bloodlands" weighed down by historical trauma and authoritarian legacies. This distinction is not merely geographic; it is deeply geopolitical. The North offers Latvia a forward-looking, values-based model for political alignment and lifestyle.

This sentiment was underscored in a July 2022 poll, where Sweden ranked as the sixth friendliest country toward Latvia, following Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, the United States, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. All of these coun-

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tries are key partners in Latvia's foreign and defence policy. Today, Sweden has become Latvia's most important Nordic partner. Bilateral relations are expected to deepen further, especially following Sweden's commitment to join NATO's Forward Land Forces in Latvia. In early 2025, Sweden deployed a mechanized infantry battalion to the Ādaži Military Base – marking the first time Swedish troops have been stationed abroad since joining NATO. This deployment sends a strong political and military message, one that is certainly welcomed in Riga and undoubtedly noted by Russian military planners.

Sweden's engagement in Latvia's defence has also encouraged a stronger US presence in the region, which is an increasingly vital factor in today's security environment. The 2024 Defence Cooperation Agreement between Sweden and the United States established the legal basis for US forces to operate on Swedish soil. As a result, the US now has access to 17 military sites in Sweden and 15 in Finland. As the researcher with the Center for Geopolitical Studies in Riga Daniels Kauliņš observes, "Although the US presence in the region is not explicitly aimed at defending the Baltic states, heightened American involvement bolsters the overall defence posture."

Finland's accession to NATO carries equal weight for Riga. Known for their quiet resolve and sauna culture, the Finns are deeply respected for their historical resilience under Russian pressure, despite sharing an extensive border with their powerful neighbour. Latvia works closely with Finland through the Joint Response Force, the Nordic Group, and other frameworks aimed at enhancing regional defence. In addition, Latvia draws inspiration from Helsinki's experience in implementing a comprehensive national defence system and a conscription-based service model. Like Sweden, Finland offers a vision of a resilient, values-based society. This approach is likely to remain a cornerstone of Latvia's long-term strategy for countering external threats. EE

Elizabete Vizgunova-Vikmane is a guest lecturer at the Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia, working as a civilian expert in Ukraine. She is currently in the process of defending her PhD in political science and history.

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Denmark

A small nation rethinking its security

MIŁOSZ J. CORDES



Photo courtesy of Miłosz Cordes

On March 6th 2022, two weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had begun, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced a referendum on lifting the opt-out on Denmark's participation in EU defence cooperation. The vote, held on June 1st, marked the end of one the four opt-outs that Copenhagen negotiated to convince their citizens to accept the Maastricht Treaty. Although few suspected more far-reaching steps would follow, Donald Trump's comeback has led to deepening the understanding that Denmark is a small nation in need of strong collective defence capabilities. This realisation has been emerging for almost 400 years.

Up until the mid-17th century, Denmark was a major power in the Baltic Sea. Ever since, however, it has seen its territory and influence shrink. The realm could not withstand the growing influence of Sweden and lost the region of Scandia to it in 1658. In the early 1800s the United Kingdom punished Denmark for supporting Napoleon. The British bombarded Copenhagen, causing large-scale fires, and gave control over Norway to Sweden. Half a century later, Prussia provoked and won the Second Schleswig War of 1863–64. Berlin, eager to project its power and unite the German states under Hohenzollern rule, took away Denmark's most populated and economically developed provinces in the south of the Jutland Peninsula. Only the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland remained of a once vast empire.

Following the Schleswig disaster, the Danish elite realized that the country had become a small nation-state. The nation's identity has since been inward-looking, based on a strong sense of community, consensus-building and trust enhanced by language and culture. In terms of foreign policy, Denmark adopted a restrained approach. It remained neutral throughout the First World War and rejected the offer to fully regain the territories captured by Germany, only accepting their northern part inhabited predominantly by a Danish-speaking population.

Invaded by Nazi Germany in 1940, Denmark showed no military resistance,

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adopting a wait-and-see approach under the relatively restrained occupation regime. It was during the Second World War when Denmark's strong pro-US stance began to form, although initially this was plagued by controversies. Henrik Kauffmann, the ambassador to the US, went rogue and on April 9th 1941, authorized the US army to build bases on Greenland without the consent of his government. Initially declared a traitor, he was proven right in the grand scheme of things. The treaty he signed laid the foundations for a strong conviction that only the United States could provide security for Denmark and its territories. Kauffmann's legacy, famously depicted in the movie *The Good Traitor*, is still in place as the 1941 treaty remains the basis for the Pituffik Space Base (formerly known as the Thule Air Base) in northwest Greenland.

The belief in transatlantic ties was so strong that Denmark was among the founding members of NATO in 1949 whereas it waited until 1973 to join the European Communities. When it came to building Western Europe's autonomous defence capabilities, however, Danes were univocally reluctant even after the collapse of the communist bloc. This was demonstrated emphatically during the discussions concerning the Maastricht Treaty and the subsequent EU defence cooperation opt-out clause Copenhagen negotiated.

The result of the 2022 referendum – with 67 per cent of voters in favour of abolishing the opt-out – marked a shift in this approach. Still, the Danish government made it clear that EU-backed defence initiatives would not hinder but complement the security umbrella provided by NATO. The nation was not willing to give up its focus on the Alliance. Comments made back in 2019 by Donald Trump about the US buying Greenland were viewed merely as a short-lived aberration.

Indeed, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Denmark needed to completely shift its security paradigm. After the end of the Cold War the country found itself in the middle of Fukuyama's "End of History" illusion and still relied on the light of freedom beaming from across the Atlantic. When the September 11th attacks against the US took place in 2001, Copenhagen was among those Western European capitals that participated in the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Danish military began building its expeditionary capabilities, neglecting territorial defence and largely overlooking the changing security dynamic in the Baltic Sea. Denmark's easternmost island of Bornholm, just 300 kilometres from the shores of Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast, was only defended by semi-professional Home Guard soldiers, amounting to a mere 200 people. When Russia invaded Crimea and Donbas, the Danish defence budget amounted to 1.1 per cent of its GDP. It was only in 2023 when the main political parties agreed to reach a minimum target value of two per cent by 2030.

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It seems that the recent statements by President Trump about Greenland provided another push towards new security thinking. On February 22nd 2025 all of the country's main political parties agreed to increase funds allocated for defence to three per cent already by this year and next. While the government explicitly mentioned the growing threat from Russia as the main reason for such a move, it also demonstrated Denmark's commitment to collective defence within NATO and sought to disarm the arguments used by Trump and his accolades. In May the Danish defence ministry announced it would deploy an additional army regiment to Bornholm, adding at least 500 more troops to the island which is inhabited by 40,000 people.

Does all this mean that Denmark is now among the pioneers of Europe's autonomous defence capabilities and that its reliance on the US is wavering? The country has come a long way from being a strong proponent of only NATO and Nordic defence cooperation to continent-wide initiatives. For now, they still only complement the decades-long NATO commitments. They have, however, the potential to bring Denmark closer to its European partners and allies. With Finland and Sweden manifesting a similar attitude, Germany finally upping its commitments and Poland being at the forefront of deterring Russia by reforming its military, chances are that the gradual reconfiguration of the Baltic and European security landscape will have far-reaching consequences. EE

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A Baltic triangle

ALEKSANDRA KUCZYŃSKA-ZONIK



Photo courtesy of Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik / Institute of Central Europe

The dispute over where the geographical centre of Europe lies has been ongoing for centuries. Central European countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – as well as Baltic Sea neighbours like Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Sweden – have all laid claim to this symbolic status. While there are rational arguments behind each of these claims, viewing the region solely through the prism of geographic centrality is insufficient.

Historically, the Baltic Sea has held strategic significance, a status that has only intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, European political and elite circles have started to pay closer attention to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, including the activities of the Russian Federation in the Baltic Sea. The Kremlin uses this region to assert influence and challenge the West, reflecting its imperial ambitions to surpass Europe militarily and economically.

As the war in Ukraine continues, Russia exploits the Baltic Sea to bypass sanctions and destabilize European states and their societies. The tensions it stirs are not limited to traditional military threats. They also involve unconventional tactics. An illustrative example is the so-called "shadow fleet", a term used to describe vessels with unclear ownership operating in the Baltic without proper documentation. Russia employs them to circumvent western sanctions, especially those targeting oil exports.

Evidence shows that the Kremlin has deployed a wide range of instruments to exert influence in the Baltic Sea region. These include attacks on critical infrastructure, the disruption of data transmission, acts of cyber-terrorism, disinformation campaigns, and espionage. All of them serve the purpose of undermining the security and cohesion of societies in the region. Given their broader implications, these developments should be regarded as integral to the overall security situation of the European continent.

Equally important for European security – though in a positive light – is the cooperation among Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway in supporting Ukraine. They assist Kyiv both in its defensive efforts against Russian aggression and politically in its pursuit of integration

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with the European Union. According to estimates from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, the Baltic Sea states are among the top aid donors to Ukraine. Estonia and Denmark each contribute 2.3 per cent of their GDP, followed by Lithuania (1.9 per cent), Latvia (1.5 per cent), Finland (1.1 per cent), Sweden (one per cent), and Poland (0.8 per cent).

Beyond military aid, Baltic Sea countries have taken proactive steps to strengthen regional security. In February 2024, Latvia initiated the creation of a drone coalition, now made up of 19 states. Although not all are located in the region, they share a commitment to investing in drone production for Ukraine and providing military training for civilians. The second funding stream aligns with the "whole-of-society" approach outlined in the EU Preparedness Union Strategy announced in March 2025.

Inspired by comprehensive resilience policies from the Nordic countries, this new EU strategy proposes a holistic approach to security. It calls for the involvement of state institutions, the private sector, public organizations and NGOs in addressing security and resilience. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have already adopted this model. Other distinctive features of the Baltic states' cooperation include the synchronization of their electricity grids and a focus on high-tech development.

For Poland, the Baltic Sea region has become over the last few years an area of growing relevance. Once primarily viewed as a Central European country, Poland is now increasingly seen as part of the Baltic or Northern region. This shift reflects its shared threat perception with countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. As a result, Poland's bilateral and multilateral relations with these countries serve as the foundation for its new northern policy. Poland proposed strengthening Baltic Sea control and supported the NATO "Baltic Sentry" mission. Additionally, a new maritime strategy named "Polish Sea" was unveiled by the Prime Minister Donald Tusk in May 2025, aimed at boosting security and protecting critical undersea infrastructure.

Thus, when Szymon Hołownia, the Polish parliamentary speaker, announced the concept of the "Baltic Triangle", he was referring to a close partnership among the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and Poland. While regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea area is built primarily on defence and resilience, this initiative would also encompass efforts toward the reconstruction of Ukraine. In this sense, it could also become a key element of the EU's post-war strategy for Ukraine.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO marked a significant development for the region, even though both countries had already been actively involved in NATO operations and broader regional cooperation. Recognizably, their formal membership, while undeniably enhancing the Alliance's military strength, carries an important

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psychological impact. It is particularly appreciated by the smaller states, such as Latvia or Estonia, which hope that any potential attack from Russia on their territory would trigger a quick response from NATO member states. It is also appreciated by Poland.

With NATO now expanded in the region, there has been a noticeable increase in air force monitoring, which takes place over the northern parts of the Baltic Sea, and in logistical support for the Baltic fleet, which tracks the movements of the Russian shadow fleet in the eastern basin. Additionally, Finland and Sweden are now working to secure access to the North Atlantic, a zone of both political and military importance, which is also very much welcomed by Poland. ŁŁ

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A German perspective on security and stability in the Baltic Sea

THOMAS MICHAEL LINSENMAIER



Photo courtesy of Thomas Michael Linsenmaier / University of Tartu

As seen from Berlin, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO significantly enhances security in the Baltic Sea region and the wider Euro-Atlantic area. This is especially true given the renewed uncertainty and geopolitical tensions in the region as a spillover from Russia's aggression against Ukraine. With the return of a logic of competition to the Baltic Sea region, and with the growing risk of a wider conflict between NATO and Russia, the Baltic Sea has once again become an area of strategic importance for Germany. Consequently, Sweden and Finland's membership bids were unequivocally welcomed by Berlin, a sentiment reflected in the Bundestag's near unanimous ratification of their accession protocols.

From Germany's perspective, Sweden and Finland's NATO accession strengthens security and stability in the Baltic Sea region in at least three ways. Each point is ultimately a function of how the two new members bolster NATO's strategic posture in the region and strengthen the transatlantic alliance at large.

First, Sweden and Finland's membership significantly strengthens NATO's strategic posture in the Baltic Sea region and more broadly in North-East Europe. With their robust military capabilities, both are considered "net contributors" and thus valuable additions to the Alliance. Moreover, in certain respects, both are seen as models in current debates about necessary reforms aimed at restoring Germany's ability to defend itself (*Wehrfähigkeit*). Examples include Sweden's approach to conscription, which, referred to as "the Swedish model", has served as a major reference point in the German debate about the re-introduction of conscription, or Finland's approach to civilian protection.

Second, from Berlin's perspective, Sweden and Finland's membership alters the strategic context in the Baltic Sea region significantly in NATO's favour. In practical terms, their integration into the Alliance greatly simplifies NATO's defence planning for North-East Europe, particularly concerning the defence of the Baltic states. As the

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framework nation for NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania, the Alliance's ability to respond to a "Baltic scenario" (as a German expert recently coined it) is of critical importance to Germany. By qualitatively taking their cooperation with the Alliance to a new level, and with NATO now being able to reliably count on their contribution to the defence of the Baltic states, Sweden and Finland's accession solves several strategic challenges that the Alliance has faced in the region. These include the lack of strategic depth, the ability to maintain critical maritime connections, and, should circumstances require, move in reinforcements and supplies. Against this background, many observers in Germany consider the Baltic states the main benefactors of these developments.

Additionally, with Sweden and Finland, Germany sees NATO better positioned to counter hybrid threats in the Baltic Sea region, including attacks on critical infrastructure. The second point has become increasingly important amidst growing tensions with Russia and, in light of several high-profile incidents, including the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines, such attacks have recently become a key concern for Germany.

Third, looking beyond the immediate regional context of the Baltic Sea, Berlin welcomes Sweden and Finland's membership as it contributes to the strength of the transatlantic alliance itself, not least by fostering cohesion. Politically, their accession to NATO reinforces the centrality of the transatlantic alliance as the core pillar for security and stability in Europe. Furthermore, considering the capabilities they bring to the Alliance, their membership is seen to strengthen NATO's European pillar and, by extension, to contribute to transatlantic burden sharing. Finally, since both are stable democracies firmly rooted in the European mainstream, they are also seen as reinforcing NATO's democratic core at a time when the Alliance's internal cohesion has increasingly become a concern for Berlin.

Thus, from Germany's vantage point, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO is unequivocally considered a strategic gain and a welcome contribution to stability and security in the Baltic Sea region. Against the backdrop of rising tensions, Germany sees their membership as bolstering NATO's strategic posture in the region, enhancing its European footprint, and strengthening the Alliance at large. While Sweden and Finland's accession aligns with German interests in the region and creates a favourable strategic context, it remains to be seen whether Berlin can capitalize on these developments and, by adopting a more active, and indeed more potent, role, deliver the *Zeitenwende* in its engagement with the Baltic Sea region. EE

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Political leaders are becoming their own satire

A conversation with Armando Iannucci, satirist, writer and director. Interviewer: Vazha Tavberidze

VAZHA TAVBERIDZE: It surely must be a bountiful time to be a satirist, in this age of madness…

ARMANDO IANNUCCI: You know, you sort of want to be out of a job, really. It's far better that the world functions well, rather than so badly that the only thing you can do is say something entertaining about how bad it's gotten. And as we've discussed many times, the people in power have become their own satire, because they all believe in entertainment. It's all about attention-seeking and making the headlines.

On that last point – political leaders becoming their own caricatures – has that made your job harder? Are there moments when you think, "this is just too ridiculous to satirize, what more could I do"?

Sometimes, yes. Usually, comedy comes from exaggerating something. But now, the people themselves are already exaggerations. They've done your job for you. That forces you to think again – how do I illustrate what's annoying me, or confusing me, or making me angry? Once you identify what you're emotionally reacting to, that's the thing you look at. You start noticing that politicians now try to sound like they're not politicians. They present themselves as outsiders, and non-mainstream: "Vote for me because I'm not like them, the others." Yet, when you study their speeches, you realize they're using the same tricks as the ones they claim to be different from, ones they are so readily dismissing. The satisfaction, if that's the right word, comes not from fictional exaggeration, because they already do that. It's more about forensically looking at what is the trick they're trying to pull off in that exaggeration? What are they trying to avoid? What is it they don't want us to think about?

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There's no point in saying "Trump's weird." We all know that. Instead, what is the reality of what he is doing? How does it contrast with what he says? Look at all the deals he claims to have made. "Gaza will be a beautiful landscape." Or "I've got Iran under control." None of it is true. It's all gotten worse – because he hasn't engaged seriously. It's all headlines over detail. Same with tariffs and trade. The economy lurches every day because no one knows where he stands.

Is that kind of forensic satire still as satisfying – or engaging – for the audience as the classic version?

I think so. I mean, Jon Stewart and John Oliver, for example, they're very funny with it. But you've got to work really hard. I don't sit around thinking, "I wish it were the old way." I just think, "It's changed, so how do I adapt?" Why not look at the language? At how rhetoric evolves to evoke certain feelings? At how they run from facts, how they avoid being challenged? They don't like facts, they're less malleable. And they definitely don't like being questioned and challenged.

I want to go back to a conversation we had earlier, before the interview, about your tweet predicting that Elon Musk would be done with Trump in three months. It wasn't exactly three months, but still close enough…

It was four months! That's still very respectable.

You wrote: "this really won't last." And as it happens, it really didn't. Where did the foresight come from?

Well, because that's what happens with Trump. He's great friends with someone, until that someone is either giving him bad headlines or taking the headlines away from him. There was an element of Musk hogging too many headlines. So Trump moves on. Next person. And then the next…

So who's next? Who's in the firing line now?

At some point, it'll be JD Vance. He's going to get fed up with Vance. Now that Musk is out, that gives Vance more room to flex his muscles. But eventually, Trump will get rid of him.

If all this were happening in *The Thick of It* or *In the Loop*, what's on the next page of the script?

At some point, all those Republicans who once called Trump a fascist, a narcissist, a liar, and then changed their tune like Vance did, some of them are going to realize what a disaster it's going to be. Not now, but maybe in a year or two. Then they'll try to shift again, back to calling him a narcissist, a liar, self-obsessed. That will be interesting and funny to watch, but also horrifying. Especially if you're a senator, and you realize: he's sucking away all my power and all my authority. I go back to my state and I'm shouted at. They may have left it too late, but we'll start to see some of them trying to peel away from the crowd and get back.

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Photo: Lev Radin / Shutterstock

Do you ever watch something unfolding at the White House and think, "That could've come straight from one of my shows"?

Sometimes, yes, but often, it feels too much. Too obvious. And everyone knows what's going on. That's the maddening part. Yet people still make the calculation: "Even if this is absurd, I'd rather this than the old law. Or, you know, we need something new. I know this is terrible, but at least it's different." The question is when do people start to think, "Hang on, this is not sustainable. This is resulting in the deterioration, if not the destruction, of how our country runs itself. Now what do we do?"

This ongoing diplomatic dance between Trump and Vladimir Putin also wouldn't look out of place as an "In the Loop" scene – what would be a satirist's take on it?

I wish I knew. It's like two men who both think they're the only person in the room worth talking to, or whose views

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matter, having to somehow engage in a dialogue. Neither has ever had to defer to anyone. So when one suspects the other wants to be top dog – it's bound to explode.

Neither of them wants to come out looking like a loser – but one has to, right? So, what happens?

Well, Trump gets annoyed that Putin isn't stopping something, because he told him to "stop it". There doesn't seem to be any attempt by Trump to tell Putin off, however. But what can he actually do? He doesn't want to get involved in wars. He's told Europe, "I'm not going to back you up." So what's he going to do? He's kind of run out of options. Is he going to hit back at Putin? Is he going to launch missiles at Moscow? Maybe they'll come up with small sanctions and a bit more military aid to Ukraine. But I don't see that. It seems to me to be a stalemate – rather like the war is. A kind of "I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone."

There's always the good old "I wash my hands of it" option.

Exactly. He'll say, "I tried. They didn't listen. It's on them." That way, he's not implicated.

Speaking of Putin, three years ago I asked you how you'd portray him if you had to direct a film about him, and your answer was quite unexpected: an 11-year-old boy in a massive suit, surrounded by an entourage of obsequious Kremlin elders. Let's flip the question. Let's look at his opponents. If great leaders are defined by the adversaries they confront – what does that say about the people trying to oppose Putin?

That's right. Who would portray them? Probably 99-year-old actors. An entourage of Neville Chamberlains.

Regarding Georgia, where we are now, a country that is, by a growing consensus, mired in democratic backsliding. Given what's going on in the world, especially in the West, is it fair to say the western world has lost its credibility to preach others about democracy?

That's a fair point. And I would say that happened as soon as we went into Iraq in 2003: based on flimsy evidence, we set a precedent. The weapons of mass destruction weren't there. The fact they were prepared to take such an action based on something so flimsy has unfortunately given a pass to others, other governments, to do the same. The damage was real.

So if you can't look to the West as the standard-bearer for democracy – where do you look?

Maybe you look inward. Ask yourself what is it that's making you angry about threats to democracy and free speech? You don't need others to validate that – it can come from within.

But does that not open democracy up to subjective interpretation? We will make our democracy as we see fit – that's quite close to what our government is telling us at the moment.

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Yes, and there's danger in that. But there's also danger in the US or UK telling others what kind of democracy they should have. That's what happened in Iraq and elsewhere. Self-determination matters. But it's also important not to take western leaders' promises at face value. When they say, "We'll back you, we're right behind you," they may emotionally feel that, but practically, what are they going to do? One shouldn't assume it's ever going to be one hundred per cent. ❞ NE

Armando Iannucci is a writer, political satirist, and producer, known for *The Death of Stalin* (2017), *Veep* (2012) and *In the Loop* (2009).

Vazha Tavberidze is a Georgian journalist based in Tbilisi and regularly contributes to *New Eastern Europe*.

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Inside Viktor Orbán's worst political crisis yet

SAMU CZABÁN

There is no sugar-coating it: after 15 years of unchecked power, Hungary's Fidesz has plunged into its most severe political crisis yet. Worsening economic data, the rise of a far more potent opposition, and shifting international political trends have led to an unprecedented situation. For much of 2025, Fidesz has no longer been the strongest party. That position now belongs to the new challenger, Péter Magyar's Tisza Party.

With parliamentary elections scheduled in Hungary for next year, it is now entirely possible, though still hard to believe, that the Viktor Orbán regime could come to an end. Yet the situation is far from simple. Orbán and his allies still possess overwhelming economic power and, crucially, continue to conduct precise polling on voter attitudes. They use this data to constantly reshape the electoral system to their own advantage. If even a single housing estate swings, they can redraw the electoral map.

As the opposition's potential victory becomes increasingly plausible, the dominant topic in Hungary's independent media has become whether Orbán would actually relinquish power if he loses at the ballot box. A new narrative has emerged from the government, portraying the Tisza Party and Péter Magyar as Brussels agents, allegedly setting the stage for foreign interference.

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David versus Goliath

Orbán has referenced the "Romanian scenario" as a possible course of action and has repeatedly refused to give a clear answer when asked by journalists whether Magyar's Tisza Party will even be allowed to run in the 2026 parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, Hungary's public prosecutor has requested that the European Parliament removes Péter Magyar's immunity, keeping alive the looming possibility that the opposition leader could be treated in an authoritarian fashion. All of this, of course, only reinforces one thing: even Orbán's own assessments suggest he is on track to lose. He is now actively exploring fall-back options.

Should the Tisza Party be banned or crippled based on fabricated legal grounds, it could cross a red line – one that might push this already tense country to the brink of a civil conflict. But how did we get to this place in just one year? One would have to explore the unexpected rise of Péter Magyar, the political freefall of late-stage Orbánism, and the key questions at stake in Hungary's potential regime change in 2026.

Péter Magyar virtually came out of nowhere. He was the head of the Student Loan Centre and the anonymous husband of President Katalin Novák. He was a mid-level officer in the Orbán regime and a member of a prestigious legal dynasty. But last year, the president suddenly fell from grace. In spite of the government's deeply Christian, family-oriented image, she issued a controversial pardon to a former deputy of the Bicske children's home, who had been convicted of covering up child abuse. The scandal broke out and sparked mass protests. These were notably led not by politicians but by everyday YouTube influencers, showing how little trust the public had in the traditional opposition.

Should the Tisza Party be banned or crippled based on fabricated legal grounds, it could cross a red line.

Although the scandal revealed serious problems in the child protection system, Orbán made the president and the justice minister – tellingly, the only two prominent women in Fidesz – take the blame and resign. No one else was held accountable. This is when Péter Magyar appeared on "Partizán", the country's largest independent and critical YouTube channel, which is viewed by many as the "real public media" in contrast to the government's propaganda TV.

In the interview, he defended his ex-wife and launched a harsh critique of the system. The video quickly became the most-watched piece of political content in Hungarian YouTube history, reaching nearly three million views. What made it so explosive was that an insider was speaking out – turning against his own regime. But Magyar did not stop there. Encouraged by the success of his interview, he or-

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ganized his own protest in time for the national holiday. His demonstration was packed. What he did next revealed exactly how different he is from Orbán's previous, often impotent opposition.

Going to the people

Péter Magyar's first move was to take to the road on the back of a flatbed truck, touring the country and delivering rousing speeches about the corruption of the Orbán regime. He visited even the smallest villages. The phenomenon was so novel and striking that crowds visibly gathered in rural town squares to hear him. Through twice-daily Facebook Live video posts, the whole country could follow where he was speaking from and how his rhetoric kept improving. Since then, he has done several national tours, fully aware that to defeat Orbán he must focus on the countryside, where Fidesz is still strong, rather than the cities, where their support is fading.

Coming from inside the system, Magyar knows the Orbánist tactics well. He is prepared for them and consistently counters them. Yet, he goes further, doing what matters most in modern political communication: he sets the agenda. He is able to highlight the state of public services in a way that resonates. The traditional opposition has said for years that hospitals are crumbling and schools are failing, but they never made it emotionally tangible. As a result, the political discourse kept defaulting to issues of corruption and the rule of law. The first issue does not deeply move most people, and the second has become so normalized that it barely registers with the public anymore.

Magyar, through persistent grassroots work, has shattered one of the regime's key myths: "Sure, it's corrupt, but at least it governs effectively." He visits overheated hospitals in the summer, thermometer in hand, to show that it's 40 degrees inside. He takes delayed trains to demonstrate the dysfunction of the railway system. He somehow always beats the government media to the punch, leaving the state propaganda machine in disarray, scrambling to respond to a new, credible challenger.

From day one, he has been in charge of his own Facebook page – still the primary internet experience for most Hungarians. Without any media backing, he has used it to maintain a steady and direct communication channel with the public. He consistently outperforms all major Fidesz figures when it comes to the amount of "likes" despite their massive advertising budgets.

In addition to his national tour, Magyar took over a minor party, the Tisza Party, so he could quickly get on the ballot for the European Parliament elections last year. With unknown candidates, the party became the second-strongest political force

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Photo: Zoltan Galantai / Shutterstock

Peter Magyar, the vice president of the Tisza Party, invited interested parties to a picnic at the foot of Nógrád Castle on the first stop of his visit to Nógrád County in May 2024.

overnight. Notably, the party secured 1.3 million votes (29 per cent) in just three months, without a truly nationwide attempt at organization. But he did not stop there. He launched the idea of "Tisza islands" – local activist cells loosely affiliated with the party. This growing grassroots network became even more visible when he organized his own version of a national consultation in 2025, managing to set up campaign booths in virtually every Hungarian town. This civil infrastructure helps to offset Fidesz's overwhelming advantage in resources and institutional power.

Reframing 2026 as a regime-change election

Magyar is a former Fidesz insider and he openly embraces Christian and right-wing values, while at the same time speaking out in favour of restoring public services and setting up a more civic-minded state. This mirrors the mindset of post-socialist Hungarian voters: a culturally conservative surface layer, but with an undercurrent of social and economic leftism. Yet much of the traditional opposition identifies openly with leftist values. The question therefore arises regarding how to hold an anti-Orbán coalition together? Magyar's answer has been to reframe

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the election as a referendum on regime change. In this framing, there is no left and right – only those who support the system and those who oppose it. Anyone against him is against change; anyone with him is part of a national renewal. Even the financing of Tisza reflects this ethos: the party claims that it is funded entirely through membership fees. Supporters can buy a symbolic "regime change card", making every donor a literal stakeholder in the political transformation.

This has created a strange situation where there is a parliamentary opposition whose member parties now only poll at a few per cent. All independent research institutes show a similar trend; the Fidesz party is weakening, while Tisza is gaining strength.

The composition of voters is fairly consistent: among those under 40, Tisza's advantage over the ruling party is nearly twofold. In the next age group up, it only just leads. However, among those over 60, Fidesz holds a significant lead. Fidesz also maintains a strong advantage among voters with only primary education and this support declines proportionally with higher levels of schooling. Orbán seemingly now relies primarily on three groups: the poor, retirees, and ethnic Hungarians living beyond the country's borders. These groups have traditionally been more dependent on the state and thus less likely to abandon a system that in many ways keeps them in check.

Accordingly, Orbán makes visible gestures towards them. He recently launched a programme to reopen village pubs and promised a tougher crackdown on designer drugs. The race is now focused on these groups as they will partially decide the outcome of the 2026 election. Péter Magyar understands this well and he focuses almost exclusively on rural areas.

Among Hungarian voters under 40, Tisza's advantage over Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party is nearly twofold.

With the ethnic Hungarian minority mostly loyal to Orbán in Transylvania, a new fracture line has recently emerged with the rise of the Romanian far right. George Simion openly pursues an anti-Hungarian domestic agenda, while at the same time he considers Orbán as a role model. Orbán, in turn, sees him as a potential ally within the European Union and even expressed partial support for him in a speech in Tihany. This, however, provoked disapproval from the established Hungarian party in Romania, which urged Hungarian voters to support the liberal candidate, Nicușor Dan (who ultimately won the presidential election in May).

There is one more notable aspect: Tisza has a slightly weaker level of support among women. Several hypotheses have been offered. These include the ideas that women tend to be more conservative and slower to shift political preferences; older age groups include more women than men due to longer female life expectancy; and

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women generally consume less political content, so new political trends reach them more slowly. In any case, this is an area where Magyar still has room to improve.

The challenges of late Orbánism

Two things need to be understood about the Orbán system in Hungary. First, it is not a pure democracy. The opposition is effectively playing a football match where it is pre-emptively given three red cards. Second, Orbán governed for his first ten years during a period of economic boom. Oligarchs have risen everywhere, but the average person has also seen some improvement year on year. The general real wage increase is undeniable, especially from 2015 to 2020. However, the anomalies of Orbán's economic policy have been brought to the surface by the crises of recent years. Orbán's logic was that a "developmental state", modelled after Eastern regimes, could be implemented in a kind of enlightened autocracy. Yet, he forgot one crucial thing: the key to the success of developmental states is education and highly skilled human labour. Orbánism, however, is deeply anti-education. Funding for higher education has been continuously reduced and trimming university autonomy has not helped institutions either.

Thus, the key element left of Orbán's developmental policy is attracting foreign investment, offering tax breaks, and relying on a moderately skilled labour force that is minimally protected by labour laws. One aspect of this was the attempt to make Hungary into a battery industry superpower – one that is heavily tied to the automotive sector. The plan partly worked. For example, this year Europe's largest battery factory operated by CATL will open in Debrecen (although, due to the current uncertainty caused by the trade war, the Chinese manufacturer has postponed the construction of the second part of the factory). But the battery sector is highly dependent on global supply chains that are vulnerable to disruptions.

The US trade war with Europe damages the German car industry on which Hungary's economy is most dependent.

Hungary is a small open economy, so it is highly exposed to international trends. Ironically, Orbán is not helped by his great ally in Washington, Donald Trump. The trade war with Europe damages the German car industry on which Hungary's economy is most dependent. Thus, the paradox deepens: the MAGA movement's big victory globally actually strengthens liberal forces as seen in the recent elections in Canada and Australia. Due to poor economic management and the election handouts in 2022, Hungary has held one of the highest inflation rates in the European Union for several years now. When combining central statistical

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data, Hungary's economy has experienced at least 50 per cent inflation over the past five years, with food prices increasing particularly sharply.

In addition to inflation, GDP data also shows that an economic crisis is brewing. In the first quarter of 2025 there has been another recession, while wage growth has stopped and the budget deficit has skyrocketed. On top of this, Orbán has escalated his self-serving battle with European elites to the point where key EU funds have been cut off. As a result, many developments in Hungary have come to a halt and there seems to be little chance that this situation will improve within a year.

Authoritarian endgame?

Most Hungarian political analysts agree that the strongest factor determining Péter Magyar's chances is the country's economic indicators. If the economic decline continues, Orbánism will not be able to maintain its economic legitimacy, which it was able to rely on for a decade. Although the government might start distributing benefits through loans, it would place the country in a very difficult situation in the long run.

For all these reasons, it is worth paying attention to Hungary in the coming year, as domestic politics has become more turbulent than it has been in the past 15 years. Hungary has broken free from inertia, which has sparked hope in many, but fuelled fears with others. A strong opposition challenger managed to clear away the fragmented and discredited opposition field. This is important, because after 2010, Fidesz transformed the electoral system into one based on majoritarian representation. The "winner takes all" principle reinforced this idea of power being centralized. The essence of this system was that parties to the left and right of Fidesz were unable to defeat it alone, and the significant ideological distance between them prevented any meaningful alliance.

Now even this line of defence has collapsed. Orbán will be forced to face Magyar directly, one-on-one. If elections were held today, according to surveys, Orbán could likely lose that battle. Yet, the question remains: how far will Orbán go to maintain power? The government's main narrative is that the opposition is treasonous. Can an outcome that would see the nation torn apart be avoided in this tense situation? And in case of a victory, would Péter Magyar, who emerged from the Orbán regime, really bring about a qualitative change? ŁE

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Authoritarian sandbox

Belarus as a testing ground for 21st century repression

LEANID MAROZAU

This year's so-called presidential elections in Belarus were nothing more than a staged farce, designed to legitimize Lukashenka's continued authoritarian rule. The absence of genuine competition, the lack of transparency, and the climate of fear surrounding the process underscored the regime's disregard for democratic principles.

The 2025 "presidential elections" in Belarus have come and gone, leaving behind a predictable outcome: a reaffirmation of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's authoritarian grip on power. Far from resembling a legitimate democratic process, the elections were a meticulously staged performance, devoid of genuine opposition, independent observers or transparency. This farce was not merely an exercise in self-reappointment – it was a glaring demonstration of a regime clinging to power through fear and repression.

The fraudulent elections serve as a stark reminder of the fragility of Lukashenka's regime, which relies on systemic violence and control to suppress dissent. Yet repression is no longer confined to Belarus's borders. The regime has extended its authoritarian reach, targeting those who have fled the country to escape persecution, further demonstrating its disregard for international norms and human rights.

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Pre-orchestrated farce

The so-called "elections" in Belarus, held in January, once again demonstrated the regime's authoritarian grip on power. Far from a genuine democratic process, these elections amounted to a mere exercise in self-reappointment for Lukashenka. Without opposition candidates, independent election observation, or safeguards against voter intimidation, the elections failed to meet even the most minimal democratic standards. International observers, including the OSCE and the European Parliament, have already condemned the process, emphasizing the absence of free and fair conditions. Just before the so-called elections, the regime began conducting "preventive talks" and rearresting those who had already participated in the 2020 protests. This indicated the government's readiness to harshly suppress any signs of disloyalty during the election campaign.

To maintain absolute control the regime implemented new repressive measures, criminalizing independent election monitoring and photographing ballots. Fraudulent results were orchestrated by state employees, while the Central Election Commission approved only regime loyalists as candidates. Internet shutdowns during the days of the election further silenced independent voices, suppressing reporting and communication.

Lukashenka's intent was clear: to stage the elections as a spectacle in order to project a facade of stability and legitimacy. Simultaneously, repression escalated, with a wave of arrests targeting dissenters in the lead-up to the vote. The regime ensured that over 500,000 Belarusians living abroad were excluded from voting, effectively silencing a significant portion of the population. These actions underscore the regime's strategy of maintaining power through systemic control and the elimination of opposition.

The regime's reliance on systemic violence is both its strength and its greatest vulnerability. The use of arbitrary detentions, "incommunicado" imprisonment, and judicial persecution has created an environment of fear. Since the fraudulent elections of 2020, over 65,000 politically-motivated detentions have been reported. The scale of repression is staggering: at least 1,265 political prisoners, including 168 women, remain behind bars, while independent civil society organizations have been dismantled. As of the end of March there are 33 people who have been sent for forced treatment for political reasons, at least 23 of whom had already been recognized as political prisoners. These individuals are being held in psychiatric clinics for an indefinite period of time without the right to amnesty or early release. Denying such figures the right to talk to family and friends is also common practice here. No less than 219 political prisoners are at particular risk. Seventy-eight people are in precarious health behind bars, while eight have disabilities, 32

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are over the age of 60 (many of them have serious health problems), and ten have mental disorders.

Psychiatric punishment for dissent

In 2025, a group of UN human rights experts raised alarm over the Belarusian regime's use of forced psychiatric treatment as a tool of political punishment. At least 33 individuals – including five women and one person aged 77 – have been transferred to psychiatric facilities in retaliation for expressing dissent. Held incommunicado under indefinite confinement, these individuals are denied the right to legal defence or parole. The experts denounced this practice as amounting to inhumane and degrading treatment, emphasizing that such punitive psychiatry erodes the rule of law and violates international human rights norms.

The regime's repression is sustained by a combination of Soviet-style intimidation and modern surveillance tools. Platforms like Telegram, once instrumental in organizing protests, are now under constant surveillance. Even symbolic acts of resistance, such as wearing the wrong colours or posting a critical message online, can lead to prosecution. For political prisoners, isolation is one of the most punishing tools.

In 2024 alone, the Belarusian State Control Committee opened 44 criminal cases for alleged financing of "extremist activities". Authorities reported the detention of 1,445 individuals who made small financial transfers via platforms like Facebook Pay to independent civil society groups. This sweeping campaign illustrates how even charitable support for civic activism is being reclassified as terrorism and criminalized by the regime.

Platforms like Telegram, once instrumental in organizing protests, are now under constant surveillance.

Many political prisoners in Belarus are held in incommunicado detention, a method the regime uses to break their spirits and isolate them from their families and legal support. These prisoners are denied the right to correspondence, phone calls or visits, including from lawyers, leaving their families in complete uncertainty about their health and well-being. Prominent detainees, such as Mikalai Statkevich, Maryia Kalesnikava, Ihar Losik, Maksym Znak, Viktar Babaryka and others, have been in isolation for months or even years. This tactic amplifies the psychological torment for both the prisoners and their loved ones, cutting off any connection to the outside world. Cases like these demonstrate the regime's deliberate use of isolation as a tool of repression, aiming to dehumanize opponents and silence dissent.

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Repression beyond borders

Lukashenka's repressions now increasingly target Belarusians abroad, extending his reach far beyond the country's borders. The regime exploits tools like Interpol's Red Notice system to pursue political opponents, with some facing extradition from countries such as Vietnam, where a return to Belarus could mean a death sentence. In the last year there have been at least three cases with Belarusians – Dmitry Pleskachev, Andrei Gnyot and Dziana Maiseyenka – against whom politically-motivated cases were launched in Belarus. All of these activists were eventually released, and the charges against them were recognized as political persecution. Such cases, which are becoming more frequent, highlight the growing dangers for Belarusians in exile.

Between 2023 and 2025, the Belarusian and Russian intelligence services conducted a coordinated psychological operation targeting the Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania, according to the country's state security. This campaign escalated from online threats to real-world acts of vandalism and attempted violence. A Belarusian-owned shop had its windows smashed, a chapel was shot at, and anti-opposition graffiti appeared in public spaces. In 2025 security services even tried to recruit attackers through social media to physically assault diaspora members – a disturbing sign of the growing cross-border dimension of Belarusian repression.

Beyond physical threats, the regime employs economic and legal measures to harass those who have left. Confiscation of property is now commonplace, with exiles unable to access, sell or manage apartments and other real estate left behind. It has become a common practice of the Lukashenka regime to launch criminal proceedings following protests or other events organized abroad by democratic forces. This happened last year when the Investigative Committee of Belarus initiated cases against participants of the peaceful Freedom Day demonstrations held on March 25th in various countries where Belarusians live in exile. Citing Article 361–1 of the Criminal Code, the authorities accused them of "discrediting the Republic of Belarus".

This is part of a well-established pattern of transnational repression aimed at intimidating and silencing dissenting voices beyond Belarus's borders. In addition to the criminal charges, the authorities have conducted home searches and confiscated property belonging to identified participants. The targeting of those who commemorate Freedom Day – whether inside the country or abroad – remains one of the key instruments of political persecution used by the regime to instil fear and suppress pro-democracy activism. At the same time, Belarusians abroad face severe limitations on accessing consular services, making it impossible to renew passports or obtain essential documents. This effectively renders many stateless

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and undermines their ability to secure stability in their host countries. This also applies to children who are already beginning to be born outside of Belarus and whose parents cannot return to Belarus for political reasons to obtain an identity document for the child. They also cannot obtain a foreign passport because their host country does not have such an option.

In April 2025, Viasna, a human rights organization, reported police raids on homes in the town of Dzyarzhynsk, targeting people who had already left the country. At least four such cases were documented, with search protocols issued in a single copy and not shared with the affected individuals. These raids appear to be part of a broader strategy to intimidate and punish dissidents abroad by targeting their families and properties left behind.

The regime's actions substantially impair the everyday experiences of Belarusians residing outside their homeland, especially in Poland which hosts the largest Belarusian diaspora. There are several hundred thousand Belarusians living in Poland today. The limited access to essential services and property ownership disrupts livelihoods and exacerbates the difficulties of establishing a new life in exile. For many, these policies represent an enduring reminder of the regime's unwavering efforts to assert dominance, extending beyond the borders of Belarus.

Role of democratic forces

Despite relentless repression, the Belarusian democratic forces remain steadfast in their efforts to counter the regime and support Belarusians both inside the country and in exile. Under the leadership of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, these forces have succeeded in keeping Belarus on the international agenda, mobilizing resources, and advocating for democratic reforms. The establishment of the United Transitional Cabinet has been instrumental in coordinating these efforts, providing a structured approach to resisting Lukashenka's regime.

In April 2025 the senior diplomatic advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Dzianis Kuchynski, participated in the funeral ceremony for Pope Francis. There, he held informal talks with several world leaders – including the presidents of Argentina, Albania and Moldova – as well as foreign ministers and high-ranking church officials. These meetings, although brief, reflect the continued efforts of the democratic opposition to maintain international engagement and recognition, despite having no formal state status.

Among the key achievements of the democratic movement is the prevention of deportations of Belarusians from abroad, where they would face prosecution or worse upon return. The meticulous human rights defenders' documentation of

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human rights abuses and submission of cases to the International Criminal Court (ICC) represent crucial steps toward holding the regime accountable for its crimes.

New initiatives also reflect the adaptability and determination of the opposition. The introduction of a new Belarusian passport, spearheaded by Tsikhanouskaya's office, aims to address the challenges faced by exiles who are unable to access Belarusian consular services. Meanwhile, creative resistance and global advocacy continue to highlight the regime's illegitimacy. Campaigns like "Belarusians Deserve Better" and large-scale rallies in cities such as Warsaw, Vilnius and beyond have united the diaspora and strengthened international solidarity. Regular protests and cultural events not only expose the fraudulent tactics of the regime but also keep the vision of a democratic future alive among Belarusians worldwide.

The Belarusian democratic forces remain steadfast in their efforts to counter the regime and support all Belarusians.

On the 39th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, in 2025, the Belarusian diaspora in Vilnius organized a commemoration that doubled as a protest against the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus. The event brought together Belarusians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians with a wider group of diplomats and representatives of international organizations. It highlighted how environmental and anti-nuclear activism has become a rallying point for the diaspora's resistance to Lukashenka's alignment with the Kremlin.

Defying the regime

Inside Belarus, the mood is one of cautious hope mixed with despair. Fear dominates everyday life, reinforced by the omnipresent threat of surveillance and repression. Yet even in this climate, acts of resistance persist. From underground cultural initiatives to the smuggling of information out of the country, ordinary Belarusians continue to defy the regime in subtle but meaningful ways. For the opposition, the ultimate goal is clear: a Belarus where the rule of law prevails, political prisoners are freed, and democratic institutions are rebuilt. The dream of a free Belarus sustains the resilience of those fighting for change, both within the country and in exile. Therefore, it is essential to go through the process of transitional justice. A well-passed transitional period will allow Belarusians to form a democratic society with a collective memory of the events of recent years, which have involved totalitarianism, repression and mass violations of human rights. It will also help them to develop mechanisms for preventing such events from recurring in the future.

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The international community must continue to reject the legitimacy of Lukashenka's regime while prioritizing support for Belarusian civil society and the diaspora. Initiatives such as scholarships, visa programmes, and cross-border exchanges remain essential for sustaining the democratic movement and providing opportunities for Belarusians in exile.

Efforts to amplify the voices of political prisoners and expose the regime's human rights violations are equally critical. These prisoners include not only Belarusians but also foreign nationals who have been caught in the regime's dragnet. Among them is also Andrzej Poczobut, a journalist and activist from the Polish minority, but also citizens of countries like Germany, Israel and the United States. At the time of writing, there are at least 36 foreign citizens who have been recognized as political prisoners and are being held in Belarusian prisons. In some cases, detainees have faced the prospect of death sentences, underscoring the regime's disregard for international norms and human rights.

> The dream of a free Belarus sustains the resilience of those fighting for change both within and outside the country.

It would be a mistake to think that Belarusian repression abroad is limited to diplomatic harassment or passport denials. In recent years, Belarusian and Russian intelligence operations have extended into active sabotage and espionage in neighbouring countries. In Poland, a country that has become a safe haven for hundreds of thousands of Belarusians, several cases have emerged. In one instance, a Belarusian citizen pretending to be a political refugee was arrested for setting fire to a major home improvement store in Warsaw – an act allegedly carried out on behalf of Russian intelligence. In another case, multiple Belarusian nationals were arrested for gathering information on military infrastructure and attempting sabotage, including photographing arms shipments heading to Ukraine. These incidents, though still relatively rare, prove that espionage and hybrid attacks are not theoretical threats – they are already happening, and the Lukashenka regime plays a willing part in them.

In search of hope

The so-called presidential elections of 2025 in Belarus were nothing more than a staged farce, designed to legitimize Lukashenka's continued authoritarian rule. The absence of genuine competition, the lack of transparency, and the climate of fear surrounding the process underscored the regime's disregard for democratic principles. This spectacle served not to strengthen Lukashenka's hold but to reveal the deep fragility of a dictatorship that relies on intimidation and repression to survive.

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Despite these grim realities, there is hope. Much of this hope is sustained by the unwavering support of neighbouring countries like Poland and Lithuania, which have provided refuge and aid to the largest Belarusian diasporas. Their governments, along with the solidarity of their citizens, have played a pivotal role in keeping the democratic movement alive, offering practical assistance and a safe haven to those who have fled persecution.

While the path to a free and democratic Belarus remains challenging, history shows that no dictatorship can last indefinitely. With the ongoing support of the international community, coordinated advocacy, and the resilience of the Belarusian people, change is not just possible – it is inevitable. The voices of those fighting for freedom, both within Belarus and in exile, remind us that justice and democracy can prevail, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. EE

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Belarus after the war

PAVLO RAD

A possible truce in Russia's war against Ukraine, resulting in what could be a frozen conflict, looks to be the best scenario for Alyaksandr Lukashenka. On the one hand, Russia would not completely shift away from its military focus, keeping a large army near the front line and preparing for possible future operations. On the other hand, a truce could help open the door to a partial lifting of western sanctions, many of which were imposed alongside Russia.

In late 2024, the potential return of Donald Trump was perceived by the Belarusian authorities as a window of opportunity for political bargaining with the West in the shadow of the start of possible peace talks over the Russo-Ukrainian War. In order to be as prepared as possible, the Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka held his electoral campaign six months before the end of his 2020 presidential term, right on the verge of the inauguration of the new US president. As a part of this, Belarus began sending signals to western countries. For example, Minsk granted amnesty to political prisoners, including three American citizens. One of these figures was released after US Deputy Assistant State Secretary Christopher W. Smith visited Belarus alongside two other officials on February 12th.

However, efforts to establish contact with the new US presidential administration are only one part of the broader processes in Belarus's foreign and domestic policy. The primary goal is to preserve and ensure the continued functioning of the Lukashenka regime. Its future will depend not only on the dynamics of rela-

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tions with key actors such as Russia, China and the United States, but also on the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine. It is the result of this war that will determine how Minsk will have to respond to existing challenges and whether it will succeed in implementing its plans for the country's transformation.

Comfortable status quo

Paradoxically as it may sound, the continuation of the hot phase of the war is more beneficial for the regime in Minsk than the establishment of a long-term peace. Thanks to Belarus's role in supporting Russia's war effort, Minsk is experiencing the best period in relations with Moscow for the last 30 years. Russia now perceives Belarus as a key stronghold on the main front of its war with the West, while the Lukashenka regime can use this as an argument to receive subsidies and economic support from the Kremlin.

Yet, should any of the sides achieve significant success, this fragile balance would be disrupted. A Russian victory could inspire it to pursue new military or political conquests in the region, also at the expense of Belarusian sovereignty. Conversely, a Ukrainian success might encourage the process of Russia's internal destabilization, calling into question its ability to continue supporting the Lukashenka regime.

The rapid normalization of Moscow's relations with the West would also put Lukashenka in a difficult position. The Belarusian stronghold would lose its relevance, thus downgrading Minsk's value for the Kremlin. What is more, as a result of a détente in Russia's relations with western countries, the regime would lose a significant portion of its neighbour's market if western companies and capital return. Therefore, in order to secure access to Russian resources in both the short and long term, the Lukashenka regime would need to come up with other ways to show its importance to the Kremlin.

The possible situation of a Russia-Ukraine ceasefire looks to be the best possible scenario for Lukashenka.

The possible situation of a Russia-Ukraine truce, such as a frozen conflict along the frontlines, looks to be the best possible scenario for Lukashenka. On the one hand, Russia would not completely shift away from its military focus, keeping a large army near the frontline and preparing for possible future operations against Ukraine. On the other hand, a truce could help open the door to a partial lifting of western sanctions, many of which were imposed alongside Russia. This could help the Belarusian economy at least partially minimize any risks associated with western companies' return to Russia.

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Geopolitical risk management

In anticipation of possible negotiations and a normalization of relations between Russia and the United States, Belarus has begun signalling its openness to the West. Since July 2024, the government has initiated multiple rounds of amnesty, resulting in the release of 293 political prisoners. To bolster this image shift, Roman Protasevich, a former dissident turned pro-government blogger who was infamously pulled off a Ryanair flight in 2021 after a fabricated bomb threat, published photos of prominent opposition leaders Maria Kolesnikova and Viktor Babariko, which depicted them in reasonably good health. Their condition had been unknown for over 18 months. In a similar gesture, Lukashenka released the American citizen Anastasia Nuhfer in February, a move later confirmed by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The timing of this release, coming shortly after a visit to Minsk by two US State Department representatives, and coinciding with both Belarus's presidential election and Donald Trump's inauguration, suggested a calculated attempt by Minsk to demonstrate its readiness for political dialogue with Washington.

Later, on April 30th, Minsk played one of its strongest cards by releasing US citizen Yuri Zenkovich, who had been sentenced to 13 years in prison for an alleged attempt to stage a coup. Zenkovich became the first high-profile political prisoner to be officially pardoned by Lukashenka. Taking into consideration information about Washington's readiness to ease sanctions on Belarusian banks and potash exports in exchange for the release of a significant number of political prisoners, it is highly likely that Zenkovich's release formed part of this broader strategic calculation. This move perhaps even served as a prerequisite for continuing dialogue between Belarus and the United States.

At the same time, Minsk's efforts to minimize risks are not limited to its engagement with western countries, as the government is actively pursuing other strategic directions. One of the key priorities in the coming months will be expanding the geographical scope of Belarusian exports. Senior officials, including former Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko, have repeatedly acknowledged the country's economic challenges, particularly a decline in export volumes. To address this, Minsk appears focused on deepening ties with Asian countries, especially those in Central Asia. This strategy is reflected in intensified diplomatic outreach and the appointment of ambassadors with strong economic credentials to key capitals in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

China will continue to serve as Belarus's primary foothold in Asia and remain its second-most important partner after Russia. Amid the potential start of peace talks regarding the Russia–Ukraine war, Beijing's influence is expected to grow

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Despite all of Minsk's manoeuvring, the truth is that Lukashenka has put himself in a situation where any scenario that may arise risks opening a Pandora's box regarding the fate of both his regime and Belarus itself.

further. Since the summer of 2024 there has been a marked increase in Chinese activity in Belarus, including a surge in diplomatic engagements and the first-ever joint military exercises held on Belarusian soil.

Looking ahead, it will be critical for Minsk to secure continued political and economic support from China, something Lukashenka hopes to reinforce with a future visit to Beijing. This follows a previously planned January trip that was unexpectedly cancelled. The key goals for this partnership include attracting more Chinese investment and boosting bilateral trade.

At the same time, Minsk must also continue to prove its strategic value to Russia in order to avoid any setbacks after the active phase of the war concludes. Russia remains the cornerstone of Belarus's foreign and economic policy, as well as the primary guarantor of regime stability. To maintain access to Russian resources in case of a rapprochement between Russia and the West, the Lukashenka regime will likely seek to demonstrate its usefulness to the Kremlin. This could include increas-

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ing the role of the Belarusian defence industry in supporting Russian rearmament and promoting Minsk's own economic model, such as the idea of implementing a state planning system, as a blueprint for Moscow, with the aim of securing preferential treatment or other benefits in return.

Power transit dilemma

This intricate foreign policy configuration serves not only to maintain the current regime's stability but also to lay the groundwork for its eventual transformation. Currently, the Belarusian political system is undergoing a gradual transformation, driven by two key factors: the worsening health of Lukashenka, and the inevitable need to manage a transfer of power in the future. In response, Lukashenka has begun enacting a series of legislative measures designed to safeguard the system he has built and to ensure its continuity after his departure.

Lukashenka is intent on preventing so-called "destructive forces" from gaining entry into the country's highest political offices.

This effort is being implemented through several simultaneous mechanisms. First, Lukashenka is intent on preventing the so-called "destructive forces" from gaining entry into the country's highest political offices or contesting the presidency. In January 2024 he signed sweeping amendments to the presidential law. These changes raise the minimum age for presidential candidates to 40 and require at least 20 years of residency in Belarus, double the previous requirement. Additionally, for the first time, the law disqualifies individuals with foreign citizenship, permanent residency abroad or any foreign-issued documents granting special privileges from running for the presidency. Second, Lukashenka has ensured legal protections for himself and his family in the event of a leadership change. The updated legislation broadens the scope of state-provided benefits for the president and his relatives. For the first time it introduces provisions resembling diplomatic immunity at the national level, including protection from prosecution for actions taken while in office and the inviolability of personal property, vehicles, residences and correspondence. The law also guarantees lifelong medical care, a state pension, and tax exemptions for the former president and his family.

Third, Lukashenka still holds a key institutional instrument that could facilitate a transition of power if necessary: the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. Originally envisioned as a means for a controlled succession, similar to the model used by Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, the Assembly was meant to serve as a platform from which Lukashenka could retain overarching influence as its head,

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while a new president assumed a more symbolic role. Following the mass protests of 2020 and closer alignment with Moscow, the transition plan was put on hold as Lukashenka reasserted control with Kremlin backing. Since then, the Assembly has functioned more as a ceremonial body, with little real political power. Nevertheless, it remains embedded in the regime's institutional design and could be reactivated at a critical moment. Should the need arise, Lukashenka could enhance its authority, using it as both a mechanism for influence over domestic politics and an additional layer of personal security.

Key challenges to be faced

Despite these preparations, it remains uncertain whether they will ultimately result in the appointment of a successor or a voluntary transfer of power. Lukashenka is unlikely to proceed with such a transition unless he is confident that it will not be disrupted by regional instability or shifting dynamics in Belarus's relations with Russia and the West, especially during such a sensitive period for the regime. Without clear guarantees about the outcome of the war and the preservation of Belarusian sovereignty, the prospect of a voluntary handover remains remote. The memory of the 2020 protests continues to cast a long shadow over Lukashenka, further limiting the paths available for a peaceful transition.

Lukashenka can also not count on thawing relations with the West given Belarusian support for Russia's war against Ukraine, reluctant as it may have been. If the US has recently shown more interest in dialogue with the Belarusian authorities, problems in relations with European countries remain relevant, particularly as they have not shown any willingness to revise their stance toward Belarus.

Lukashenka cannot count on thawing relations with the West, given Belarusian support for Russia's war on Ukraine.

This applies primarily to Lithuania and Poland. Without normalizing relations with these two countries, Minsk is unlikely to restore its foreign policy standing to the level seen in 2019. It appears that Lithuania will be the least likely to adjust its approach, as doing so would effectively mean admitting the failure of its backing of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Poland, on the other hand, may be somewhat more open to reconsidering its policies, especially given its economic interests, as Warsaw has been increasing its exports to Belarus. However, given the escalating migration crisis on the border and the imprisonment of Andrzej Poczobut – an activist for the Polish minority in Belarus sentenced to eight years of prison – any rapproachement seems to be a quite distant prospect.

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Pandora's box

Despite all of Minsk's manoeuvring, the truth is that Lukashenka has put himself in a situation where any scenario that may arise risks opening a Pandora's box regarding the fate of both his regime and Belarus itself. Guided by his own interests and regularly focusing on the short and medium-term outlook, Lukashenka is losing sight of the country's strategic development, thereby making it hostage to a volatile foreign policy environment.

Even the most favourable scenario for Minsk, the end of Russia's war in Ukraine in the form of a frozen conflict, does not guarantee that in a few years all the efforts of Belarusian officials will not be nullified by another reckless adventure from Moscow, one that could target not only Ukraine but other European states as well. Recognizing Belarus's strategic role, Ukraine and western countries must prepare for the possible sudden emergence of a power vacuum in Belarus, as well as additional Russian efforts to control Minsk and ultimately dissolve Belarus's sovereignty. Otherwise, the balance of power in the region will irreversibly shift in favour of Moscow, putting the whole European continent at risk. EE

This text was written before the US-negotiated June 21st release of 14 political prisoners from Belarus, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski.

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Why the Black Sea is vital to Ukraine

JAKUB ŁOGINOW

Ukraine's successes in the Black Sea are among the most unexpected developments in the current war waged by Russia in the country since 2022. Russia aimed to defeat Ukraine not only through military means but also by crippling its economy. This scenario did not materialize. On the contrary, Ukraine's military, economic and logistical gains in the Black Sea and Danube waterways secured critical export revenues for Kyiv, allowing the Ukrainian state to function.

On February 24th 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine not only from land and air, but also from the sea. The Russian fleet occupied the entire Azov Sea and almost all of the Ukrainian Black Sea basin. At first, the Russians captured the strategically important Snake Island located near the coast of Romania. For several months they also occupied Kherson and its seaport, as well as attempted a landing at Odesa. They blocked Ukrainian ports to strangle the economy, drive the state budget into bankruptcy and cause social unrest. The Kremlin hoped that the lack of export revenues would in the end lead to Kyiv's capitulation.

Prior to 2022, the Ukrainian economy was heavily dependent on exports, particularly of grains, food products, raw materials such as iron ore, and heavy industrial goods including metallurgical and metal products. This strong export orientation was largely due to a relatively small domestic market. The incomes of Ukrainian households, especially outside Kyiv, were among the lowest in Europe, resulting in limited domestic consumption. However, starting in the early 2000s the Ukrainian economy began to steadily grow and became more innovative. High-

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quality food products, such as beverages, sweets, and fruit and vegetable preserves from Ukraine started to show up on European markets. Ukraine also became an exporter of modern boats, ships and industrial equipment. Despite this diversification, the bulk of Ukrainian exports in 2021 still consisted of raw materials and low-processed goods. Their transport by road was economically unviable. They were shipped primarily through sea routes and the Danube waterway, as well as by rail.

Danube operation

In the first months of the full-scale war, Ukraine focused on two ways to transport its goods abroad. Kyiv created alternative land routes for the export of grains and other goods, which were mainly sent to European ports. In addition, it sought alternative waterways such as the ports at Constanța in Romania and Gdańsk in Poland. However, while cooperation with Romania worked well, the Polish ports proved to be unprepared for the new challenges. Their terminals were of insufficient capacity to handle large grain transports, while the rail transport routes between the Ukrainian border and Polish Baltic coast were deemed inefficient. As a result, land transport helped Ukraine only partially.

Kyiv thus quickly recognized the urgent need to unblock its routes on the Black Sea, where in early 2022 it only had access to three small Danube seaports. These were: Izmail, Reni and Ust-Dunaisk. Additionally, Kyiv could make limited use of Giurgiulești, the sole seaport of neighbouring Moldova. All of these ports are situated along the Danube river, which in this region is classified as internal maritime waters that can be accessed only by seagoing vessels with a moderate draught.

The small port of Izmail suddenly became Ukraine's most vital gateway to the world, replacing Odesa.

Known as the Budjak region, this area was largely neglected until 2021. The maritime infrastructure, centred around the city of Izmail, was underdeveloped and inefficient. This situation had to change almost overnight due to the war. The small port of Izmail suddenly became Ukraine's most vital gateway to the world, effectively stepping into the role once held by Odesa. What helped in this process was a change in the high-level personnel of the Ukrainian Danube Shipping Company. The new manager, Dmytro Moskalenko, initiated reforms, paid off outstanding debts, and restored the credibility of the previously mismanaged state-owned enterprise.

In addition, to create new routes, the Ukrainians established cooperation with partners from Romania, Serbia, Austria, Germany and other countries, which also

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allowed them to come up with innovative logistics solutions. Cooperation with nearby Constanța in Romania, the largest Black Sea port and an ocean hub, became the most important in this regard. By organizing "transhipments" of grain at the roadstead of the Constanța port, where goods were transferred from smaller-size ships and barges to large ocean-going vessels, the Ukrainians managed to accelerate their transport and avoid congestion. As a result, the maritime enterprises operating on the Ukrainian Danube waterways began generating significant profits and increased cargo transhipments – all while operating under constant threat from Russian shelling. Some missiles even landed on the Romanian side of the river.

All said, for over a year the once quiet and overlooked Budjak region became a strategically vital area, critical to sustaining Ukraine's trade, economy and state budget. Its local population, including workers in the maritime sector, railways and related industries, demonstrated remarkable dedication, showing a strong sense of responsibility towards the Ukrainian state. As a result, the so-called "Danube operation" can be called a success. In other words, Ukraine managed to withstand the maritime blockade during the most challenging period of the first months of the war. As a result, by autumn 2022, its GDP began to rebound.

Asymmetrical warfare

At the same time, Russia started to feel the pressure of the so-called Global South when countries from Asia and Africa started to voice their fears about the consequences of the disruption to Ukrainian grain supply chains. To alleviate these concerns, the Black Sea Grain Corridor was established through Turkey's mediation. Although in a limited capacity it operated for one year, from July 2022 to July 2023, and allowed for the trade of grain to leave Odesa ports.

As a result of this initiative, in less than half a year since the onset of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine began to regain control of the Black Sea. It also managed to push Russian forces out of Snake Island, with this happening on June 30th 2022. By 2024, Ukrainian air and sea drones destroyed a third of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which was forced to withdraw from its base in Sevastopol and move to Novorossiysk, a city in Krasnodar Krai.

Without a doubt, these victories in the Black Sea can be seen as an example of successful asymmetric warfare. Ukraine achieved them even though it faced the traditionally mighty Black Sea Fleet, which had enjoyed such esteem since the Soviet times. For this reason, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, independent Ukraine and the Russian Federation fought over its ownership. The outcome of the dispute, which ended in 1995, proved unfavourable to Ukraine as it was allowed

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to keep only 18.3 per cent of the fleet. With time, due to lack of investments and corruption, these assets also deteriorated. After the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, Ukraine lost most of these ships. Hence, when the full-scale invasion started in early 2022, Russia's victory on the Black Sea seemed inevitable. Overtime, however, Ukraine proved this assumption wrong. It demonstrated that it can destroy the seemingly "invincible" Russian fleet with inexpensive air and sea drones. In this regard, Ukrainians have shown great skills, ingenuity and precision, which – in turn – allowed them to achieve large gains at rather small costs in terms of human losses.

Risks

In July 2023, Russia unilaterally terminated the Black Sea Grain Initiative, despite protests from countries in the Global South. In response, Ukraine announced that it would create its own trade corridor and, together with allies, guarantee its protection from Russian attacks. In late August 2023, the Ukrainian Maritime Corridor commenced operations. It connects the ports of Greater Odesa (Odesa, Chornomorsk and Pivdennyi) with the Bosporus and Dardanelles Straits. However, for security reasons, its route has been moved westward. To reach the safe territorial waters of Romania, merchant ships, when sailing in Ukrainian territorial waters, have to remain very close to the coastline. Despite some initial concerns, the corridor has proved to function quite well. It is used by the ships that are owned by the most important global shipping companies, and it has allowed for the level of transhipments at Greater Odesa to return to their pre-war levels.

In 2023 Russia unilaterally terminated the Black Sea Grain Initiative, despite protests from countries in the Global South.

As stated above, there was some doubt whether wartime conditions would allow for such shipping practices. It was also unclear whether in a time of war international capital would participate in business ventures or be willing to insure ships that sail to Odesa. Reality has proven that such challenges can be overcome, illustrating that similar risks are inherent to the business of global maritime trade. These problems are scrutinized by those who are involved in this business. For example, the Red Sea, which is not that far away from the Black Sea, presents similar challenges. Merchant ships sailing in this water basin are also exposed to shelling and forced boardings. Such threats can be issued by Houthi rebels, or come from the territory of Somalia, as well as other places where pirate attacks occur.

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Clusters

Ukraine has a long coastline within its internationally recognized borders. Its length is deemed to be 2,782 kilometres. In comparison, Germany's North Sea and Baltic Sea coastline is approximately 1,200 km long (excluding the islands), while Poland's sea coast is 770 km long. From the moment it gained independence in 1991 until the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine developed its port and maritime industry along the coastline. Today, its seaports are divided into several clusters, with each of them having a slightly different function and specialization.

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The westernmost is the Danube cluster. This includes the aforementioned ports of Reni, Izmail and Ust'-Danube. However, the most important among the clusters is the Odesa cluster. This includes three major ports that make up the Odesa agglomeration: Odesa, Chornomorsk and Pivdennyi, as well as some smaller ports (for example, Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi). These ports are multi-purpose in nature. They contain container terminals, ferry terminals, general cargo terminals, and bulk terminals where the handling of grains, oil products and other goods takes place. Odesa ports are exceptionally well located – both seaward and landward. They also have excellent navigational parameters (including great depths) and good infrastructure, alongside rail, road and pipeline connections to the hinterland.

Ukrainian seaports are now divided into several clusters, with each having a slightly different function and specialization.

Another cluster is made up of the ports in the cities of Mykolayiv and Kherson, including the specialized port of Olvia near Mykolayiv. They are not located on the open sea, but in the estuary sections of the large navigable rivers Buh (Southern Buh) and Dnieper. Ukraine currently controls both of these cities, but they are under constant fire. Their proximity to the frontline explains why the port infrastructure has been badly damaged.

For this reason, the ports are currently using their potential only to a limited degree. We can yet expect their full reactivation once the hostilities end. Both cities will probably then focus on developing their modern port industries, including shipbuilding. Such scenarios should be taken into account in discussions on Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Other port clusters are currently under Russian occupation. These are the Crimean cluster and the Azov cluster. The Azov cluster includes, among others, the ports of Berdiansk and Mariupol. Before 2014, these ports played an important role in Ukraine's foreign trade. However, they were also important for the Donbas trade, including exports of coal and steel products from Donbas and neighbouring regions (including Zaporizhzhia).

Prospects

One can make an educated guess that the best development prospects are foreseen for ports and maritime enterprises (including shipyards) that make up the Odesa and Danube clusters. Their development is already happening despite the ongoing war. At the moment, there is less probability of Ukraine quickly regaining Crimea and the Azov Sea coast. However, even if this scenario were to happen, it is true that the seaports in this area are of little importance to Ukraine for mari-

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time trade, although they are of military importance. The mines and industries of Donbas and eastern Ukraine have been badly destroyed, which explains why today Kyiv does not necessarily need the Azov Sea ports.

The possible regaining of Crimea and the Crimean and Azov ports would be yet important for Ukraine for its seabed and offshore exploitation. Ukraine's offshore areas, including those close to Crimea, are highly valuable for their numerous deposits of oil, natural gas and other raw materials. They can be also of great value for the possible construction of offshore wind farms and the production and transmission of hydrogen. Therefore, even if the conflict becomes frozen and the West tacitly agrees to the further occupation of Crimea, it would be most recommended to ensure that as much of Ukraine's maritime areas as possible fall under Ukraine's de facto control, rather than that of Russia. It is already foreseeable that the dispute over the control of maritime areas in Crimea will be one of the most important flashpoints once a possible ceasefire is concluded and the conflict becomes frozen.

It is also important to ensure that Ukraine controls both banks of the Dnieper river and that the Novaya Kakhovka dam is rebuilt to restore navigation. The Dnieper is an important inland waterway and there are three thriving shipyards in the centre of Kyiv, producing world-class boats (patrol, rescue) and sea-river vessels (for German, African and Asian customers, among others). All these developments could offer great opportunities for Ukraine's future economic cooperation with Europe, the United States, Canada and other partners. Yet to achieve this stage it remains essential that Ukraine controls the entire Dnieper river, as well as obtains international guarantees for shipping that takes place between Kyiv and the Black Sea.

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Balancing values and interests

NATO's constrained engagement in the South Caucasus

NINO LEZHAVA

Considering the current turmoil in transatlantic affairs, NATO's room for manoeuvre in the South Caucasus is constrained by broader geopolitical rivalries and its limited capacity to prioritize this region as well. Russia maintains a strong military and hybrid influence in the region, while Iran's ambitions and China's expanding economic footprint further limit western leverage.

It has been a while since the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative position for the Caucasus and Central Asia became vacant. Since its establishment in 2004, it has served as the eyes and the ears of the Alliance, facilitating the implementation of NATO's foreign policy, monitoring internal political developments and reforms, and liaising with local governments.

Meanwhile, the regional geopolitical environment in the wider Black Sea region has harshly evolved. The Partnership for Peace (PfP) member states in the South Caucasus diverged from their established trajectories in favour of transitional, multi-vector policies in light of the recalibration of transatlantic relations. While answers regarding security guarantees, this time for the entire European continent, are still pending, NATO urgently requires a reassessment of its strategies and ad-

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justment to the new reality. Re-examining its policy towards the South Caucasus should also be a part of this process.

Strategic importance

Accepting the region's strategic importance, as well as the complexities and limitations of deeper integration, NATO must carefully define the new level of its engagement in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, having long-term implications in mind. Meanwhile, the European Union has published its "EU's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea", including closer cooperation with Azerbaijan, Turkey, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine. In this transitional era, the document focuses on three areas: "Enhancing security, stability, and resilience; fostering sustainable growth and prosperity; promoting environmental protection, climate change resilience and preparedness, and civil protection."

The strategy does not mention human rights, which has an explanation; cooperation with Azerbaijan is one of the necessary actions to support the EU's efforts to gradually phase out remaining Russian energy imports, and Turkey has an immense role in the fulfilment of NATO's role in the region. As for Georgia, the document slightly mentions it and indirectly criticizes the Georgian government for its anti-EU stance.

In 2024, during a three-day historic tour to the South Caucasus facilitated by the latest NATO Special Representative for the region, the former Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg issued a stark warning about the risks of Russia securing a dominant position against Ukraine. According to him, such an outcome could further escalate Russian aggression and embolden authoritarian actors. Ironically, one year later, Ukraine is now fighting to be recognized once again as a victim of the Kremlin's imperialism and striving for a ceasefire. At the same time, authoritarian regimes, particularly in the South Caucasus, appear increasingly emboldened indeed.

Georgia, once the most advanced strategic partner for NATO and a recipient of its generous assistance, has been captured by a pro-Russian oligarchy, erasing a decade of democratic progress and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the country. It has been 202 days since the continuous protests in Tbilisi and beyond, although overcrowded jails still hold illegally detained artists, journalists, and citizens fighting for freedom.

The Georgian Dream party closely follows Russian guidelines by controlling security institutions, the courts and the legislative body to undermine and suppress fundamental human rights while gaining total control. Unfortunately, the investment made by NATO to bolster democratic governance and security oversight

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in Georgia is now being squandered. The Georgian ministry of foreign affairs has announced the closure of the EU and NATO Information Center, which served to keep the Georgian population informed about European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes and to strengthen resilience against Russian disinformation and malign propaganda. The same applies to the national security council, which will also be dismantled.

Investments made by NATO to bolster democratic governance and security oversight in Georgia is now being squandered.

The only institution still withstanding this turmoil may be the Georgian defence forces, thanks to ongoing cooperation with transatlantic partners and strong ties rooted in value-based friendships among uniformed personnel. However, the political leadership of the ministry of defence has already dismissed a significant number of pro-western personnel to erase such institutional memory and reduce the units working on NATO-Georgia cooperation. Meanwhile, officials from Georgian Dream have intensified rhetorical attacks on NATO, misrepresenting Tbilisi's longstanding contributions to NATO peacekeeping missions and accusing member states of manipulation and interference.

The rift between NATO and Georgia began following Russia's unjustified attack on Ukraine, when the Georgian government failed to align with western sanctions. Since then, for the first time in the history of this cooperation, Tbilisi was omitted from the Washington Summit Declaration and the NATO Secretary General's latest report on the open-door policy. The Bucharest Summit pledge on Georgia's eventual membership in NATO appears to be fading.

Critical dilemma

Although political distancing is evident, Brussels continues to maintain practical cooperation with Tbilisi, which is driven by two key factors. First, Georgia remains the only South Caucasus country on the Black Sea, making it strategically significant for regional security. Second, NATO standardization and interoperability have been crucial in modernizing Georgia's post-Soviet military, with a tangible risk of regression and corruption if these efforts are abandoned. Indeed, the suspension of military ties would undermine years of progress.

Acknowledging this, NATO recently held a major joint exercise with the Georgian defence forces. However, even in this situation, the Alliance is walking a fine line sustaining defence cooperation while managing growing political disillusionment. After all, Georgian Dream is framing mutual activities in its own way in order to bolster its legitimacy among the electorate. In this complex landscape,

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the challenge for NATO lies in preserving hard-earned gains without rewarding backsliding. On the other side, hope lies in the majority of Georgian society supporting Euro-Atlantic integration through non-stop protests.

Meanwhile, a significant development has emerged in the South Caucasus that is important for the Alliance as well. Armenia and Azerbaijan have recently announced the finalization of a peace deal – a move that, under balanced conditions, could hold the potential to reshape the region's future in terms of connectivity, energy cooperation, economic integration and stability. However, the agreement places Armenia in a particularly delicate and vulnerable position in terms of protecting its sovereignty and human rights. Nevertheless, NATO, like the rest of the key actors in the West, simply welcomed the progress towards peace after the announcement.

This raises a critical dilemma, which is not unusual in relations between transatlantic leaders, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Although NATO presents itself as a political-military alliance grounded in democratic values and strict membership requirements, even as it continues to navigate complex global and regional shifts, its credibility and influence in the South Caucasus will increasingly depend on its ability to balance strategic interests with its foundational values. The peace deal, while a potential turning point, thus tests not only regional actors but also the coherence and consistency of the West's broader engagement in the region.

Thus, Brussels needs a clear and coherent strategy towards the South Caucasus, not merely to react to regional dynamics, but to proactively position itself for more effective engagement. This is essential if the transatlantic partnership is to remain competitive regarding the Russia-China-Iran axis and appropriately balance Turkey's regional ambitions within the framework of NATO's shared values and responsibilities.

Security beyond Georgia

None of the countries from the South Caucasus beyond Georgia aspire to NATO membership, no matter how delusional it is becoming for Tbilisi these days. Despite this, changes are visible in Armenia's foreign policy. The Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, noted that NATO is not an item on Armenia's agenda, and membership is not being discussed. However, the diversification of security sector partners away from Russia is a new vector in Armenian foreign policy. After the failure of the Russian-led CSTO to support Yerevan, the previous security and economic system for Armenia is no longer credible. Thus, it seeks other alternatives, including cooperation with NATO, China, BRICS and Iran. Armenia was present at the 2024 NATO Washington Summit, hosted US-Armenian military

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exercises in 2023 and 2024, and recently joined the NATO-Georgia drill as an observer. It aspires not to be identified as an ally of Russia but also realizes that it is heavily dependent on Moscow to transport volumes of international trade. Russian troops are also still stationed on Armenian soil.

In comparison to its neighbours in the region, Azerbaijan's geopolitical positioning towards NATO is sturdier, considering its energy-rich background, location and governance. As a result, despite notable constraints in values, Brussels and Baku have maintained stable bilateral cooperation. In particular, since the onset of the war in Ukraine, NATO member states, also represented within the European Union, have signed energy agreements with Azerbaijan to reduce dependence on Russian gas. Lately, this cooperation has been advanced with another agreement to double imports from Azerbaijan by 2027, all while labelling President Ilham Aliyev's autocratic government as a "trustworthy partner" and witnessing Baku's aggressive tactics against its neighbour.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan visibly prioritizes non-alignment, maintaining strategic partnerships with Turkey (a NATO member), Russia and increasingly China. Without calculated Russian passivity and Turkey's open political and military support, the latest Nagorno-Karabakh offensive would not have succeeded. In this light, NATO should remain mindful and exercise caution in its approach while welcoming the announced peace deal between the historic rivals. While the agreement represents a notable step forward, the path to a sustainable peace remains uncertain, particularly given the absence of reference to the so-called Zangezur Corridor in the draft treaty and the continued assertive rhetoric from Baku towards Yerevan. A balanced and principled engagement will be essential to support a durable and inclusive resolution.

Another important dimension lies in the geopolitical and economic significance of emerging transit routes and development prospects, which continue to draw the attention of both regional and global actors. In this context, Turkey's role is especially significant, while its strategic ambiguity continues to challenge NATO unity. Addressing Ankara's unique position within NATO often presents a challenge for some Alliance officials, who may hesitate to fully engage with the complexities it brings. Attempts to draw parallels between Turkey's current strategic ambiguity and Portugal's early NATO membership under António de Oliveira Salazar's authoritarian regime fall short of providing meaningful justification for current ambiguities. While Portugal's admission reflected the realities of the early Cold War, today's geopolitical environment and NATO's commitment to democratic values demand greater clarity and consistency.

Brussels thus finds itself in a delicate position, where influence must be matched with responsibility. Turkey has skilfully pursued a hedging strategy, maintaining ties

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with diverse actors while maximizing leverage. Meanwhile, Pashinyan's optimism that Yerevan's normalization with Ankara is only a matter of time may underplay the potential concessions involved, especially regarding security and political influence. In this context, NATO also bears responsibility to ensure fair and balanced engagement. Any peace process that involves Turkey must also account for Armenia's security needs and broader regional stability.

The search for balance

Considering the current turmoil in transatlantic affairs, NATO's room to manoeuvre in the South Caucasus is constrained by broader geopolitical rivalries and its limited capacity to prioritize this region as well. While Russia maintains a strong military and hybrid influence in the region, Iran's ambitions and China's expanding economic footprint further limit western leverage. As a result, full NATO membership remains unlikely for any South Caucasus state in the foreseeable future. The internal fragmentation between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, each following divergent foreign policy paths, creates extra barriers, making any unified NATO engagement inherently uneven. Considering the aforementioned factors, the Alliance seems less willing to devote more resources to the South Caucasus, especially while addressing its internal challenges.

Nonetheless, if NATO is to foster long-term stability and democratic resilience in the region, it must adopt a coherent and visionary strategy. This approach must balance realistic limitations with principled engagement, holding both member states and partners to consistent standards.

There is a chance that NATO's post-war commitments to Ukraine could create extra ties and serve as a valuable model in the wider Black Sea area, equipping the South Caucasus with extra meaning in terms of regional security. While NATO is unlikely to take in any of the South Caucasus states in the near future, the Alliance should encourage all three states to deepen their participation in the Partnership for Peace where it is consistent with their interests and capabilities. This offers a pragmatic path forward that will reinforce engagement while upholding the Alliance's core values and investments. EE

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Georgian Dream's war with reality

TINATIN LOLOMADZE

In the shifting landscape of Georgian politics, one phrase has come to dominate political discourse in recent months: the "Global War Party". Introduced by officials from the ruling Georgian Dream party, the term is now used regularly to discredit opposition figures, civil society, and even western allies.

Georgia has long been a battleground for Russia to test its hybrid warfare tactics before applying them to the West. In this context, Georgia became the perfect testing ground for dangerous propaganda. It was here that the narrative of the "Global War Party" began to take shape, fuelled by the rhetoric of Georgia's ruling party in 2022. This marked the time when the Georgian Dream (GD) party began labelling opposition parties as the "Party of War" or "Party of Betrayal", all part of a calculated effort to manipulate public perceptions. This marked the inception of a new term that would gain prominence in the coming years.

In November 2022, then chairman of the Georgian Dream party Irakli Kobakhidze first used the term "Global War Party" to describe certain members of the European Parliament. He accused them of representing foreign interests pressuring Georgia to align with western military objectives, particularly regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Kobakhidze suggested that these individuals were part of a broader, coordinated effort to involve Georgia in the war, which he believed would lead to the country's destruction. Following this initial statement, the term "Global War Party" gained significant traction within the rhetoric of the ruling Georgian Dream party. Kobakhidze and other officials increasingly used it to frame opposi-

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tion parties, especially the opposition United National Movement party, as agents of foreign influence. He stated that they sought to "Ukrainize" Georgia – an accusation implying that they wanted to drag the country into a conflict with Russia.

In subsequent statements, Kobakhidze elaborated on the concept, describing the Global War Party as a group exerting significant influence over American and European structures, all with the goal of prolonging the war in Ukraine and opening a second front in Georgia. He expressed hope that western institutions would free themselves from this influence, which he viewed as a threat to Georgia's sovereignty and peace.

Straining relations

The rhetoric around the so-called Global War Party did not stop at lofty claims of defending Georgia's sovereignty and peace. The main geopolitical clash began in earnest when the Georgian government – despite earlier promises that it would not apply for EU candidate status before 2024 – was forced to reverse course and submit an application in 2022. This shift was not the result of internal reform or long-term strategic planning, but a direct response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the sudden urgency that gripped the region. As Ukraine demonstrated extraordinary resilience and rapidly submitted its EU application, followed closely by Moldova, the pressure on Georgia mounted. Rather than signalling a genuine recommitment to democratic reform, Georgia's application was largely symbolic. It was a political manoeuvre aimed at maintaining appearances, not substance. What followed was not an acceleration of reforms but a doubling down on a rhetorical strategy that increasingly framed the European Union not as a partner, but as an external actor manipulated by the so-called Global War Party – a vague, conspiratorial grouping of western officials, liberal NGOs, opposition parties and pro-Ukraine voices.

As Ukraine rapidly submitted its EU application, followed closely by Moldova, the pressure on Georgia mounted.

Georgia's relationship with the EU had, until this point, been one of the pillars of its post-Soviet transformation. Since the signing of the EU Association Agreement in 2014 and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), Georgia had stood out as a regional reformer. The Georgian public remained overwhelmingly supportive of EU membership, viewing it as essential to national security and prosperity. But beginning in 2022, the government started turning this relationship into a wedge issue. Criticism from Brussels, whether concerning democratic

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Photo: Adam Reichardt

In just two years, Georgia's relationship with the EU has gone from aspirational to adversarial. This is not because of the EU's policies, but because of how those policies have been manipulated by the ruling party.

backsliding, press freedom or judicial independence, was no longer treated as constructive oversight. Instead, Georgian officials portrayed these critiques as foreign interference, often implying that they were orchestrated by actors more interested in destabilizing Georgia than supporting it. The European Union became, in the party's narrative, not a partner in reform but a conduit of pressure aimed at dragging Georgia into a geopolitical confrontation.

The introduction of the Global War Party narrative allowed Georgian Dream to take this a step further. When EU officials expressed support for Ukraine, or concern about former President Mikheil Saakashvili's imprisonment, the GD framed such statements as evidence that the EU was no longer impartial. Prominent members of the ruling party claimed that parts of the EU, particularly within the European Parliament, had been infiltrated by pro-war interests intent on opening a second front against Russia in Georgia. These accusations were not supported by evidence, but they were effective in framing any western critique as part of a broader conspiracy against the relative peace enjoyed by the country.

When the European Commission announced in June 2022 that Ukraine and Moldova would be granted EU candidate status while Georgia would not, the rul-

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ing GD party weaponized the decision. Rather than accepting the Commission's recommendations, which included 12 clearly defined priorities for democratic reform, the Georgian government launched an offensive against the EU's credibility. Officials claimed the decision was politically motivated and blamed Georgia's refusal to be "dragged into war" as the reason behind the setback. This narrative suggested that the EU was punishing Georgia for pursuing peace, while rewarding Ukraine for its involvement in war.

At no point did GD publicly acknowledge that the EU's concerns stemmed from concrete issues: the jailing of political opponents, the politicization of the judiciary, systemic attacks on civil society, and worsening media freedom. Instead, the ruling party portrayed the EU as an ideologically compromised institution manipulated by the so-called Global War Party. This became central to GD's political strategy. While continuing to declare EU accession as a top national priority, the party increasingly adopted rhetoric and policies that made such integration unattainable. This contradiction came into sharp focus in 2023 with the introduction of the so-called "foreign agents" bill.

Modelled after Russia's 2012 legislation used to silence independent voices, the bill aimed to stigmatize and constrain civil society organizations and independent media that receive foreign funding. The government knew that passing such a law would almost certainly jeopardize Georgia's EU candidacy. Massive protests erupted, forcing the government to withdraw the bill temporarily, but the episode revealed the regime's willingness to derail Georgia's European aspirations in the name of "sovereignty" – a term GD had redefined to mean insulation from western influence. During this period, EU institutions expressed mounting frustration, to which Georgian Dream responded by doubling down on its narrative: "They are attacking us because we refuse to join their war."

This framing has been a victory for Russia. Without taking any military action, the Kremlin has watched as one of the most pro-European countries in the post-Soviet region has grown increasingly distrustful of the West. Kremlin officials and state media praised the Georgian government's refusal to impose sanctions on Moscow, its openness to Russian migrants, and its increasingly defiant stance toward western actors. In some instances, Kremlin representatives openly commended the Georgian leadership for resisting so-called blackmail from Brussels and defending sovereignty.

In just two years, Georgia's relationship with the European Union has gone from aspirational to adversarial.

In just two years, Georgia's relationship with the EU has gone from aspirational to adversarial. This is not because of the EU's policies, but because of how those policies have been manipulated by the ruling party. By weaponizing the EU acces-

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sion process, the Georgian Dream has turned one of the country's most promising tools for national development into an instrument of fear and division. The tragic irony is that Georgia's 2022 EU membership application – intended to align the country with Europe's democratic future – has instead become the basis for a narrative that isolates it from that very future.

So… you want war?!

In the October 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream heavily relied on the Global War Party narrative to shape political discourse and rally voter support. By framing the election as a stark choice between war and peace, GD positioned itself as the sole protector of Georgia's sovereignty and stability, while portraying opposition parties as agents of foreign influence.

Central to the GD strategy was the portrayal of the election as a referendum on Georgia's future. The campaign's core message was clear: vote for peace, or there will be war. Campaign materials often featured stark visual contrasts, such as peaceful Georgian landscapes juxtaposed with war-torn Ukrainian cities, underscoring the potential consequences of a change in political leadership. The slogan "Say no to war – choose peace" appeared widely across posters, billboards and televised ads, reinforcing a sense of fear and uncertainty. This messaging tapped into deep public anxieties, especially in light of Georgia's past conflicts with Russia. GD emphasized that it alone could ensure continued peace, while suggesting that any alternative would drag the country into chaos.

The Georgian Dream has labelled opposition parties and civil society organizations as agents of the Global War Party.

As part of this narrative, the party accused western powers, particularly the US and the EU, of meddling in Georgia's internal affairs. These accusations fed into a broader Global War Party conspiracy theory, which claimed that western actors sought to use Georgia as a pawn in a broader conflict with Russia.

Taking this rhetoric even further, the Georgian Dream labelled opposition parties and civil society organizations as agents of the so-called Global War Party. This served to delegitimize their political opponents, casting them as puppets of foreign powers willing to sacrifice Georgia's peace and sovereignty to serve western interests. In contrast, GD presented itself as the only party capable of protecting national independence and preventing escalation. Pro-government media outlets like Imedi and PosTV played a crucial role in spreading and reinforcing this narrative. Through news broadcasts, talk shows and political commentary, these

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channels echoed GD's warnings about foreign interference and the dangers of political change. By framing the election in terms of national security and external threats, the ruling party effectively positioned itself as the only legitimate guardian of Georgia's future.

This media strategy helped cultivate an atmosphere of fear and urgency, where voters were led to believe that choosing the opposition would lead the country into war. Despite allegations of voter intimidation, election fraud, and media manipulation, the Georgian Dream secured another victory in the 2024 elections, winning 54.08 per cent of the vote. Opposition parties contested the results, citing numerous irregularities and instances of foreign meddling. Nevertheless, GD's message had clearly resonated with a significant portion of the electorate, many of whom viewed the election as a choice between peace and renewed conflict.

Echoes of the Kremlin

This strategic messaging, rooted in fear, polarization, and accusations of foreign subversion, not only proved electorally effective but also mirrored broader patterns seen in disinformation campaigns across the post-Soviet space. In particular, the binary framing of political choices, demonization of opposition, and the portrayal of western actors as destabilizing forces, closely resemble tactics long employed by the Kremlin. These parallels raise important questions about the evolving nature of political communication in Georgia and the influence of external narratives on domestic discourse.

From the vilification of the West to the weaponization of fear and the delegitimization of dissent, the similarities between Georgian Dream's rhetoric and Russian state messaging are becoming difficult to ignore. One of the clearest parallels lies in how both Georgian Dream and Russian officials portray the West, not as partners in development and democracy but as imperialistic actors pushing smaller countries into proxy wars. Georgian Dream officials frequently accuse the US, the EU and NATO of trying to "open a second front" in Georgia as part of a broader strategy to weaken Russia.

The Georgian Dream's narrative of caution and neutrality draws heavily on the trauma of the 2008 war with Russia.

In 2022 Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili reinforced this narrative in a parliamentary speech, rhetorically asking: "Despite all this, it turns out that Georgia should be punished because there is no war in Georgia today? How can we understand this, friends?" He added that "It was directly stated that Ukraine was given the status because Ukraine is at war."

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With these remarks, Garibashvili indirectly accused the West of denying Georgia EU candidate status precisely because it had avoided war, echoing a broader narrative of victimization and external blame that closely resembles Russian state messaging.

These statements closely echo Kremlin rhetoric, where NATO and the US are regularly portrayed as expansionist forces sowing instability. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has repeatedly claimed the West "provoked" the war in Ukraine by ignoring Russia's security concerns. In this worldview, smaller nations are not independent actors but pawns in a US-led campaign to encircle and weaken Moscow.

The Georgian Dream's narrative of caution and neutrality draws heavily on the trauma of the 2008 war with Russia – a memory that still haunts much of the Georgian population. The party has used this fear to justify its refusal to sanction Russia or fully align with Ukraine. In December 2023, PosTV broadcast a documentary titled *Ukraine as an instrument of geopolitical confrontation*, arguing that Georgia's refusal to engage in war has preserved peace and that Ukrainian decisions to fight were tragic and avoidable. Garibashvili in July 2023 declared that "we avoided the war they planned for us," implying a deliberate western plot. The State Security Service has issued statements claiming pro-western protesters and civil society groups were preparing "destabilization scenarios" similar to Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan.

This strategy closely resembles how Russian state media presents its foreign policy. For years, Kremlin outlets like RT and Sputnik have framed Russia as a victim of constant western aggression, portraying NATO expansion as a dire threat to national survival. Russian citizens are repeatedly reminded of past invasions, from Napoleon to Hitler, to foster a siege mentality that justifies war as defence. In both cases, fear is not simply a consequence of conflict; it is a strategic communication tool. By invoking existential threats, leaders seek to paralyze the opposition and consolidate their control. One of the most dangerous features of this shared rhetoric is its delegitimization of domestic opposition. In Georgia, politicians who advocate for deeper western integration or express solidarity with Ukraine are often labelled as agents of the Global War Party.

Words matter

In early 2023, the ruling party introduced a bill to designate foreign-funded NGOs and media outlets as foreign agents – a move that drew international condemnation and triggered mass protests across Tbilisi and other cities in the country. This mirrors Russia's 2012 "foreign agents" law, which has been systematically used to silence NGOs, independent journalists, and opposition voices. In both

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countries, the message is the same: if you criticize the government, you are not just wrong – you are unpatriotic, a radical, or a foreign agent. This binary framing of "us versus them" leaves little room for democratic debate. The linguistic parallels between the Georgian Dream and Russian propaganda are perhaps the most telling. The very term Global War Party echoes Russian terms like "the party of war" and "foreign provocateurs". These are frequently used on Russian state television to describe western leaders or Ukrainian officials.

Pro-government Georgian media has increasingly adopted this lexicon. Critics of the ruling party are described as "agents of chaos" or the "sacrificial lambs" of western interests. The idea that civil society is trying to "drag Georgia into war" is a near-verbatim echo of statements made by Russian news anchors about Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022. These phrases do more than convey ideas, they manufacture moral clarity, simplify complex issues, and stoke outrage. And the more they are repeated, the more they begin to shape public consciousness.

In the battle for Georgia's future, words do matter. When the ruling party adopts the language of authoritarian regimes, the risk is not only rhetorical: it is political, strategic and deeply existential. This is not merely Russian propaganda imposed upon Georgia from the outside. It is a calculated campaign within – a battle for the country's democratic survival fought not with weapons, but with narratives.

Georgia has become a testing ground for new hybrid war tactics, where strategic disinformation and psychological operations are aimed at weakening public trust in a fragile democracy. These tactics are not unique to Georgia. Indeed, they are already taking root elsewhere in Europe. In countries like Romania, Slovakia and Hungary, we see the echoes of this same model: populist elites deploying anti-western, pro-sovereignty messaging to consolidate power and discredit civic institutions.

The term "Global War Party" is not just a slogan, it is part of a powerful propaganda machine. It is an alarm bell for the West. The West must understand that the disinformation experiments being run in Georgia today may soon be deployed more widely across the democratic world tomorrow. EE

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Armenia's pivot to the EU

LEONIE NIENHAUS

On March 26th 2025 the Armenian parliament passed a law declaring its intention to apply for membership of the European Union. Although the law does not constitute a formal application for EU membership, it is a clear signal of Armenia's willingness to move out of Russia's orbit and develop closer relations with the West. However, the path to closer European integration is fraught with obstacles.

In recent years, Armenia has expressed a strong political will to deepen its relations with the EU. In a speech to the European Parliament on October 17th 2023 the prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, stated that "Armenia is ready to move as close to the EU as the EU deems possible." The foreign minister, Ararat Mirzoyan, reiterated this in November 2023 after the European Commission recommended granting candidate status to neighbouring Georgia, stating that the Armenian people have European aspirations and are committed to closer relations with the EU. Abandoned by its traditional security ally Russia, these statements clearly underline Armenia's willingness to turn away from Moscow.

This shift culminated on April 4th 2025, when the president of Armenia, Vahagn Khachaturyan, signed a bill formally enshrining Armenia's ambition to join the EU. The law states that Armenia, "aiming to develop democratic institutions, improve the well-being of society, strengthen the country's security, resilience, and the rule of law, announces the launch of the process for Armenia to join the European Union". While this bill stipulates the intention of joining the EU, it does not constitute a formal application for EU membership. Indeed, Prime Minister

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Nikol Pashinyan stressed that accession would require considerable time, in addition to a presumed nationwide referendum.

Historic step

Significantly, the law was driven by a citizen initiative formed by a coalition of pro-European parties and activists. The members of the Euro-Vote group, founded in September 2024, include, for example, the former prime minister, Aram Sargsyan; Arman Babajanyan, head of the For the Republic party; and the chair of the European Party, Tigran Khzmalyan. After approval form the Central Election Commission of Armenia (CEC), the group successfully collected 52,351 signatures and the final version of the bill was adopted on March 26th by the Armenian parliament.

While the law was celebrated as a historic step by Pashinyan's ruling Civil Contract party, it was heavily criticized by the opposition. Members of the Armenian Alliance, led by former Armenian President Robert Kocharyan, described it as a "mockery of a law" and spoke out in favour of strengthening relations with the EU without prioritizing full membership.

The Russian reaction was predictably harsh as well. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksei Overchuk reiterated the incompatibility of EU membership with Armenia's membership of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. In addition, the Russian ambassador to Armenia, Sergei Kopyrkin, in a manner typical of the Russian state, claimed that the West was trying to open a second front in Armenia.

In contrast, the EU welcomed the new law. In a joint statement, the chair of the delegation for relations with the South Caucasus, MEP Nils Ušakovas, and the European Parliament's permanent rapporteur on Armenia, MEP Miriam Lexmann, called on the Commission, the High Representative and the Council to actively support Armenia's closer integration, while simultaneously emphasizing that accession will be a long and difficult road. Apart from the lengthy process of becoming a member of the EU, it also remains uncertain whether the country will apply for EU candidate status before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2026, which could have a significant impact on the country's foreign policy direction.

According to a 2023 survey, 58 per cent of Armenians would support EU membership in a referendum.

Overall, the Armenian public has a generally favourable view of the EU. According to a September 2024 survey by the International Republican Institute, 58 per cent of Armenians would support EU membership in a referendum, while only 13 per cent would oppose it. Among supporters, 40 per cent cited security and sta-

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bility as the main benefit of closer relations with the Union, followed by economic improvement (11 per cent) and national development (11 per cent).

Among those who opposed a potential EU membership, 22 per cent said it would harm Armenian family norms, while 21 per cent believe the EU to be unreliable. Around 12 per cent feared that membership would provoke Russia and increase security risks. Despite this broadly positive perception, parts of society are disillusioned after the EU's absence during the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and its lenient response to Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing of Armenians in the region in 2023. This discontent is fuelled by Russian efforts to wage a hybrid war with Armenia as its main target, which aims to sow divisions and foster anti-EU sentiment by portraying Brussels as a threat to Armenia's identity and security. With the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026, this information warfare is likely to gain traction.

An historic agreement

Since gaining independence, Armenia has sought to balance its foreign policy between the West and Russia. This balancing act, initiated during the first presidency of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, was however constrained by external pressures as well as internal challenges. Under his successor, Robert Kocharyan, the rhetoric of a balanced and complementary approach shifted to an actual deepening reliance on Russia. Later, Serzh Sargsyan, as president, rebranded this strategy as a multi-vector policy. However, in practice, Yerevan's foreign policy continued to prioritize close relations with Moscow.

> Membership in the Eurasian Economic Union precluded Armenia from entering into a trade agreement with the EU.

A decisive moment came in the early 2010s, when Armenia sought to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. However, after five years of negotiations, Sargsyan, right before signing the agreement at the Vilnius Summit in 2013, announced Armenia's decision to abandon integration and instead join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Security concerns, particularly tied to Nagorno-Karabakh, prevailed over closer relations with the European Union.

Membership in the Eurasian Economic Union precluded Armenia from entering into a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU, unlike other Eastern Partnership states: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Instead, Armenia and the EU opted for a less ambitious arrangement, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). This was signed in November 2017 and

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fully entered into force in 2021 after Pashinyan came to power following the 2018 Velvet Revolution. The agreement retains more of the political content of the Association Agreement, while its economic provisions align with Armenia's commitments under the Eurasian Economic Union.

While the CEPA excludes a free trade component, it provides Armenia with limited access to the EU's internal market and lays the groundwork for deeper cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, transportation, environmental protection and connectivity. Despite the agreement representing the cornerstone of current EU-Armenia relations, a plan for a more ambitious partnership that aims to "amend and enlarge the scope of CEPA" has been under discussion since 2024.

An important step in Armenia's EU integration, as outlined in CEPA, was the launch of visa liberalization talks in September 2024, which would allow for long-term stays of Armenian citizens within the EU for purposes such as education and work, thereby fostering people-to-people connectivity between EU and Armenian citizens. Whilst the process of visa liberalization has demonstrated favourable outcomes in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, it also necessitates substantial reforms with regard to document security; border and migration management; combating corruption and organized crime; and fully embracing fundamental rights.

An important step in Armenia's EU integration was the launch of visa liberalization talks in September 2024.

The EU has also increased its support for Armenia in terms of security and resilience. Following Azerbaijan's offensive in September 2022, which resulted in over 200 casualties and the occupation of Armenian border territories, the EU launched an observer mission under its Common Security and Defence Policy. The monitoring mission, extended until February 2027, aims to promote stability in border areas and support Armenia's border demarcation process with Azerbaijan. While this mission was welcomed by Yerevan, it was criticized by Moscow and especially Baku, which sees it as a violation of its sovereignty. Despite these objections, the EU mission is a crucial element of Brussels's engagement with border security in the region, especially as peace negotiations with Azerbaijan have stalled and ceasefire violations have been recorded on various occasions.

Moreover, under the framework of the European Peace Facility, which supports initiatives under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy for the prevention of conflicts and the preservation of peace, the Council adopted its first ever non-lethal assistance package for Armenia's armed forces, worth ten million euros. This approval is particularly significant given Armenia's continued membership (albeit frozen) in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Adding to this, in light of strengthening Armenia's resilience, the EU has proposed the

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biggest assistance package since Armenia gained independence: the Resilience and Growth Plan for 2024–27, which offers support for democratic reforms, security and the economic development of the country. While the growing partnership between the EU and Armenia holds great potential, it remains constrained by a mix of external pressures and internal challenges, which complicate closer integration and will require careful adjustments from both sides.

Obstacles to closer integration

Armenia's economic reliance on Russia remains a substantial hurdle. As a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia represents Armenia's biggest trading partner. In 2024 , as much as 42 per cent of its foreign trade was with Russia, compared to only 7.3 per cent with the EU. In fact, trade between both countries has increased with the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Some critics claim that this is due to the increase of "re-exports" of goods to Russia as a means of sanctions avoidance. This dependency extends further to such critical sectors as food security and energy, with Russia supplying 88 per cent of Armenia's natural gas and maintaining significant control over its energy infrastructure much like the Soviet era.

As a landlocked country with closed borders to major trade routes through Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia has faced many challenges in diversifying its energy and trade partnerships. While efforts to reduce Armenia's energy dependency on Russia are underway, they are said to pose a risk to Armenia's financial stability.

Yet, in terms of security, Armenia has made real progress in reducing its reliance on Russia. Previously, Moscow was seen as Yerevan's main security guarantor, particularly through Armenia's membership in the CSTO. However, this trust vanished after Russia refused to support Armenia during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 against Azerbaijan's aggression, with Pashinyan describing Armenia's security dependency on Russia as ineffective. In response, Armenia announced its withdrawal from the CSTO in 2024 and ended 32 years of cooperation with Russia for security at Yerevan Airport.

The country's weapon procurement strategy also underwent a transformation: while Russia provided 96 per cent of Armenia's weapons before 2020, it now only supplies ten per cent, with India and France emerging as the key suppliers. Despite Armenia's notable move away from Russian security dependency, the 102nd Russian Military Base, which is leased until 2044, shows Moscow's continued presence and influence. To make matters worse, Russia's growing alliance with Azerbaijan, formalized through a Declaration of Allied Interaction in 2022, poses a direct threat to Armenia's territorial integrity.

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Beyond the Russia problem, another major challenge lies in the Armenian government's stalled reform agenda. High hopes following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which promised sweeping reforms, have given way to stagnation. Key areas such as electoral procedures, constitutional amendments, anti-corruption efforts and judicial reforms remain underdeveloped. Since 2020, this stagnation has deepened, with public administration and governance systems still falling short of expectations. This lack of reforms, in addition to a lack of civil society engagement, also impacts the implementation of the CEPA agreement with the EU.

Despite these shortcomings, the EU has taken a lenient stance, often praising Armenia's reform efforts rather than taking a critical look at the delays. Although the ruling Armenian party cannot be compared to the illegitimate ruling Georgian Dream party in Georgia, this neighbouring case should nevertheless serve as a reminder of the importance of observing genuine commitment to democratic reforms. Therefore, the EU should insist of the fulfilment of reforms and offer the Armenian government further assistance in doing so.

From the EU side the main obstacle to closer relations with Armenia is its energy relations with Azerbaijan. Following the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the EU has stepped up its efforts to diversify its energy sources, among others, with Azerbaijan. In a memorandum in the energy field, signed in July 2022, the EU and Baku agreed to increase gas exports to Europe from 8.2 billion cubic metres in 2021 to 20 billion in 2027. Although Azerbaijani gas only accounts for four per cent of the total EU supply, it is of greater importance for individual member states such as Bulgaria, Italy and Greece. Recent agreements have also extended its supply to countries such as Hungary, Romania and possibly Austria.

The EU should insist of the fulfilment of reforms and offer the Armenian government further assistance in doing so.

The EU's reliance on Azerbaijani energy has also softened its response in relation to Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Despite publishing condemning statements, no restrictive measures against Baku followed suit. Indeed, the violations of the regime in Azerbaijan have been called a "diplomatic blind spot" of the EU. The visit of High Representative Kaja Kallas to Azerbaijan, immediately after the 110th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, and despite ongoing border violations by Baku, raises once again questions about whether the EU's strategic interests prevail over its norms. Her visit faced heavy criticism, with former German Bundestag member Michael Roth questioning whether "gas is more important than (pro-EU) commitment."

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Towards closer integration

While Armenia's full EU membership might remain a rather distant prospect as of now due to the lengthy and complicated accession process, its political leadership has made a clear and strong commitment to deepening ties with the EU. For the country, closer integration offers not just a path towards sustained development but a vital means of safeguarding its independence in a tense geopolitical environment. Trapped between a revisionist Russia, a hostile Azerbaijan and an ambivalent Turkey, the country is left with very few alternatives. Citizens of Armenia have also expressed their desire for freedom and democracy, most notably through the Velvet Revolution in 2018.

These commitments should align with the EU's values and should be met with further support, especially in easing the country's economic dependency from Russia, but also with supporting the crucial democratic reforms needed. The EU must also be prepared to take decisive measures in countering potential renewed Azerbaijani aggression. Failing to do so would otherwise further undermine the EU's credibility, especially in a region where authoritarianism has emerged as an increasingly fashionable model of governance in neighbouring Azerbaijan and Georgia.

In addition, closer relations with Armenia are also economically beneficial in terms of investment opportunities (especially in the IT sector) and the EU's security, as this would counter Russian influence in its neighbourhood. Furthermore, Armenia holds the potential to become a crucial transport cordior that could enhance the connectivity between Europe and Asia. Thus closer integration between the EU and Armenia are vital for both sides. To put it in the words of the former EU ambassador to Armenia, Piotr Świtalski: "Armenia is not just a neighbour, but part of the European family."

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Europe's complex relationship with Azerbaijan

JP O'MALLEY

Relations between Brussels and Baku have largely been based around continued shipments of oil and gas from the Caspian Sea. However, such links obscure a delicate human rights situation in Azerbaijan that ultimately challenges Europe's ability to both bolster and promote its liberal democratic values in the wider region.

Four years ago, Günel Hasanli was secretly filmed at home having consensual sex with her boyfriend. The video of the 38-year-old Azerbaijani woman later went viral on social media. Hasanli was publicly humiliated, it seems, for being the daughter of Jamil Hasanli: a prominent Azerbaijani historian, author and opposition politician.

"This video is a form of political blackmail by [our president] Ilham Aliyev, and [the] security agencies of the state," Jamil Hasanli wrote on Facebook, shortly after the tape surfaced. Günel Hasanli's story is not an anomaly. Today, many women face similar episodes of public shaming in Azerbaijan.

"The government of Azerbaijan actively targets women journalists and human rights activists by using secret video cameras to film them having sex in their homes and these videos are then leaked on social media," explained the Azerbaijani freelance journalist, Arzu Geybulla, from Istanbul, where she has been living in exile for more than a decade. "Through surveillance programmes like Pegasus, many women in Azerbaijan who criticize their government have had their personal

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data stolen. In some cases, intimate pictures of these women later mysteriously appeared in online groups, where they were ridiculed," the 41-year-old Baku-born writer said. "There were other cases of Azerbaijani women having their personal information shared publicly, in an attempt to threaten them."

Bloody history

In 2019 Geybulla launched Azerbaijan Internet Watch – a website that tracks and maps internet censorship and surveillance in the country. Her interest in the subject is personal. The Azerbaijani journalist received a torrent of online abuse after writing for *Agos*, a Turkish-Armenian newspaper. "I got rape threats and death threats after the government affiliated media in Azerbaijan described me as a foreign agent, and a traitor, who was working for the Armenian government," she said.

It is a serious accusation. Not least because Azerbaijan and Armenia are old enemies with a complex, bloody history. The ongoing dispute between the two rival nations is over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a landlocked mountainous region at the southern end of the Karabakh mountain range within Azerbaijan. The fighting between the two rival nations goes back to the early 20th century, when Armenia and Azerbaijan both enjoyed brief periods as independent republics. Later, they were both conquered by the Bolsheviks. In March 1922, Armenia joined Georgia and Azerbaijan to form the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, which joined the USSR on December 30th 1922. Then in 1923, the Kremlin established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast: a small autonomous region with a majority Armenian population situated inside the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. Ethnic tensions were put aside for decades in the name of socialism, until the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994).

Ethnic tensions were put aside for decades in the name of socialism, until the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.

After six years of fighting, and an estimated 30,000 dead, Armenia won. But in the wake of the war an important issue remained. This was namely the legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh. "Despite its insistence [that] it was independent, Nagorno-Karabakh was still effectively seen as an extension of Armenia itself," writes Gabriel Gavin in *Ashes of Our Fathers: Inside the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh*, published this past January.

Presently a reporter with *Politico* in Brussels, the British journalist spent three years in the South Caucasus reporting on the conflict, including the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (September – November 2020). Fought over 44 days, the fighting

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concluded with an estimated 7,000 casualties on both sides. This time Azerbaijan won. Their forces recaptured previously lost territories in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Evidence subsequently emerged, though, of war crimes committed by Azerbaijani conscripts. These have since been verified by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Bellingcat, a Netherlands-based investigative journalism group. Azerbaijani propaganda broadcasted "various atrocities, such as civilians being executed after being captured, beheadings of fallen Armenian soldiers, and desecration of bodies", said Ashot Melikyan of the Yerevan Press Club.

After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War ended in November 2020, a ceasefire agreement was brokered by Moscow. But the conflict flared up, again, in September 2023, when Azerbaijan launched the so-called "anti-terrorist" offensive. It lasted less than 48 hours and concluded with more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians fleeing their homes in what was, in essence, a carefully planned ethnic cleansing project by Baku.

"In front of the international community Azerbaijan displaced the [entire] population of Nagorno-Karabakh, who became refugees," said Tirayr Muradyan, an investigative journalist with *Hetq*, a Yerevan-based website. "But the right to return remains open for these refugees who were forced to flee their homeland."

"After the 2020 war, and the 2023 military intervention, journalists in Azerbaijan who spoke about the conflict from a humanitarian point of view, or about the losses on both sides, were labelled traitors," Geybulla added.

Opposition crackdown

The largest and most populous country in the South Caucasus region, Azerbaijan is a serious contender for the title of a ruthless police state. Freedom House, an NGO devoted to the support of democracy around the globe, ranks Azerbaijan as "not free", giving it a score of zero out of 40 for political rights. In Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Azerbaijan ranked 164 out of 180 countries. Repression inside the country increased in the wake of Baku's final victory in Nagorno-Karabakh in late 2023, which resulted in the ethnic Armenian enclave being officially dissolved on January 1st 2024.

"There was a hope within Azerbaijani society that resolving the standoff with Armenia would lead to less paranoia and repression, but the opposite happened," said Gavin. "Since then, the authorities have arrested dozens of journalists, opposition figures and academics, including Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu."

Ibadoghlu is the founder and chair of the opposition Azerbaijan Democracy and Prosperity Party (ADR), which the Azerbaijani government has refused to grant

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official status as a political party. The Azerbaijani scholar also led the Economic Research Center in Azerbaijan, a think tank that focused on economic development and good governance, until 2014, when the Azerbaijani government forcibly closed it down. Ibadoghlu had been working as a research fellow at the London School of Economics, and held a UK residency permit, when he was arrested, with his wife, Irada Bayramova, in late July 2023 outside Baku.

Ibadoghlu's daughter, Zhala Bayramova, described the dramatic nature of their arrest: "Their car was rammed by about six cars, then 20 men, dressed in black, physically dragged my Mum and Dad from their car," said Zhala Bayramova, a 28-year-old human rights lawyer, currently living in exile in Lund, Sweden. "My parents were then taken, separately, into the organized crime department: a place where [the police] take activists to a special room in the basement to torture them."

Zhala Bayramova was later released, but her husband was arrested on several bogus charges, including counterfeiting money and possessing extremist religious material. If convicted, Ibadoghlu could face up to 17 years in prison. A diabetic, Ibadoghlu was denied his medication for most of the nine months he remained in a pre-trial detention facility. He was then transferred to house arrest in Sumgait, a city located 31 kilometres away from Baku, where he remains today. "My Dad is under constant police surveillance 24 hours a day," said Zhala Bayramova. "And he doesn't have access to health care. I have nightmares every night and I'm scared they are going to kill him."

Zhala Bayramova was last back in Azerbaijan in August 2021, organizing a protest march as a board member of a leading feminist movement in Azerbaijan. "I was physically assaulted and tortured twice. First by the Secret Security Service, who injured my neck, and then by the police, who crushed my ribs and my kneecaps," Bayramova explained. "Beatings like this are quite common in Azerbaijan for people who are politically active. When I left in 2021, I decided that I would not go back. I was already diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and I was falling apart."

Energy politics

In August 2023 the *Washington Post* editorial board published an op-ed calling for the release of Ibadoghlu, whose scholarship has laid out how oil and gas revenues have fuelled corruption and authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. Last November, when Azerbaijan hosted the UN Climate Change Conference (COP29), in Baku, the country's president, Ilham Aliyev, made global headlines, claiming that oil and gas are a "gift of God". Azerbaijan is said to have an estimated 2.5 trillion cubic metres of natural gas. Those reserves produce around 90 per cent of Azerbaijan's

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exports and almost two-thirds of total budget revenue. British Petroleum (BP) is the largest foreign investor in Azerbaijan.

That relationship began in 1994 when Azerbaijan's then president, Heydar Aliyev, a former KGB boss and the current president's late father, signed a major oil-exploration agreement with a consortium of foreign oil companies, led by BP.

"Without BP, Azerbaijan does not have the right techniques to get the oil and gas out of the ground and so BP's existence in the country is what makes the Azerbaijani government rich," said Zhala Bayramova. Her brother, Ibad Bayramov, a tax consultant, also based in Sweden, believes "BP holds unique access to the Azerbaijani president, given the company's pivotal role in the country's oil and gas sector."

Ibad Bayramov said he has met with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office multiple times to discuss his father's case. He also mentioned a letter, sent in mid-March, to BP's chair, Helge Lund, with 22 signatures from a cohort of British MPs and Lords. It urged the British oil company to use its privileged position to raise his father's case with the Azerbaijani government and advocate for his immediate release. But "the Azerbaijani government is not taking the UK's diplomatic efforts seriously," Ibad Bayramov insisted.

Azerbaijan's natural gas reserves make up 90 per cent of exports and almost two-thirds of total budget revenue.

Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu's arrest is part of a carefully orchestrated and ongoing cultural and political purge being waged against journalists, researchers, intellectuals, professors and academics inside Azerbaijan. Those persecuted include several other high-profile political prisoners. Among them is Anar Mammadli, a civil rights activist who ran an election monitoring organization in Azerbaijan. Abducted on the streets of Baku in April 2024 and subsequently arrested, Mammadli is also the founder of the Climate of Justice Initiative: an organization made up of human rights defenders and environmental activists working independently to defend issues on climate.

"Prior to COP29, Anar Mammadli was saying: this is an opportunity for us to engage with the government around the climate issue in Azerbaijan. That is why the Azerbaijani government arrested Anar Mammadli, to silence him," said Florian Irminger, president of the Progress & Change Action Lab, a Geneva-based human rights group that manages "The Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan". "In detention, Anar Mammadli is not getting access to medical aid and there is a big concern around his health, as there is with many other prisoners in Azerbaijan within the pre-trial detention system, where conditions are very poor."

The charges Mammadli is facing today violate "the European Convention on Human Rights because there [is] no reasonable suspicion of [him] having committed a criminal offence and the actual purpose of his arrest was to silence and

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punish him," reads a statement published on the Council of Europe's website, published in late April.

Caviar diplomacy

Since 2001, Azerbaijan has been a member of the Council of Europe. The Strasbourg-based political body presently has 46 members and is Europe's oldest intergovernmental organization, dedicated to advancing human rights, the rule of law and democracy across the continent and the wider region. Last July, The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) issued a public statement documenting evidence of widespread torture carried out by police officers in Azerbaijan. "Yet no action has been taken by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan to implement the Committee's long-standing recommendations to end such practices," the statement read.

"Whatever the Council of Europe says no longer bothers the Azerbaijan government," said Geybulla. Florian Irminger shared that view. He noted that Mammadli was awarded the prestigious Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2014. In January 2024, this body resolved not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation, concluding that the country has "not fulfilled major commitments". Still, Azerbaijan formally remains a member of the Council of Europe and has not been indefinitely kicked out, like, say, Russia was in March 2022.

Azerbaijan formally remains a member of the Council of Europe, unlike Russia which was expelled in March 2022.

"The Parliamentary Assembly suspended Azerbaijan from the Parliamentary Assembly," said Irminger. "But this is a symbolic gesture. The political side of the Council of Europe – that is, the member states and especially the Secretary General – have not done anything. Instead, they made a new Action Plan on Human Rights with Azerbaijan."

Last December, Irminger helped bring about the publication of a report, jointly published by the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan. This was aptly titled "Azerbaijan's Defiance: A Decade of Contempt for the Council of Europe".

"The Council of Europe is supposed to push the member states in the direction of human rights," said Irminger. "But this report shows that Azerbaijan's [defiant behaviour] presents a risk to the Council of Europe's relevance, credibility, and, quite frankly, to its very existence."

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Several sources *New Eastern Europe* spoke with mentioned Azerbaijan's sophisticated and polished public relations machine. Many referenced the term caviar diplomacy. This is a subtle lobbying strategy in which Azerbaijani government officials, PR people and journalists are said to present visiting European dignitaries with secret gifts, luxury tours, and in some cases, cash, to persuade them to look the other way regarding the country's abysmal human rights record.

"Azerbaijan's vast oil and gas reserves have become a relatively minor but still important part of the EU's energy mix," Gabriel Gavin pointed out.

In late April, the European Union and Azerbaijan agreed to resume negotiations on a new partnership and cooperation agreement. At a press conference held in Baku, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, spoke glowingly about Azerbaijan's "humanitarian support" and Brussels's shared values with the Aliyev regime. "Our relationship with Azerbaijan is based on mutual respect, including the respect for the rule of law and human rights," said Kallas with a straight face, and without a glint of irony in her eyes. *NEE*

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Between law and loyalty

Milorad Dodik and the challenge to Bosnia and Herzegovina's statehood

SAMIR COMAGA

Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing a key challenge. Will it manage to preserve its constitutional order or will the political will of one man prevail over the state's laws and international obligations? Milorad Dodik is not just a symptom of the problem, but its embodiment.

The political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is currently facing its deepest institutional and legal crisis since the end of the war. Deep divisions are present at all levels of government and are most evident in the political moves of Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority entity of BiH. Dodik has become a key political actor whose actions often cause divisions both within and outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the heart of the current crisis is a decision made by the country's court, which issued an arrest warrant for Dodik on suspicion of committing the criminal offence of attacking the constitutional order. The order was issued after the suspects did not appear at the hearing before the BiH Prosecutor's Office.

Although the arrest warrant was clearly directed and executed on the basis of the law, Dodik continued to openly challenge the jurisdiction of the judicial institutions,

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moving freely within BiH, more precisely Republika Srpska, but also beyond its borders. Attempted arrests, such as the one in East Sarajevo, had no repercussions on the ground. As a result, Dodik continued to freely cross the border despite all legal orders. This open challenge to the authority of the country's judicial bodies has created a situation in which the functionality and stability of the state and its basic institutions are put into question.

Complicated system

For readers who are less familiar with the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and even for the citizens of this country themselves, the functioning of its institutions is sometimes not entirely clear. At the highest level of government is the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is collective and consists of three members – one representative from each of the three constituent peoples: Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Two members of the presidency (a Bosniak and a Croat) are directly elected from the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, the other member of the presidency (a Serb) is directly elected from the territory of Republika Srpska. The state level of government is often paralyzed by entity vetoes and ethno-national calculations.

The BiH border police, although formally under the state ministry of security, is in practice fragmented and subject to political influence. This is best illustrated by Dodik's ability to cross the state border into neighbouring Serbia without facing any obstacles. At the time of writing this article, Dodik was even in Moscow, attending a ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

On March 27th the court of Bosnia and Herzegovina requested that Interpol issue an international arrest warrant for Dodik. The Interpol General Secretariat rejected this request, citing Article 3 of the Interpol Statute, which prohibits any intervention or activity of a political, military, religious or racial nature. In other words, Interpol believes that issuing an arrest warrant could be interpreted as a politically-motivated move, which is contrary Interpol's rules. Previously, both Serbia and Hungary officially objected to BiH's request and Dodik has so far evaded arrest, even though 16 police agencies in the country have the authority to arrest him.

At the time of Milorad Dodik's sentencing before the BiH court, Hungary, according to reliable sources, sent a special security unit that was supposed to land at Banja Luka Airport in Republika Srpska. The plane carrying members of the Hungarian unit, however, was not granted permission to land on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This event raised additional doubts and concerns about the level of international support that Dodik enjoys, especially given his close po-

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litical relations with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. It also raised the issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina's security sovereignty and potential interference by foreign factors in the country's internal legal and political processes.

Dodik's rise to power, a missed opportunity?

A few remarks about Dodik's rhetoric and his rise to power can help make the changes in his political activities clearer. Milorad Dodik came to power in Republika Srpska in the late 1990s with surprising but strategically directed support from the international community and a significant part of Bosniak political structures. At the time, after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, international actors, particularly the United States and the Office of the High Representative (OHR), were looking for politicians within Republika Srpska who were not directly linked to war crimes and who demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the international community.

Dodik, then a relatively unknown leader of a small opposition party – the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) – had emerged as a politician who verbally distanced himself from the nationalist rhetoric of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), whose leaders, including Radovan Karadžić and Momčilo Krajišnik, had been indicted for war crimes. In international circles, Dodik was perceived as a "breath of fresh air", a politician ready to build democratic institutions, respect the Dayton Agreement, and pave the way for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Such a stance also found some pragmatic support among Bosniak political elites, who saw in Dodik the lesser evil compared to the hardline politicians of the SDS. His election as prime minister of Republika Srpska in 1998 was not the result of the political power of his SNSD party. At that time, the group did not have broad support from citizens or the crucial backing of High Representative Carlos Westendorp, who used his Bonn powers to neutralize the influence of the SDS. The international community provided Dodik with financial, political and institutional support, expecting a reformist course. However, although he initially led with rhetoric of reconciliation and integration, after returning to power in 2006, Dodik began to gradually change his political direction, using increasingly pronounced nationalist and secessionist rhetoric. This completely changed his position in the political landscape of BiH.

His initial rise to power is increasingly being analyzed as a missed opportunity by the international community and Bosniak politicians, as he later used the legitimacy he was granted to build an authoritarian and destabilizing political platform. This case illustrates the complexity of post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina and

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Photo: Presidential Executive Office of Russia (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

The political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is currently facing its deepest institutional and legal crisis since the end of the war. Deep divisions are present at all levels of government and are most evident in the political moves of Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority entity of BiH.

the risks of supporting politicians based on short-term considerations rather than long-term stability and principles.

Loyalty above the law

The arrest warrant issued by the court of BiH against Dodik for disobeying the decisions of the High Representative Christian Schmidt, which Dodik openly denies, has run into a wall of institutional passivity. Officers within the State Investigation and Protection Agency, who by law should have carried out the arrest, withdrew after receiving a notification from Republika Srpska's interior ministry that there was "no basis" for Dodik's arrest. It is important to note that during the attempted arrest, inspectors from the agency were without an armed escort, while Dodik's escort was armed.

This coordination points to a de facto parallel in the system of government, where entity bodies do not recognize the authority of the federal state of BiH, and

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therefore neither does international justice. The police and security agencies in Republika Srpska operate as parallel structures based largely on political loyalty, not the law.

The absurdity of the whole situation is further deepened by the fact that the police administration in Novo Sarajevo has filed criminal complaints with the prosecutor's office of Republika Srpska against seven members of the BiH State Investigation and Protection Agency. These officers, who tried to detain Dodik on the court's order, are charged with criminal offenses of "unlawful deprivation of liberty" and the "abuse of official position" under the entity's Criminal Code.

SIPA, the State Agency for Investigation and Protection, is increasingly the target of political attacks from RS. Its activities are systematically obstructed, from bans on entry to specific institutions to public threats. Restricting SIPA represents a direct attack on the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and an introduction to possible physical conflicts between entity and state structures. Even here, the absurdity arises that despite the law prohibiting SIPA's activities in the territory of Republika Srpska, SIPA members carry out arrest operations in RS, sometimes even with the assistance of the entity's internal ministry.

Support from Belgrade?

Aleksandar Vučić, the president of Serbia, has been a key player in the Western Balkans for a long time, balancing between different interests and alliances. His support for Dodik reflects the complexity and nuances of his diplomatic strategy. If supporting Dodik seriously threatened Vučić's international position or Serbia's economic interests, he would very likely sacrifice him. That is why Vučić maintains a strategy of "controlled destabilization", supporting Dodik just enough to avoid conflict, but enough to have influence in BiH.

Despite Serbia's formal commitment to respecting the Dayton Agreement, Aleksandar Vučić has consistently provided political support to Dodik. The rhetoric of Serbian officials often includes claims about the "endangerment of the Serbian people" and "rigged trials" against Dodik. Such support destabilizes internal relations in BiH and encourages Dodik's political irresponsibility. Belgrade thus balances between diplomatic ambivalence and tacit support for secessionism.

Following the issuance of a central arrest warrant for Milorad Dodik, the media scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina was flooded with his inflammatory rhetoric and insults. Dodik used extremely polarizing and aggressive language in his public appearances, often directed not only against international officials and Bosniak politicians, but also against opposition leaders within Republika Srpska. He insulted

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the opposition by calling them "traitors", "servants of Sarajevo" and "foreign mercenaries", thereby further destabilizing the political environment within the entity.

In his speeches, Dodik persistently identifies himself with Republika Srpska, sending the message that any attack or criticism directed against him is, in fact, an attack on the entire Serbian people. Such rhetoric aims to homogenize the political base and create an atmosphere of general vulnerability, in which any criticism of his government is presented as a betrayal of national interests. In doing so, he ignores the fact that there is a strong opposition within RS that opposes his policies.

Opposition parties, including the PDP and SDS, have repeatedly emphasized that they do not support Dodik's confrontational policy. Instead, they advocate for resolving political issues through dialogue and within the institutional frameworks. Their representatives call on Dodik not to hide behind Republika Srpska and the Serbian people in order to avoid personal responsibility for actions that have resulted in court cases. They point out that the institutions of Republika Srpska must serve all citizens and not just as a political shield for one man. This rhetoric has further fuelled political and ethnic tensions, with hate speech constantly present in media outlets close to his regime. Numerous human rights and media freedom organizations have pointed to the increase in verbal violence and the threat to democratic dialogue, while international representatives have repeatedly appealed for responsible behaviour and restraint when it comes to public appearances.

Despite these appeals, the competent judicial and regulatory institutions did not adequately respond to Dodik's appearances, which further strengthened the feeling of impunity and enabled further erosion of the political culture in the country. His communication became the dominant source of media content, which pushed the narrative about the verdict and judicial processes into the background, while emotions and antagonisms flooded the public space.

Dodik's closest political ally at the state level is Dragan Čović, the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union, a Croatian nationalist party in BiH. Their cooperation is based on a common interest in weakening state institutions, undermining the constitutional court, and retaining SNSD personnel in the council of ministers. Čović's passive approach to Dodik's radicalization is interpreted as tacit support for destabilization, which further complicates the implementation of reforms.

Could civil conflict erupt?

After the verdict against Dodik and the issuance of an international arrest warrant, the political and media scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina is once again saturated with tension, inflammatory rhetoric, and fears of destabilization. Although there is

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frequent speculation among the public and on social networks about the possibility of an armed conflict, most domestic and international experts believe that the outbreak of war – in the classical sense – is unlikely, but not completely ruled out.

The role of the international community is crucial for maintaining peace. EUFOR's Althea mission, which is tasked with maintaining the security environment in BiH, has recently been reinforced with additional contingents of soldiers and helicopters. These units conduct daily military exercises across the country, sending a clear message that the international community will not allow the peace achieved by the Dayton Agreement to be disrupted. This very presence is a strong deterrent to anyone who might potentially try to provoke armed incidents.

In addition, there is no serious social support for a new conflict. BiH citizens, regardless of ethnicity, are largely against any escalation of violence. War trauma, mass migration, economic insecurity and general exhaustion from political crises have left deep consequences, which make an armed solution seem absurd and suicidal today.

Although a general war is not currently a realistic scenario, Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a state of deep political instability. The continued presence and readiness of the Althea mission, supported by NATO allies, guarantees relative security for the time being

The European Union's commitment to preserving peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina was further confirmed by the recent decision of Austria and Germany to impose sanctions on Milorad Dodik. These sanctions include a travel ban to both countries, which also includes a transit ban, as well as a freeze on assets in their territories. These measures represent a strong political signal and the clear position of the European Union towards Dodik's incitement of political tensions and obstruction of state institutions in BiH. In addition, sources from diplomatic circles indicate that other European Union members are considering imposing similar sanctions, which further underlines the EU's determination to take concrete steps to protect the sovereignty and stability of BiH.

War is unlikely, but the deep political crisis, rising nationalism, legal dysfunction, and the undermining of state institutions are very serious problems. The potential future scenario is not armed conflict, but a long-term dissolution and paralysis of the state, which is currently largely underway.

A test of the state's resilience

Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing a key challenge: will it manage to preserve its constitutional order or will the political will of one man prevail over the state's

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laws and international obligations? Milorad Dodik is not just a symptom of the problem, but its embodiment. His impunity sets a dangerous precedent that could have long-term consequences not only for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also for the entire region.

In the context of such a crisis, responsibility lies not only with domestic institutions but also with the international community to act decisively and with principle. Any hesitation today could mean the destabilization of the entire Western Balkans tomorrow.

Immediately after the verdict and the issuance of the central arrest warrant, the media scene was marked by extremely inflammatory rhetoric, while the general public spoke intensively about the possibility of an armed conflict. Speculations about the possible occupation of SIPA premises by members of Republika Srpska's internal ministry caused particular concern. However, as the days passed, tensions gradually decreased, and the drama of the situation subsided. Today, it seems that the topic of Milorad Dodik has almost disappeared from the agenda in both the media and social discourse.

The political system of BiH allows political leaders to manipulate the situation, ignoring the common interests of citizens.

The political system of BiH, consisting of three constituent peoples and two entities, together with mechanisms of blockades and ethnic fragmentation, allows political leaders like Dodik to manipulate the situation to their advantage, ignoring the common interests of citizens. This further complicates the functionality of the state and its institutions, which often leads to disagreements and political crises. It is precisely because of such complexity that BiH is unable to bring about the key reforms needed for progress, with political paralysis continuing as a result.

Dodik's strategy, based on balancing political alliances, nationalist rhetoric and international challenges, raises serious questions about the future of BiH. In order for the country to overcome the current crisis, it is necessary to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure greater accountability of political leaders, and support the implementation of the law, including the execution of orders that should be carried out without political interference. Only through this process can BiH embark on a path of stability, reconciliation and lasting political cohesion. EE

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The Russian ontology

DAVID HALLBECK

The language used in literature and public discourse is not just a mirror of society, it is part of its very structure. By tracing historical frequencies of certain key words and expressions in Russian texts, we can uncover patterns that reflect the deeper cultural, ideological and psychological shifts in Russian society. What do these linguistic trends reveal about Russia's past, present and possible future?

Quantitative, artificial intelligence-based methods can be fruitful also in the humanities. In order to conduct research, one needs, though, an *a priori* formulated theory, what is in AI research referred to as an ontology, in order to know what to search for. It does not mean that AI research in any field is limited to *a priori* formulated principles; it usually yields results and formulates new concepts which go far beyond the theory formulated in the first place. However, one needs such a set of categories in the beginning. The theme of this article is a tentative Russian ontology tested by searches for keywords. Given how they correlate both with each other and subsequent political changes in the cases I will mention, it is hard to avoid the impression that they reflect a deeper structure.

Seeking correlation

The Google Books Ngram Viewer tool offers interesting possibilities for researching the frequency of words in many world languages from around the year 1500 until 2022. There are, of course, other databases, such as those of major national libraries like Gallica, as well as Europeana, but here I will focus on Google Ngram Viewer (also referred to as Google Ngram).

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The tool is easy to use, but it comes with several important limitations. It does not provide a comprehensive picture of word or phrase frequency, as it is based on individual books or journals being viewed as units. This means that a book published in only a few copies can influence the results just as much as one published in large numbers. Similarly, a reissued edition can skew the data for the year in which it was republished. While this may distort the historical timeline, it also reflects contemporary demand for that work.

Another issue is the lack of transparency about the corpus. For example, while we can see there is a Russian-language corpus, it is unclear how representative it is of Russia itself. Given Russia's dominance in publishing within the Russian-speaking world, it is reasonable to assume the data reflects trends in Russia, but this is not guaranteed. Moreover, Ngram Viewer provides no data on spoken media such as radio or television. While this is obvious, it is important to bear in mind when interpreting the results.

To make a tool like this more reliable, especially with the help of AI, it would need to factor in several variables: the number of copies printed, sold, or borrowed; the geographic location of the publication; whether it is a translation (and from which language); the cultural status of the publication (as indicated by style, literary awards, academic recognition, etc.); and whether the publication is scientific (e.g., in natural sciences, medicine, mathematics, physics, or chemistry) or not.

Nevertheless, the tool does reveal some intriguing correlations, which suggests it holds empirical value. Whether Ngram Viewer qualifies as AI is debatable. There is no universally accepted definition of AI. As was famously said of the chess computer that beat Garry Kasparov, once something works, it's no longer considered AI. In that sense, Google Ngram might be considered a basic form of AI as it performs tasks that would take human intelligence millions of years to complete, even if it lacks human-like analysis and has not passed the Turing Test.

To pursue my research, I created a basic ontology by formulating categories and assigning keywords to them, then conducted searches using the Ngram Viewer. This method requires a strong grasp of the history of semantics in specific languages, as well as proficiency in those languages. Though still in its early stages, the approach has already yielded interesting results. It is often difficult to explain why every principle in such a system works. Yet when predefined categories and keywords show consistent correlation, it is hard to deny that a systemic connection exists. I call this the "correlation test" of a hypothesis. Causal explanations may need to wait, but a large set of correlations can help lead to such explanations.

In the long term, a deeper analysis is needed, one that considers not only changes in frequency but also the usage of antonyms or words with opposing meanings, which can be hard to define. In some cases, increased frequency might simply signal

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a lively public debate, caused, for example, by a legislative proposal, and increasing also the frequency of antonyms, rather than a significant cultural or societal shift. For certain keywords related to education in Russia, this appears to be the case.

Changes and phenomena

In a previous article I wrote in *New Eastern Europe*, titled "The return of ideology", I tried to formulate a very basic set of categories which would apply to certain types of societies while not to others. When doing this I took into consideration only a specific time frame, since societies are not static, and not condemned to retaining certain, even deeper structures, forever. For the present article, I selected a few keywords for Russia, keywords which would pertain to a society which was relatively recently illiterate, and which in the pre-industrial world had patriarchal, communitarian family structures. This was true both horizontally, between the father and his children, which were very authoritarian and violent, and vertically, between brothers, which were relatively egalitarian. I also associate a society like contemporary Russia with a relatively feudal conception of the economy, that is an economy that is built more on administration and a division by symbolic criteria of existing resources than by the creation of new resources.

The intellectual developments of the 1990s laid the groundwork for the resurgence of more traditional ideas under Putin.

Russia is also a society where the middle class in the western, mostly English and French sense, is a marginal phenomenon. Such a society does, however, also hold high esteem for pure science and identity-shaping literature. In the current, highly technological war launched against Ukraine, with its need for scientific knowledge, the general importance of informatics, and thus mathematics, and for the support of the masses, this does not make the country seem so weak as many imagined.

For the keywords I have used in this study, those linked to specific ideological or cultural structures, one might expect a slow and gradual decline in their frequency over time, particularly as education levels rise. A modest increase could also be expected during periods when official propaganda gains influence, as has occurred in Russia since at least 2014. This general expectation is mostly supported by the data. However, there is one notable anomaly when examining the period from 1960 to the present: around 1980, many of these keywords reach an all-time low, while their opposites reach an all-time high.

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What happened in the Soviet Union in 1980? On the surface, not much. Yet during this period, representatives of the so-called "new thinking" – which may have paved the way for Mikhail Gorbachev's later reforms or at least reflected broader social changes that made such reforms possible – were beginning to gain influence in Soviet think tanks and institutions. This process has been described in depth by Robert D. English in *Russia and the Idea of the West*.

These trends nevertheless suggest that cultural change may precede political transformation. The rise in the frequency of certain keywords during the 1990s and their decline in the Vladimir Putin era points to an important conclusion: the post-Soviet Russian identity was never fully embraced at the time. Instead, the intellectual and cultural developments of the 1990s may have laid the groundwork for the resurgence of more traditional or state-centred ideas under Putin.

Small but significant shifts

To make more precise predictions based on this kind of data, it would be necessary to assign numeric values to various types of political changes and link them with keyword frequencies or other linguistic elements. Political transformation often stems from small but significant shifts in everyday values and language, which are shaped by deeper demographic, educational and epistemic (noetic) structures. These structures can offer predictive insight into political developments and may eventually be modelled once we better understand which factors are most influential.

The 19th century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who developed a compelling theory of imitation, focused much of his work on these kinds of subtle social changes. He advocated for studying the "succession of minute transformations" in politics and industry, beginning in one's immediate surroundings. As a curious example, consider the word *vozhd* (leader), a term often associated with Joseph Stalin. Its frequency declined slightly between 1960 and around 1975–1980, but began to rise significantly after 1985, continuing to increase until 2022.

The relative stability in the frequency of many keywords during the Putin era suggests a high level of acceptance for his model of governance and perhaps points to its durability. This aligns with the idea of "Putin's long state" as described by Vladislav Surkov in 2019, a long-term, ideologically coherent structure that may pose a sustained challenge to Europe.

In my study, I chose to focus on the period from 1960 to 2022. This broader timeframe helps highlight the pivotal shift around 1980 and trace the subsequent changes during the Putin years, many of which reflect a return to, or even a surpassing of, pre-1980 frequency levels. I do not link the choice of 1960 to any specific

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political event, as that would require a separate analysis of earlier data to understand the context. It would, of course, be valuable to compare this data with material in other languages to better distinguish what is uniquely Russian. However, aside from a few exceptions, space does not permit such an analysis here.

Analysis

Let us consider the term *nasledstvo* (inheritance), which conveys a passive, feudal conception of the economy. It reached an all-time low in 1978, with a relative frequency of 0.0000235911, following a certain decline from 1960, then increasing, with some ups and downs until 2022. This decline and increase during Soviet times suggests that it was not a term that was as such incompatible with Soviet discourse, but rather one that was increasingly marginalized until a new, more traditional discourse started to take shape in the late 1980s and the 1990sa trend also observed in many of the other keywords examined in this study.

The phrase *velikiy kombinator*, the self-glorifying label of the iconic fictional conman Ostap Bender, also shows an all-time low in 1983. As a cultural archetype, the trickster thrives in economies driven not by production or education, but by opportunistic adaptation. This is a fundamentally pre-modern model, resonant with feudal or transitional societies. A similar trend applies to the name Ostap Bender itself. Looking further into the relationship between language and cultural mentality, one can associate certain keywords with an "oral" perception of literature, prevalent in societies with recent histories of mass illiteracy. As I argued in "The return of ideology", literature and poetry often retain public relevance in such societies, acting as carriers of traditional structures. A term like *muza* (muse) is illustrative. It reached a historic low in 1969 (0.0000699997), followed by a rise in the 1990s and a continued increase during the more ideologically assertive Putin years. A similar pattern can be observed with *lavriy* (laurels).

This pattern extends to terms rooted in classical or Latin traditions. For instance, Vergil appears more frequently than Limonov after 2010, an interesting reversal and perhaps an indicator of the stability of certain ancient Western cultural symbols in Russian discourse. The word *missiya* (mission), reflecting attachment to abstract ideals or civilizational goals, also bottoms out in 1980 (0.0000373604), before climbing again.

The term *istina*, denoting a deeper, almost metaphysical form of truth, offers a unique lens. One might question whether such a concept is meaningful at all, as truth can be seen simply as correspondence between statement and reality. Nevertheless, *istina* resonates with essentialist thinking, a hallmark of traditional or

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ideologically rigid societies. Notably, its adjective form *istinniy* was used by the actor Ivan Okhlobystin in 2022 to advocate for a "holy war" against the West and is frequently employed by the Russian Orthodox Church. Usage of *istina* increased steadily from the 1970s and rose sharply after 2014, though its rise began in the 1990s. In contrast, the term *sootnoshenie* (correlation), more analytical in nature, was relatively frequent around 1980, while *istina* was not.

Similarly, the phrase *analiz soderzhaniya* (analysis of content), which implies an external, abstract view of language (compare with David R. Olson and Walter Ong), peaks around 1980, then declines gradually through the 1990s and the Putin era. This trend also applies to phrases like *soderzhaniye zakona* (content of the law), as opposed to merely referring directly to a legal act. The word *analiz* mirrors this trajectory, with a peak around 1980 and a continuing, if decelerated, decline after 2010. Meanwhile, *muza* rises, suggesting a divergence between analytical and oral-traditional modes of expression.

Such linguistic formulas, which concern how something is said rather than what is said, are likely more resistant to censorship. They often appear ideologically neutral but may better correlate with cultural and political shifts. This distinction is also visible in the diverging trajectories of *nauka* (science) and *nauchnyi podkhod* (scientific approach). While *nauka* may function as a slogan or pretence, *nauchnyi podkhod* reflects method – how one engages with knowledge. By the mid-1980s, belief in Soviet science was still loudly proclaimed, but many who praised it were soon turning to faith healers and mystics. Likely, those who consistently used "scientific approach" were less prone to such shifts.

Gendered terms follow similar patterns. Usage of *muzhskoy* (male) and *zhenskiy* (female) increased markedly from around 1985, after declining since the 1950s. In 2022 both terms were more frequent than in 1900, with use becoming more balanced over time. Interestingly, around 1980 both words were equally infrequent. In the French equivalents (*masculin*, *féminin*), however, *féminin* has been more frequent than *masculin* every year from 1900 to 2022. This suggests that while meanings may vary, frequency trends in certain languages can be compared with caution. The archaic term *domostroy*, a reference to a patriarchal family code, reaches a historic low around 1975, then surpasses more analytical phrases like *sootnoshenie faktorov* (correlation of factors) in frequency.

A look at geopolitical terms reveals something striking: West, Europe, Ukraine, and even the ethnic slur *khokhly* all show a marked decline in frequency since the late 1990s or early 2000s. *Rossiya* (Russia) follows a similar trend post-2001. This suggests a shift inward. When internal concerns dominate, external references become unnecessary. Such developments support the hypothesis that current political actions, including the war in Ukraine, are more a product of internal cul-

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tural dynamics than external antagonisms. Deeper ideological and psychological structures have resurfaced after their brief suppression in the 1980s. This does not diminish the responsibility of those leveraging these structures for political ends, nor the fact that Ukraine is now paying the price for their reappearance.

Change on the horizon?

If word usage truly reflects societal shifts, what can we expect going forward? The anomalous trends around 1980 reflected a decline in Soviet public confidence and the growing prestige of non-Soviet ways of thinking. In contrast, the 1990s saw a return to expected trajectories, particularly a slow but steady decline in feudal or oral-traditional thinking, influenced by rising education levels.

The Putin era before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine largely preserved this slow evolution. While propaganda amplified bombastic rhetoric, deeper trends tied to education continued, albeit very slowly. This, however, suggests, given the influence of the war on Russian society, that no major internal transformation is likely within the next two, three decades, perhaps even longer. The current regime, or something like it, may persist for long and any change to the better seems less likely for every day that passes by.

We should not discount the influence of status and resources being directed towards the military and propagandists. These figures could reshape public discourse and values over time, particularly in rural Russia, where returning soldiers may affect local perceptions of authority and respectability. An aspect of this are the efforts now made by the Russian government to strengthen the future status of veterans. Such changes could, long-term, strengthen the support for the war even more and create a society which is both more ideological and more prone to violence than even today's Russia. In today's Russia, the meaning of the war is the war itself much more than any specific territorial or security claims. It considerably strengthens the Putin regime and its possibilities of repression.

Europe must therefore remain realistic. Any hope for future internal transformation must not distract from the immediate goal: confronting and defeating the Putin regime. Waiting passively for cultural shifts is not a strategy. The West must be prepared for a long and deeply rooted ideological confrontation, without illusions.

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A weekly dose of disinformation

NOVAYA VKLADKA

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has used social media as a platform to promote pro-military and pro-state propaganda. This policy affected all public institutions in Russia, including in the regions. Soon after, a top-down system of social media posting was developed and people working on the ground soon found themselves in the position of having to act also as propagandists. Not all agreed with this policy.

"Become a force defending the motherland," reads the caption on a photo of a man holding a weapon, promoting Russian military contract service. Since the spring of 2022, posts like this with military-patriotic themes have flooded the social media pages of government-funded institutions on *VKontakte* (the most popular social media platform in Russia, similar to Facebook). These posts can be found on public pages, including schools, kindergartens, social service centres, hospitals, theatres, museums and libraries. To find out who initiates such propaganda, *Novaya Vkladka* (*New Tab*) spoke with employees of state institutions in the regions and investigated the role of public sector workers involved in these posts, as well as how their personal choices affect the broader informational landscape.

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Random war videos

At the end of 2020 Natalia, then a university student in Petrozavodsk, took a part-time job at one of the city's public institutions, earning 12,000 roubles per month (roughly 130 euros). She was told she would be working on some social projects, but her employer never elaborated on which projects exactly, and no tasks were assigned. For the first two months, she simply sat at her desk doing nothing. Later, she learned she was technically "covering" the positions of employees on maternity leave.

The institution worked in the social welfare sector, but even after three years, Natalia still did not understand its exact function. The organization did not actually work with any of the groups mentioned in the department's mission (e.g., pensioners, children). Natalia could not clearly define her job duties either, as she says she wrote some reports and helped organize events.

In summer 2022 she was offered a role as a public relations specialist after the previous person quit. The institution had a camera and other professional video equipment, even a green screen in one of the offices. Yet the department's *VKontakte* page had only about 2,000 followers at the time. Natalia admits she had no experience working with social media, but they hired her based on the fact that they believed the "youngest person equals social media manager".

For the first few months, Natalia still did not know what she was supposed to be doing. Gradually, tasks appeared: shooting videos for entrepreneur initiatives, developing course programmes for social workers, writing news and event summaries. Natalia says none of it served any real purpose, neither for the city residents nor the institution itself: "I was just sitting there like a bump on a log."

The senselessness of the work led to depression. Natalia quit but later returned out of financial necessity, unable to find another job due to her deteriorated mental state. That is when she learnt that the once-ignored social media page of the state organization had begun receiving "news from above".

Even after three years, Natalia still did not understand the exact function of the institution where she worked.

"As far as I know, the news was generated by the Regional Management Centre (RMC) and manually distributed across all subordinate institutions. My director would forward them to me after receiving content by email from the RMC. The news was always boilerplate. If you scroll through any government public page, you would see the same format: random videos about the war, 'our guys' (soldiers), and so on. We used to call it 'shit-news'", recalls Natalia.

Officially, RMCs were created to accommodate communication between citizens and government officials online, as well as monitor social media for resident

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complaints using an incident management system that forwarded complaints to relevant government agencies. In practice, however, RMC employees monitor user comments which the authorities might find objectionable. According to *Kommersant*, in 2020, the federal government allocated 23.1 billion roubles to fund RMCs under the national "Digital Economy" programme. The money was issued as a subsidy to the autonomous non-profit organization "Dialog Regions", which was responsible for creating the RMCs. Its founding organization is Dialog, another Russian propaganda group controlled by the government managing "communication between citizens and public institutions". Since December 2021 it has been headed by Vladimir Tabak, a former leader of the "Putin's Supporters Network" youth movement. His deputy is Darya Bogdanova, former head of the department of information policy for the Vologda region, where she oversaw the launch of the local RMC.

Firing point

Since December 2022, it has become mandatory for all government bodies, local administrations and their affiliated organizations to run their own social media pages. Amendments with regard to the new requirement were made to federal legislation in July of that year. The Russian government designated *VKontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* (another Russian social network which translates to classmates) as the priority platforms. These pages had to be registered via the *Gosuslugi*, an online public services portal, after which they were marked with a flag and the label "state organization". State social media pages are promoted by their curators as "a convenient communication system between authorities and citizens".

Russian state-run social media pages are promoted as a convenient communication system between authorities and citizens.

"There is no system of government transparency like this anywhere else in the world … where every agency has its own social media page. The law is considered successful and that it does not require amendments. Public social media pages are now working like the biggest news outlet in the world. We have 175,000 pages and, according to the latest data, a little over 70 per cent are actively and systematically maintained, publishing at least three posts a week," said Andrey Tsepelev, deputy director general of Dialog Regions. He made this comment in December 2024 during an online event held for public sector workers who manage their institution's social media pages.

Tsepelev cited data from the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, claiming that one in every three Russian citizens reads government social media pages.

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Later he called social media pages a "weapon in the informational hybrid war being waged against Russia".

"We cannot retreat," he said. "The malicious ideas that our enemies try to implant in us and our youth, once they're in, they're hard to root out. Every [state social media page] is our firing position." Initially the production of military-patriotic content for these pages was handled by local RMCs, which was established in each Russian federal region in 2020 by order of Vladimir Putin.

At government-funded institutions, these new regulations were received differently by staff: some tried to adapt, while others are still trying to minimize interference "from above". According to Natalia from the Karelia region, the head of their institution tried to only post news items that were at least somewhat related to the social sector for which the group was responsible. As a result, their VK page featured fewer posts than many other government organisations in the region.

She explains that shortly after the legal amendments were passed, a new administrator appeared on their institution's social media page – the press secretary of the regional ministry of social protection. These "top-down" admins (such as press secretaries of the relevant ministries) would log into their admin accounts on the *Gosuslugi* portal and distribute news posts across social media communities within their sector. "At that time, I think the posts were still being sent manually for publication, but at some point, they started posting automatically. And then the whole stream of bullshit-news started pouring onto our pages and filling up our users' feeds," Natalia recalls.

Posts from above

The same thing happened at a state-run theatre in the Kirov region. Evgeniya, who has worked in the public relations department at the institution for several years, says that before 2022 no one interfered with how the theatre's social media pages were managed. But then the situation evolved into one of increasingly tight control. They too started receiving "top-down" news posts. Unlike the theatre's own content, Evgeniya says, the audience ignores these patriotic posts. They regularly get the fewest likes.

Inna, who has been running several public pages for a state-run youth centre in the Novosibirsk region for over a decade, recalls that in the summer of 2022 – just two weeks after the legislative amendments – they received an email requiring them to register their page on the *Gosuslugi* portal. All administrators were instructed to link their personal accounts to their official profiles on the government site. Anyone who did not do this within a week was removed as an admin.

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The production of a weaver's portraits of Vladimir Putin.

Inna says the thought of not complying had not even crossed her mind. She needed to keep posting updates about the events and projects of the centre. "We all have a crazy workload, and tasks like these are just something you complete without thinking much, so you can go back to your original scope of work. Those who cared less as much simply didn't even bother registering."

In fact, Inna's youth centre started posting military-patriotic content even before it became mandatory through the *Gosuslugi* portal, at the beginning of spring 2022. "There was an element of pressure. The posts came down as an obligation. Our director did not edit anything, she just posted what was sent. But she's very patriotic. I barely remember what the posts were about because the whole situation was so emotionally exhausting, and I didn't want to get involved. All I wanted to do was to keep deleting them," she recalls.

According to Inna, the posts were sent from the city hall and district administration, often accompanied by detailed guidelines on "working with youth during times of socio-political tension". They were also issued a list of mandatory war

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documentaries, which she described as "intensely gory", that had to be shown to children and teenagers. The list included *War Correspondents*, *The Guardians*, *Donbas: Recognized*, and *I Went to War*. Inna says she and her colleagues pretended to watch them and even faked a photo report, but never actually screened the films for their audience.

The youth centre has to report weekly to the mayor of Novosibirsk about its patriotic efforts on social media. "If you're not mentioned in the mayor's weekly report, it's like you didn't work at all. What counts as patriotic? War documentaries, meetings with veterans of the Special Military Operation, media posts glorifying the operation and the Second World War, celebrations, lectures, discussions – anything tied to war. Even though environmental issues are technically part of the patriotic curriculum, the leadership does not count that as valid work," Inna explains.

Evgeniya from the Kirov region says that their theatre's VK page was also connected to the *Gosuslugi* system in 2022, but they have tried to navigate it cautiously: "The position of the leadership plays a big role. We work with many other cultural organizations. I'm subscribed to dozens of theatres across the country and I see a difference. Some are fundraising for drones, while we have the bare minimum of that kind of content: only the posts that are auto-published appear [on our social media page]."

One such post, Evgeniya recalls, came out in autumn 2024 and was about a nationwide campaign to support the families of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. These types of posts are created outside the theatre and pushed to social media groups via the *Gosuslugi* system. According to Evgeniya, their team tries to make these posts disappear quickly by immediately publishing more of their own theatre-related content afterwards.

Lyudmila, an employee at a kindergarten in Vologda, said that someone from the education ministry called and asked them to add an external account as an admin of their VK page. This account also started managing groups for other educational organizations in the region. The account's avatar was a random internet image and it was created in December 2020, shortly after the Regional Media Centre was established in Vologda. According to Lyudmila, this admin now publishes "pro-government posts" through the *Gosuslugi* system in these education groups.

Olga, who worked as a social media manager for a regional tourism community in the Buryatia region in 2023 said their page had very few mandatory patriotic posts: "There were some young guys at the RMC who I didn't know. Maybe once they asked us to repost some federal news, something non-offensive, soft kind of stuff."

In the social institution where Natalia worked, the new rules about managing social media were taken lightly. When staff were asked to link their VK pages to the organization's account on *Gosuslugi*, they did, according to Natalia, because manag-

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ers at state-funded institutions are scolded "from the top", so they pass that pressure down. Everyone is afraid of such anger cascading down the chain of command.

But even in that institution, there were people against the war: "Some colleagues under 30 thought the new rules were bad because of all the military-themed news. But that didn't influence their decision whether to continue working there or not," Natalia says.

Unpaid obligations

Training state workers to manage social media was also handled by the Regional Media Centres, both online and in person. Natalia from the Karelia region recalls an offline seminar: "There were women, directors of rural psychiatric institutions, just sitting there, completely lost." She remembers that, initially, post control over the news was not very strict: "It was like, one bullshit-post a week."

Yet, starting in August 2022, when top-down posts began to be self-published, the Karelian RMC started demanding at least three unique posts per week on the organization's activities, in order to "dilute" the military-patriotic content. This was tied to the way social media ranking algorithms work.

"Over there [in Karelia's state organizations], the ladies were totally losing it, it was a total mess because this wasn't part of the job. If the quota wasn't met, they were scolded during weekly meetings," Natalia adds.

In most state organizations in the Karelia region, as in other regions of Russia, there were no positions for social media specialists. As a result, this unpaid work was taken on by managers or their assistants.

Pyotr, who interned at the same social institution where Natalia worked and wrote his thesis on *Gosuslugi*, says that public sector employees were unprepared for these changes: "The training courses, as I understand it, were held with a delay, about six months after the amended law came out. There were no specialists for this job, so maintaining *Gosuslugi* was just dumped on existing staff."

The lack of dedicated social media management positions in state institutions is confirmed by comments on a Telegram channel run by staff of the aforementioned Dialog Regions. Some of the comments included: "They really need to address the issue of pay … we're working completely for free"; "If this is so important, why is it unpaid?"; "There is a law saying institutions are required to do this, but after more than a year, there still isn't a single budgeted staff position for it." These complaints remain unanswered.

Inna from Novosibirsk admits that sometimes it is "sickening" to even open their youth centre's social media page because of the constant military content.

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She recalls that in 2022, when they were asked to publish posts promoting military contract service, some parents among their followers reacted negatively and left comments. After that, the number of such posts was reduced. Inna also remembers deleting one lengthy anti-war comment, "just in case," so the author would not get fined. According to her, opinions about the war in their team vary: some oppose it, while others are more patriotic, especially those whose "husbands or relatives are fighting at the front." These women spend evenings at the youth centre weaving camouflage nets. But such topics are not openly discussed.

Turning a blind eye

Evgeniya from the Kirov region also notes that no one in her team talks about the war: "Everyone understands the context. It's like with the buses marked with the letter Z. At first, many people refused to ride them, but then you realize: you're not supporting the regime just because of that, and you still have to get to work. The same with *Gosuslugi* – everyone just turns a blind eye to it."

She adds that her manager supported her by assigning the social media duties to other staff members. "He knows my stance perfectly, therefore I am not bothered in this regard at all." She notes that no one on her team supports the war, and they comply with the new rules superficially, "just so the theatre could continue operating".

On the Buryatia regional tourism's social media page, there were no posts about the war.

Olga from the Buryatia region says that on the regional tourism social media page which she supported, there were no posts about the war. Her director was very cautious when selecting topics for publication. For example, when a well-known local tour guide passed away and Olga wanted to post an obituary, the director initially approved the post to help the family raise money for the funeral. But just a few minutes later, she changed her mind.

"She personally explained that if we post this now, we'll get swamped with requests to publish obituaries for soldiers," Olga recalls. She also remembers that when the director asked her to meet some soldiers at the airport and write a post about it, she refused to go and there were no consequences for her at work.

Inna from Novosibirsk continues to work at the youth centre but admits she struggles with an internal conflict. "I cope by telling myself that by staying in this role I can influence things, even if not publicly, even without speaking out loud. I try to minimize how much I discuss this topic with young people."

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Natalia from Petrozavodsk experienced a family rift due to her anti-war stance. At work, the "stream of shit-news" created a moral dilemma. She felt ashamed of the top-down propaganda posts she was required to publish in the social service's group, just by pressing the "publish" button.

She believes this content affects followers. "Over time, they start forming a specific point of view on certain events." In early 2024, Natalia left her job at the state organization. "It wasn't like I had some dramatic moment, like they made me carry the Russian flag somewhere. I just got fed up." Out of the whole team, she was the only one who quit.

This article was written collaboratively by members of the Novaya Vkladka editorial team and was first published in Russian on their website. We republish it here with their permission.

Novaya Vkladka (New Tab) is an online magazine with documentary features about life in the Russian regions after the start of the war in Ukraine.

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The fight for a letter

How Ukraine is removing Russia's imperial legacy

OLENA MAKARENKO

For decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, remnants of the Soviet and Russian imperial legacy, such as symbols, street names and the names of cities and villages, remained visible in Ukraine's public spaces. Russia's 2014 invasion, followed by the full-scale assault in 2022, accelerated efforts to purge this legacy, though not always without controversy.

For years, Dmytro Karpiy has been on a mission to erase Soviet and Russian imperial symbols from Ukraine's streets, advocating for the renaming of places and the removal of monuments that glorify a past empire. His latest battle is over a single letter in the name of Brovary, a city in Kyiv Oblast, where he has lived for 16 years.

This renaming effort gained momentum after Ukraine passed the law on the condemnation and prohibition of propaganda concerning Russian imperial policy in Ukraine and the decolonization of toponymy in 2023. On September 19th 2024, the Ukrainian parliament voted to rename 327 settlements and four districts, whose names contain symbols of Russian imperial policy or do not comply with the standards of the state language. The city of Brovary was not included in the vote, leaving its status in limbo with its chances for renaming rather low.

The large-scale wave of renaming and removing Soviet symbols in Ukraine was triggered by the EuroMaidan Revolution, followed by Russia's 2014 invasion of the

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Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the occupation of Crimea. This reignited the de-communization process, which began during the Soviet Union's collapse but remained unfinished, peaking in 2015.

"Only after the war in 2014 did the society realize that change was necessary. There was a surge of patriotism, revealing that Ukraine's existing toponyms, almost entirely rooted in communism, were incompatible with our identity," Karpiy says.

A lasting imprint

Karpiy's fight began even earlier, in 2011, when he was advocating for renaming streets in Brovary that honoured organizers of the Holodomor – the man-made famine under Stalin that killed millions in Ukraine. His initiative failed at the time, as most of the commission responsible for names opposed it, stating that it was not the right moment. Mariya Ovdienko, a member of the commission who was in favour of renaming, faced years of opposition. One argument against the change was that elderly residents might struggle to adapt.

"I replied, 'who will think about the children? How can they learn that Pavlo Postyshev helped organize the Holodomor, yet see a street named after him near their school? That teaches kids that double standards are acceptable,'" Ovdienko says. Change became possible in 2015, but Ukrainian society still did not fully re-evaluate the role of the Russian Empire as a whole.

Bohdan Korolenko, a historian and an employee at the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, explains that the long period under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union has left a lasting imprint on public consciousness, shaping individuals through an all-Soviet, all-Russian narrative in books and films. However, Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 has prompted Ukrainians to shift their perspective.

"Previously, there was no understanding that this legacy is colonial and imperial, and it has to be removed. This layer of imperial heritage overshadows our Ukrainian history and cultural heritage, devalues it, and pushes it into a secondary, marginal position," Korolenko says.

The long period under the Russian Empire and Soviet Union has left a lasting imprint on public consciousness.

The effort to eliminate Russia's imperial legacy is known as decolonization, which led to the emergence of the aforementioned law. Key provisions condemn Russia's imperial policies, prohibit the propaganda of its symbols, and outline the removal of these symbols from public spaces, including the renaming of streets and toponyms, as well as the removal of memorial markers associated with Russia's

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imperial politics. This ongoing decolonization process has led to the mass renaming of cities, towns and villages. The decolonization of street names in Ukraine began after the full-scale invasion in 2022, even before the relevant law was adopted.

One letter matters

The city of Brovary, where Karpiy has lived since 2008, is at the centre of discussions about a potential renaming. Local activists, including Karpiy, are advocating for changing the spelling from "Brovary" to "Brovari" to align with Ukrainian-language standards. While subtle in English transliteration, this change reflects a significant shift in Ukrainian spelling, switching from the letter "*и*" to "і" in the final syllable. This change has both philological and historical significance. According to the philological argument, as the advocates of renaming state, the name "Brovari" originates from the Ukrainian word for breweries and should end in "і" in the plural form.

Karpiy first learned about the spelling issue from a newspaper article by Ovdienko, also a local activist and historian. "When the Bolsheviks, namely the Russian occupants, came to power, they altered Ukrainian sounds to make them easier for Russians to pronounce. They changed the city's name without regard for how Ukrainians would say it, aiming to assimilate the Ukrainian people into Russian culture. Their goal was to undermine Ukrainian nationhood, language, and culture," Karpiy explains. He notes that it took decades for Ukrainians to adjust to this new pronunciation, with some older residents still using the pre-Soviet form.

Local activists are advocating for changing the spelling of the "Brovary" to "Brovari" to align with Ukrainian language standards.

Ovdienko, born in the Brovary district, recalls her childhood memories tied to the old name. "I came from the village of Trebukhiv, where my mother always pronounced it Brovari until her death. For her, it was natural," she says. For Ovdienko, the issue extends beyond childhood memories; it's about Ukrainian identity. "The city was called Brovary during the most intense period of Russification in Ukraine," she asserts.

After graduating in 1980, Ovdienko began her career as a Ukrainian language and literature teacher in Brovary, resisting the pressures of Russification. "My students told me, "We trust you, but no one else talks about Ukraine's independence. It's hard to hold on to this belief when the world around us is different." I reminded them that history doesn't ask, and we have a path to follow," she recalls.

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As a publisher, Mariya Ovdienko wrote "the city of Brovari" not Brovary, in every book she published.

Photo: Olena Makarenko



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The "I love Brovary" sign in the city center.

Photo: Olena Makarenko





Dmytro Karpiy in front of the "I love Brovari" sign, where local activists replaced the last letter.

Photo: Olena Makarenko

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Activist Yuliya Kapshuchenko is confident that renaming Brovary is about restoring historical justice.

Photo: Olena Makarenko

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In some cases, Dmytro Karpiy, like other activists, was removing old street signs when utility services failed to do so.

Photo: Olena Makarenko

In 1989, Ovdienko helped organize the city's first commemoration of Taras Shevchenko, the most famous poet in Ukraine and a symbol of the nation from the 19th century, despite local government prohibitions. Shevchenko visited Brovary multiple times and referenced it in his writings, using the old name Brovari – another argument for the renaming. Additionally, Ovdienko points out that two villages in Ukraine share this name and have always been spelled it Brovari, not Brovary.

Despite these arguments, the local government opposes the change. Since Brovary was not included in the list of renaming voted on by the parliament, the city Mayor Igor Sapozhko responded by saying that this means Brovary will not be renamed. However, a separate decree to consider the renaming was registered in the parliament over the summer of 2024, leaving the possibility for Brovary's renaming still open.

No mood for change

While Karpiy states that his inner circle recognizes the necessity of renaming the city, the atmosphere in Brovary's central park on a casual Friday tells a different story. "It's named Brovary, and it should stay that way. Whether it's Russian pronunciation or not, it's still Brovary," insists Ivan. Meanwhile, Daniil, who was visiting the city, questions the overall value of renaming: "It depends on the resources needed. Right now, we have to think carefully about where to allocate them." His friend, Viktor, who recently moved to Brovary, echoes this sentiment: "Renaming cities or streets isn't a priority. It might just be about public opinion or misusing funds."

Taras Shevchenko visited Brovary multiple times and referenced it in his writings, using the old name Brovari.

Local resident Anna adds to the financial argument, asserting that supporting the army is more pressing than a name change. "I don't like Brovari," she says, "and many others don't either. People are used to Brovary. Even if the name changes, it'll take years for anyone to use it."

Yuliya Kapshuchenko, a local activist, attributes resistance to a lack of educational campaigns. Such initiatives are neither initiated nor supported by local authorities. "There is, however, a committed part of the community – local intellectuals and activists – who understand that renaming is about asserting historical justice, not just a label change," Kapshuchenko says. She addresses the financial objections, explaining that renaming does not require millions in costs. It mostly involves changing signs, not reprinting passports en masse. Changes occur when people update their documents.

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She argues that a lack of education on the topic leads many to misunderstand the true costs. "Only if someone actively says, "I want to live in Brovari instead of Brovary" will they change their passport," she adds.

Happy streets

While the city name remains unresolved, the renaming of its streets and removal of memorials glorifying the Russian Empire is nearing completion. According to Karpiy, the majority of streets in Brovary have been already renamed. He and Ovdienko actively proposed names combining old historical names of locations, significant events and figures from different periods of Ukraine's history, and local personalities.

Often, local governments in various cities and towns have opted for some neutral names for the streets like *Shchaslyva* (Happy), *Zatyshna* (Cozy), or *Vyshneva* (Cherry). Such choices frequently face criticism for failing to escape the legacy of old names. Additionally, some streets receive overly general names. For example, Brovary's central Pushkin Street has been renamed to *Vidrodzhennya* (Renaissance) Street.

Only a few streets in the city are left to be renamed, including one honouring soldiers from the Soviet-Afghan War.

"They did not explain, however, which renaissance it refers to," Karpiy says. This particular street is another sign of the empire's conquest, not only of local identity but also of the local economy. Karpiy explains that the area where the street is now located was once known as *Pekarnya* (Ukrainian for bakery), as several bakeries operated there in the early 20th century. However, in the 1930s, the Bolsheviks implemented a policy of liquidating private businesses.

"That's how these bakeries disappeared. A hundred years have passed, but people still remember the old name of this central street," Karpiy says. Although his attempt to revive the historical name was unsuccessful, he notes that local activists have managed to restore several other historical street names in Brovary. Only a few streets that have not been renamed are left in the city, including a street honouring soldiers from the Soviet-Afghan War.

"This is a recent name, chosen in 2015. The war in Afghanistan was an aggressive conflict, similar to Russia's actions in Ukraine today. Honouring Afghan warriors is impractical, but it remains a debatable issue," Karpiy explains. He believes this street will eventually be renamed, but it's not currently on the agenda. Karpiy himself is unable to participate fully in the decolonization efforts now, as he is currently serving in the military.

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Imperial influence is hard to erase

Brovary is not the only major city where renaming has sparked heated discussions. The abovementioned vote by Ukraine's parliament on renaming 327 settlements did not address five of the most contentious cases. One such case is Pervomaysk in Mykolaiv Oblast, with the street's name referencing the Soviet holiday May Day. Names associated with this holiday were among the most common candidates for renaming.

"May 1st in France or the United States, and May 1st in the former Soviet Union are two different things. In Europe it marks the day of workers' struggle and solidarity, while the Soviet concept honoured the proletariat's role in the October coup [of 1917]. This idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat became a symbol of the communist regime. Names related to May 1st, which were established in Ukraine after Soviet power, clearly connect to Russian imperial politics," Korolenko explains.

Renaming these locations has not been a pressing issue for most places with names tied to the holiday, but the situation in Pervomaysk is more complex. In the spring of 2024, a parliamentary committee supported the name Olviopol after local deputies proposed either keeping Pervomaysk or adopting the new title. However, Olviopol is also linked to Russian imperial ambitions, as it was named by Catherine the Great as part of her so-called "Greek Plan", a strategy against the Ottoman Empire.

"Imperial Olviopol instead of Soviet Pervomaysk? Mykolaiv Oblast doesn't deserve this," reacted Taras Kremin, the State Language Protection Commissioner, on Facebook.

Later, local deputies proposed a new name, Bogoslavsk, to the parliament, but another suggestion was to keep the old name, Pervomaysk. The case of Pervomaysk, along with other contested cities, was postponed to be considered separately in the parliament.

As the MP and candidate of historical science Volodymyr Viatrovych stated at a press conference devoted to the preliminary results of decolonization, the process falls behind the deadlines set by the law. Moreover, he believes attempts to ignore the issue in parliament are related to either indifference towards the issue by some MPs or fears that their voters would be against the changes.

"The parliament's lack of attention to the renaming process has caused a negative backlash throughout Ukraine, and now we are witnessing a series of local initiatives aimed at blocking the implementation of the decolonization law altogether," Viatrovych said.

While Ukraine strives to erase centuries of imperial legacy, renaming locations is often one of the first actions taken by Russian forces upon occupying new ter-

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ritories. Monuments clearly recognized as Ukrainian, such as those honouring victims of the Holodomor or notable Ukrainian figures, are dismantled.

"Russia's goal at this stage is to destroy Ukrainian statehood. This is the main objective – not just to capture a specific territory or region, but to eliminate Ukrainian statehood and, consequently, Ukrainian identity, which is an integral part of that statehood," Korolenko says.

In contrast, Ukraine's task, as he emphasizes, is to commemorate the memory of the past and preserve its identity. Ukraine's efforts to maintain its identity in public spaces continue alongside the ongoing war. ЇЇ

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Dancing with the dictator

How Belarusian propaganda took over TikTok

KSENIYA TARASEVICH

In September 2020, following the August protests and mass state media layoffs, *Russia Today* sent a team to Belarus. Their mission was to help reboot state media and to teach social media strategies. Since then, Belarusian institutions have leaned heavily on the Russian experience. One of their key platforms for cheap and effective propaganda distribution has been TikTok.

On the left, a young man is picking outfits for his visit to the military office. On the right, a man in uniform rates each look with sarcastic flair. Just another quirky TikTok? Not quite. The TikTok clip, created in the platform's popular "stitch" format, has gained over seven million views.

What seems like harmless fun is actually part of something much bigger – a surge of pro-Lukashenka TikTok creators aiming to promote regime narratives. The campaign makes authoritarianism look relatable, even charming.

Welcome to Lukashenka's TikTok, where propaganda comes complete with trendy beats and filters. Is there any chance for pro-democratic forces to fight back?

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How Belarusian propaganda conquered TikTok

Lukashenka's propaganda machine recognized TikTok's power just in time and adapted traditional television narratives into short vertical videos. The solution was simple: cut clips from TV broadcasts and remix them with trending sounds. No studios or major editing needed.

A 2024 study by iSANS, an international expert group on Belarus, divided pro-regime TikTok accounts into four groups: accounts linked to state bodies and organizations (45 per cent of those analysed); collective accounts with impersonal content and unclear authorship (31 per cent); personal accounts using a direct "talking-head" format (25 per cent); and accounts linked to law enforcement bodies such as the ministry of internal affairs (three per cent). Many accounts borrow directly from the Kremlin's playbook. They use TikTok trends to increase visibility: adding popular music, using trending hashtags and collaborating with each other to boost engagement. While pro-democracy accounts tend to maintain a positive tone, pro-Lukashenka ones lean heavily on sarcasm and negativity. The aim is clear: to make propaganda feel like entertainment.

Lukashenka's propaganda machine recognized TikTok's power, adapting traditional TV narratives into short vertical videos.

What do pro-Lukashenka TikTok accounts put in the spotlight? One example can be seen in @First_news, which borrows its name from Lukashenka's long-standing nickname in state media – "The First". Most videos are short clips from Lukashenka's daily schedule: visiting Moscow, shaking hands with officials, or delivering a punchy line that could easily go viral. The account is rather anonymous – just a constant stream of curated moments. Its sole focus is the Belarusian leader.

The account @evgenbelorus uses a different approach. In one video, the influencer casually talks to the camera and shares his opinion – a typical "talking head" format. He comments not only on Belarusian news but also on international stories, such as recent news about the AfD in Germany being labelled extremist. His videos are recorded in everyday settings, often at home or in his car, using only a basic microphone and a frontal camera. What makes Evgen's content stand out is the lack of obvious signs of propaganda. There are no red-green visuals, no mentions of Lukashenka, no patriotic slogans. At first glance, it looks neutral. But once you listen to the content, the message becomes clear. It is propaganda in a softer form – casual, personal and harder to spot.

In contrast, the account @zdes.by is something else entirely. This account uses TikTok-native formats (though they gained more traction on Instagram). It is filled

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with memes, trending jokes and short-form humour that speaks the language of Gen Z. At first, it is difficult to tell whether the account is mocking the state's aesthetic or promoting it ironically. But its frequent access to official events, and its clearly professional production quality, reveal a different story. It is unlikely that an opposition satire channel would be granted such a level of access or budget.

Together, these accounts illustrate the key strategies behind Belarusian TikTok propaganda. @First_news promotes the leader's image directly – the classic cult-of-personality approach; talking-head accounts like @evgenbelorus deliver soft messaging through relatable, familiar personas; and @zdes.by targets younger users with high-quality, trend-aware content that blends in perfectly with the platform's native style – a seamless delivery system for regime-friendly narratives.

The narratives

According to an iSANS study, Belarusian pro-regime TikTok accounts promote a range of coordinated narratives. A key theme is the international success of Belarus – videos praising the country's safety, sports achievements, infrastructure, and youth patriotism, while claiming sanctions have no impact. Clips often show full store shelves and booming tourism, implying sanctions hurt the West more than Belarus.

Of course, they heavily promote Lukashenka's personality cult. The Belarusian dictator is often glorified, portrayed as a symbol of stability and prosperity. His speeches, quotes and state TV clips are the main sources for TikTok content. Another major theme is external hostility. According to their narratives Russia is a victim, NATO a threat, and Ukraine a failed state.

The Belarusian dictator is often glorified, portrayed as a symbol of stability and prosperity.

Anti-Ukrainian content is widespread. Ukraine is called a "Nazi state", while the president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is mocked. War fatigue is emphasized, Russia's invasion is justified, and Lukashenka is promoted as a peacekeeper.

Finally, propaganda seeks to discredit the Belarusian opposition, portraying exiled leaders as traitors, spreading fake news, and justifying police violence during the 2020 protests. Hate speech and efforts to show conflict within the internal opposition are common tactics to erode trust in pro-democracy forces.

The content often mimics the aesthetics of the Soviet era. According to FactCheck.by, the regime may even follow a unified visual "brand book" rooted in Soviet motifs. Why use a nostalgic look for Gen Z and millennials? Most TikTok users were born after the USSR collapsed. As a result, they cannot relate with pioneers'

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handkerchiefs or the hammer and sickle. Yet, researchers suggest the aesthetic reflects the nostalgia of the regime's core officials – many aged 45 to 70 – and the design choices are more about projecting stability than appealing to actual memories.

"We are experiencing a kind of nostalgia renaissance," the iSANS expert explains. "This applies not only to music, but also to visual aesthetics." This may be why the content hits just the right note.

From Gen Z to grandparents

TikTok is not just for teenagers in Belarus. According to the Digital Data Report, as of early 2025 the social media app had 6.36 million users aged 18 and older in the country. That means it reaches about 87.5 per cent of the adult population. TikTok, alongside YouTube, is among the most popular platforms in the country. In terms of gender, 54.9 per cent of TikTok's ad audience is male and 45.1 per cent female. This actually mirrors Belarus's real gender ratio quite closely, much more so than platforms like Instagram, where the user base is mostly female.

TikTok appears to be growing in the country. Between October 2024 and January 2025, its ad reach jumped by 513,000 users, nearly nine per cent growth in just three months. There is also a persistent myth that TikTok is for kids. The iSANS expert points out that since 2022, the user base has become more evenly spread across age groups. The majority are still 18 to 34, but people over 35 make up a steady share too, about five to six per cent in each bracket up to 55+.

"TikTok in Belarus has surprisingly broad reach across all generations," the iSANS expert says. "And this is how Belarus is different from other countries. Because here TikTok spread into almost every part of daily life."

Why the platform boom? It may be because Belarusians are mentally drained. They are often overloaded with bad news and aggressive Instagram ads. TikTok offers an easy escape. Once you start scrolling, you might not stop for 30 minutes, or longer. The algorithm is sharp. Like travel? You will see endless videos of beaches and cityscapes. Into cooking? The latest viral recipes are at your service. It is fast, fun and feels personalized. TikTok creators are also harder to persecute, unlike Facebook or Telegram. People speak more freely. It feels anonymous, and safer. What also makes TikTok so appealing is how easy it is to start. You do not need fancy equipment or polished visuals. Just a phone and a bit of editing, and you are good to go.

Unlike YouTube, which is seen as a place for serious, high-quality content, TikTok values authenticity. People can share everyday moments and still get attention, even with no budget.

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What the numbers say

According to the iSANS report, pro-regime accounts had the fastest average follower growth, followed by those that were pro-Kremlin. Pro-democracy pages grew the slowest. One reason is fear – many Belarusians worry they could face administrative or criminal charges just for subscribing to or interacting with opposition content. Another factor is the broader appeal of Russian-style propaganda, especially for Russian-speaking users outside Belarus. Yet, with TikTok, the numbers can be misleading. It is a huge, chaotic space, more like an ocean than a newsfeed. You do not need a big follower count to go viral. An account with just a few thousand followers can rack up millions of views. The only metric that really matters is median views per video over time – that is what shows whether an account is being seen now.

"We can claim that any TikTok-related rankings can only represent accessible data, but they don't reflect the bigger picture," the iSANS expert says.

In Belarus, bloggers must register with the government to legally post ads if they want to monetize content. This regulation puts creators in a bind. To make money, they often must produce pro-regime content, such as participating in "unity marathons". Open support for Russia's war is not mandatory yet, but the pressure is growing. Popular creators like KOKO.by or Denis Blishch can secure advertising deals. Smaller influencers survive on product swaps and minor partnerships. TikTok itself does not pay Belarusian creators, but Russian and local brands continue advertising. Despite this, it is not easy to earn money from blogging due to the peculiarities of Belarusian legislation. As of last year, bloggers with over 10,000 followers will have to list themselves in a special registry of advertisers. At the same time, it is not necessary to submit information if the author is engaged in the placement of social advertising or some types of advertising on vehicles. Thus, the state has one more way to control bloggers. According to the iSANS expert, they can continue to live in Belarus and make their usual content. However, sometimes they will have to publish information about various "Marathons of Unity" or other pro-Lukashenka events.

In Belarus, bloggers must register with the government to legally post ads if they want to monetize content.

One example is the popular food blogger KOKO.by mentioned above. During one video, he planted a tree in People's Unity Park – an obvious propaganda gesture. The iSANS expert says that blogging in Belarus does not bring serious money, especially if you are a pro-governmental blogger. This distinguishes Belarus from Russia, where participation in propaganda activities can really bring tangible

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income. Belarusian pro-governmental bloggers more often do it not for the sake of just earning money but for wider benefits such as career advancement. In some cases, participation in these media campaigns serves as a condition for promotion.

In September 2020, *Russia Today* sent a team to Belarus. Their mission was to help reboot state media and to teach social media strategies. Since then, Belarusian institutions have leaned heavily on the Russian experience, especially through the "Union State" framework. Joint forums, shared tech, and security collaborations have only deepened. Belarus lacks a formal blogger payment system. But after TikTok left Russia in 2022, many Russian content studios moved their operations to Belarus. Now, Russian bloggers often appear in TikTok analytics as if they are based in Belarus. Due to the fact that TikTok blocks Russian user data, and many Russians use VPNs, views from Russia are often recorded as Belarusian. Some videos rack up over six million views – more than Belarus's total TikTok audience. This is a clear indicator of cross-border influence.

Pro-democratic forces response

The pro-democratic forces, most of whom are outside the country, were slow to join TikTok. As one iSANS expert explains, this was largely due to US funding policies that prohibited supporting TikTok content creation, viewing the platform as an enemy space (it is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance). According to the expert, this was a strategic mistake. By ignoring TikTok, independent media lost their position on the platform and lost a large portion of their audience. However, after they finally joined the platform, Belarusian pro-democratic media groups and bloggers adapted quickly. They started producing diverse content, learned the format fast, and showed real creativity, especially considering how difficult it is for them to monetize their work.

Despite their professionalism, pro-democracy narratives are drowned in a sea of pro-regime content.

Yet despite their professionalism, pro-democracy narratives are drowned in a sea of pro-regime content. This is not because Belarusians are not interested in pro-democratic narratives. Instead, it is because the other side simply posts much more, overwhelming the algorithm.

Some conspiracy theorists claim that Chinese algorithms are rigged to favour Putin and Lukashenka. The iSANS expert firmly disagrees with this idea. "TikTok rewards volume," he says. "The more you produce, the more likely you are to be seen. The problem is scale of funding. Pro-democracy outlets cannot compete in

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volume. The budget of Belarus's Agency of Television News is larger than the entire US funding which was available for Belarusian independent media, and that's not even counting Russian state support for their bloggers." Even so, Belarusian pro-democracy content creators are more agile and efficient than their Russian counterparts. They use resources wisely, and Belarusian society has shown stronger resistance to disinformation than many others in the region.

Nevertheless, TikTok in Belarus is slowly becoming state propaganda's most successful channel. It is cheap to operate, allowing Minsk to effectively hack the algorithm and create an ecosystem of state-backed creators who fill up feeds with pro-regime content. While pro-democratic content creators face real obstacles such as limited funding, delayed entry, and a high-risk environment, they seem to have adapted quickly, learning the platform's language and building resilient communities with far fewer tools. The battle for the most popular platform in Belarus is still on. State media relies on constant repetition, while independent creators bring fresh ideas, creativity and credibility. Even in a space driven by algorithms, those strengths still matter. **EE**

Kseniya Tarasevich is a journalist and editor based in Poznań, Poland and is originally from Belarus.

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Thirty years after the Srebrenica genocide, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a land suspended between memory and oblivion

TATJANA ĐORĐEVIĆ AND JOSHUA EVANGELISTA

Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a battleground, where nationalism and ethnic divisions are highly visible. Thirty years after the war, more than 50 schools in the country are "schools under one roof", where students are divided not only by curriculum but also physically. In one of these schools, a history teacher presents her lessons according to two different curricula.

Near the Srebrenica Memorial Centre in Potočari, Bosnia and Herzegovina, music fills the air. Children sing, accompanied by an acoustic guitar, keyboard and drums. The repertoire is diverse, the emotions strong and yet the music brings a smile to the face, especially considering that the earlier visit to the memorial centre chills both the heart and soul. Standing at the door is Ismar Porić, the founder and creative director of the "House of Good Tones" music school in Srebrenica.

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"When someone comes to Srebrenica for the first time, they can feel the genocide in the air, which must never be forgotten. But there is one important thing: "We must not remain in the past. We must care for the living and invest in them,"" says Porić.

Revisionism

The Memorial Centre recently opened a new exhibition titled "The Path of Salvation". It was displayed in one of the hangars where the Dutch UN battalion had housed refugees arriving in Srebrenica, a zone that was meant to be safe. Hundreds of remnants of shoes, sneakers, boots and tiny little shoes, were displayed on a glass table, symbolizing the suffering of July 1995. On panels and large fabric banners hanging from the ceiling, sentences written by men and boys reveal their thoughts as they tried to escape from Srebrenica.

"At night, we hold hands so we don't get separated. Anyone who leaves the column has no chance of surviving." These are just some of their reflections. Between 12,000 and 15,000 people set out on a 100-kilometre journey through the forests toward free territory near Tuzla. Over 8,000 were killed by the Army of the Republic of Srpska under the command of General Ratko Mladić.

Children from Srebrenica, Bratunac, Potočari and surrounding areas, attend the "House of Good Tones" music school as an alternative form of education alongside regular schooling. "Children of Bosniak or Serbian ethnicity, born here after the war, carry a heavy burden," says Porić. "They have a difficult childhood and upbringing, given the political climate that still exists, even 30 years after the war. They know more than a child should about those horrific events."

In the ninth-grade history textbook authored by Professor Dragiša Vasić, which has been part of the official curriculum in Republika Srpska since September 2024, figures like Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić are portrayed as individuals who played key military and political roles during the war. Karadžić is described as a poet, psychiatrist and politician who contributed significantly to the creation of Republika Srpska. The text omits any mention of his life sentence for genocide, crimes against humanity, and violations of the laws of war by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). It simply notes that he was handed over to the tribunal.

Ratko Mladić, the former commander of the Army of the Republic of Srpska, is presented as a key general in the defence of Serbs in Croatia and as the figure most responsible for creating the Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While it is mentioned that he was extradited to The Hague in 2011, the reasons for his extradition are not explained.

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The end of the war in 1995 is described through the lens of the Serbian capture of Srebrenica and Žepa; the fall of the Republic of Serbian Krajina; the expulsion of 450,000 Serbs from Croatia; and the signing of the Dayton ceasefire. There is no mention of the Srebrenica genocide, nor of the suffering of other ethnic groups.

On the other hand, the history textbooks used in schools in the Federation are also filled with inaccuracies and biased narratives. A supplementary ninth-grade textbook, authored by Almir Bećirović and Nazim Ibrahimović and introduced into the Tuzla Canton curriculum in 2022, dedicates 64 pages to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Bosnian war, war crimes, and the destruction of cultural and religious heritage. This book presents the conflict exclusively from the perspective of Bosniak victims, excluding the suffering of other ethnic groups and the crimes committed by the Bosnian Army, which have been documented and prosecuted by the ICTY and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Between 12,000 and 15,000 people set out on a 100-kilometre journey through the forests toward free territory near Tuzla.

In January 2024 the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina annulled part of the curriculum in Republika Srpska related to "Topic 11: Republika Srpska and the Defensive-Homeland War", following an objection regarding the glorification of war criminals.

However, the book is still in use according to Džana Brkanić, deputy editor in chief of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). "Our analyses have shown that history textbooks for primary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina present three different versions of history, often containing inaccuracies," Brkanić says. "We cannot claim that history is taught better in some places and worse in others, but we do argue that it is politically conditioned, shaped by the views of the majority population in either the Federation or Republika Srpska."

Genocide deniers

In May 2024 the United Nations adopted a resolution declaring July 11th as the International Day of Remembrance for the Srebrenica Genocide. Following this, the Association of Victims and Witnesses of Genocide launched a new website in October 2024 to monitor and document all forms of genocide and war crimes denial in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Murat Tahirović, president of the association, says that every act of denial or glorification is now carefully documented, analysed and forwarded to the appropriate institutions, including the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina,

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A picture of the Srebrenica Genocide Memorial and Cemetery for the victims of the 1995 massacre. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the massacre.

for further action. He points to the insufficient work of judicial institutions in prosecuting genocide denial under the 2021 law.

According to an analysis by the Srebrenica Memorial Centre, media outlets from Republika Srpska and Serbia play a crucial role in shaping public attitudes towards the genocide, with Milorad Dodik, the President of Republika Srpska, standing out as the most prominent genocide denier. Tahirović, who was a member of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was severely wounded in the chest and abdomen and spent 59 days in a detention camp, emerging with serious consequences. In 2005, he was elected president of the Association of Camp Detainees in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nia Abadžić, a student at the Faculty of Criminalistics, Criminology and Security Studies at the University of Sarajevo, criticizes how genocide and the horrors of the war are taught in schools. However, she finds even more disturbing the trend of passing down generational trauma.

"War traumas that my generation did not experience first-hand can still shape young minds, depending on how they are passed down to us," Abadžić says, adding that her parents taught her and her sisters to remain open to any discussion.

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Nia learned about the events of the war in high school through a curriculum that was based solely on one perspective: the tragedy and sorrow of the Bosniak people. In contrast, Jaska Pajić, a law student from Banja Luka, learned nothing about the war of the 1990s because that part of history was under an embargo for teaching in schools until 2018.

History through court-established facts

Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a battleground where nationalism and ethnic divisions are highly visible. Thirty years after the war, more than 50 schools in the country are "schools under one roof", where students are divided not only by curriculum but also physically. One of these schools is located in Busovača, central Bosnia, and serves 240 students of Bosniak and Croat ethnicity. Emina Musić, a history teacher at the school, presents her lessons according to two different curricula.

"Croatian ethnicity students attend one shift, while Bosniak ethnicity students attend another," Musić says. After analysing numerous history textbooks, BIRN created a database of court-established facts between April 2021 and March 2023. Professor Melisa Forić prepared these materials for use in formal education in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"This database is divided into ten regions. We used all The Hague rulings to extract facts, which were then adapted for teachers," Brkanić says.

"We also prepared multimedia materials, in which we avoided bloody scenes but included testimony from people who were witnesses to the war and certain crimes."

BIRN offered this material to all education ministries in Bosnia's cantons and the equivalent body in Republika Srpska. Memoranda were signed only with the ministries from the Sarajevo and Tuzla Cantons, which included the database as additional teaching material for history. BIRN never received a response from the ministry in Republika Srpska. ĐĐ

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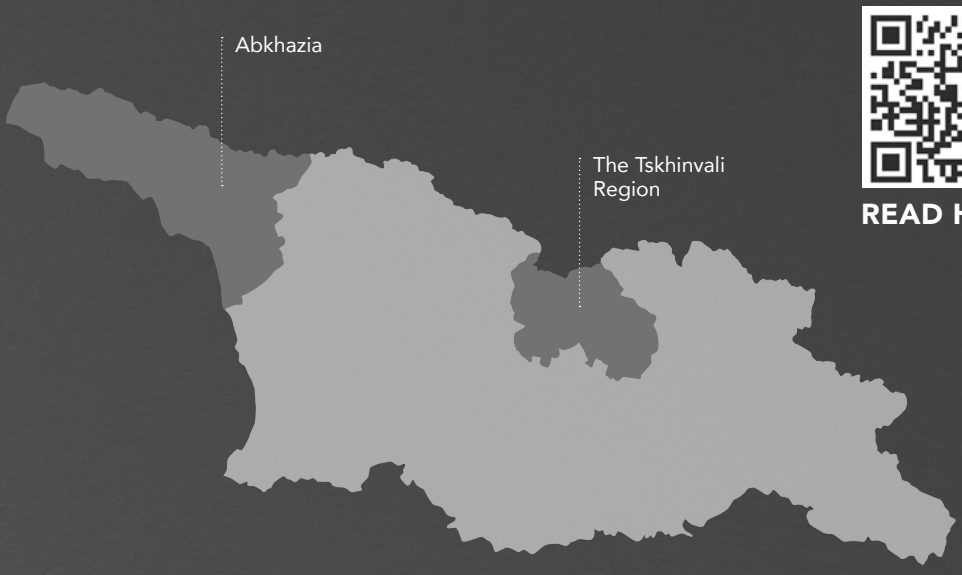
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"FOREIGN POLICY" OF THE RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED REGIONS OF GEORGIA AFTER THE AUGUST 2008 WAR



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Belarusian literature

Wandering through a swamp

VERA BEIKA

It cannot be said that today's Belarusian literature has inherited the tradition of its perished predecessors naturally, through the continuation of stylistic choices or rediscovered forms. Rather, this tradition is now displayed through allusions, reminiscences, quotes, inclusions of images or metaphors developed by former poets that are now included in the fabric of modern and postmodern verse. At the same time, today's Belarusian literature continues to "clear the path" of the generation from the late Soviet period.

Belarusian writers, who try to convey the dramatic history of Belarusian literature through, for example, public speeches, show that there are two approaches that can be described as optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. In the optimistic one, Belarusian literature is presented as a phoenix burnt to black ashes only to rise again. Indeed, over the past century alone, Belarusian writers twice had to reinvent the historical novel, the science fiction story, the school of translation, literary criticism and free verse. This had to be done each and every time, as if it was for the very first time. This optimistic spirit is expressed by a motto of resilience: "They have tried to kill us many times, but they never succeeded – and they won't succeed now either."

The pessimistic perspective portrays a Belarusian swamp, where a group of amateur wanderers makes its way on an uncertain path. Their only goal is to remain

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alive when they reach a hill, while the swamp around them appears as a lonely, dangerous and wild expanse. Only few realize that the path ahead has already been cleared by the earlier wanderers who were equally desperate as the ones today. They also do not know that they are not surrounded by a desert, but instead boundless riches hidden in the black bog. There is no one left to tell them about the path or the swamp, because their predecessors lie here in the mire – along with their unknown achievements and unclaimed experience.

Black holes

Contemporary Belarusian writers are well aware of the "black holes" that exist between cultural generations. It is a topic of discussion in both literary circles and other artistic communities: actors, filmmakers and painters. Seemingly, it is one of the most serious diseases of the Belarusian culture. Its many causes are both external and internal. The first cause is obvious. Throughout its history, Belarusian literature has never experienced even minimally favourable conditions. Since the 19th century, when Eastern Slavs were just beginning to build their national concepts and constructs, Belarusians had neither their own state nor their own language which they could apply for intellectual use. Belarusian education, press and books – therefore also literature, which grows from all these components – were officially banned in the Russian Empire, which had incorporated the Belarusian lands in 1795. Consequently, the Belarusian gentry, the educated segment of the population that had traditionally produced literature, had no opportunity to realize their creative potential in the language they were born into and spoke at home. The language of artistic and intellectual expression, literary careers, publishing, and ultimately, the language of fame and glory, was always foreign. It was either Polish or Russian.

Contemporary Belarusian writers are well aware of the "black holes" that exist between cultural generations.

Logically, prodigies born in this land had no other choice but to give themselves to other cultures that were stronger and more suitable to withstand the general pressure of empire. Just to name a few, there was Adam Mickiewicz, who was born in Navahrudak in the Hrodna (Grodno) region, who became a Polish national poet. At the same time, Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose family is said to have come from the area of present-day Belarus, specifically from the village of Dostoyevo in the Brest region, became a Russian writer.

Throughout the 19th century texts written in Belarusian occupied only a marginal position in European culture. They existed either as ironic-satirical poems

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(Kanstancin Vieranicyn's "Taras on Parnassus" or the anonymous "Aeneid Inside Out") or the semi-forbidden, thin booklets of populist verses such as those that we can find in Francišak Bahuševič's collections. That is why even the controversial use of the Belarusian language – introduced as perceived barbarisms in Polish-language plays by the Polish-Belarusian poet and dramatist Vintsent Dunin-Marcinkievič – is now considered part of the treasured legacy of Belarusian literature.

Taking root in such conditions was an extremely difficult task for a fragile national tradition. Yet, it took root and was even quietly nurtured. The wide influence of Mickiewicz was echoed a generation later in Maksim Bahdanovich, one of the founding figures of modern Belarusian literature, while Bahushevich inspired the works of Yanka Kupala.

The Nasha Niva period

The seeds of that tradition began to flourish during our first renaissance – an era now known as the "Nasha Niva" period. Amid the broader surge of national liberation movements within the crumbling empire, we witnessed the birth of several literary milestones: the first historical novel (*Labyrinths* by Vatslau Lastouski), the first novel in verse (*New Land* by Yakub Kolas), the first drama (*Paulinka* by Yanka Kupala), the first psychological story (*Two Souls* by Maksim Haretski), and the first modern philosophical treatise (*By the Eternal Way* by Ihnat Kancheuski-Abdziralovich). Poetry blossomed alongside short fiction and literary criticism, and the brilliant star of Bahdanovich rose to illuminate the era. Unfortunately, all this would be scattered by the social cataclysms of the early 20th century.

Namely, the Nasha Niva tradition was sidelined in the new quasi-state of Soviet Belarus, which existed from 1920 to 1922. Writers who carried forward the Nasha Niva legacy did so in secrecy, often cloaking their messages in what is called an "Aesopian" language. Yet it was precisely this tradition – although forced into the underground – that continued to nourish the emerging literature broadly labelled as Soviet. In truth, in the beginning there was little that could be called genuinely Soviet about it. At its core, the Belarusian culture remained driven by the aspiration for an independent state. This was the case until 1929, when nearly an entire generation of young writers, already somewhat compromised by the new ideology, was executed upon Stalin's orders in the Kurapaty Forest near Minsk, or perished in concentration camps.

According to Leanid Marakou, a researcher of Stalinist repressions, of the approximately 2,000 writers repressed across the Soviet Union, around a quarter – about 500 – were Belarusian. While these numbers are approximate, they reveal a

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clear pattern. For Moscow the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was a showcase of Soviet achievements and the outpost of the Soviet Union against the "hostile West". That is why cultural purges in Belarus were among the most brutal. As a result, the entire works of the literary generation of that period were removed from libraries and bookshops, destroyed, and banned from mention and citation. The tradition was broken.

It was replaced with foreign input. The few men of letters who survived the purges of the 1930s, at the cost of their own integrity and the price of total Russification, were now tracing their literary genealogies to Pushkin and Tolstoy, rather than Kupala and Haretski. The post-war generation that came to the world of literature in the early 1950s thus had no ground of their own.

Return to lost tradition

Thus, after the Second World War, Vasil Bykau had to reinvent a special style of talking about the war, even though 30 years before him, Maksim Haretski had written stories about the First World War. Mikhas Straltsou had to rebuild psychologism in prose – although 30 years before him, Mikhas Zaretski had already used it.

Vladimir Karatkevich was declared the pioneer of the historical prose genre in the 1960s, although Belarusians had developed historical prose before. Yet, it had to be created from scratch, taking Russian classics as a model. The "Bum-Bam-Lit" experimental movement of the 1990s was perceived as an extraordinary innovation, although it was taking its inspirations, albeit unknowingly, from artists from a century ago.

Today we can see an interesting tendency of Belarusian writers starting to turn to the achievements of the perished writers. In other words, they turn their sights back towards the previous generations. In literature such a situation is rare. Thus, it is worth illustrating it with an example such as Yauhen Kuntsevich's poem "Samnasamasts". It was published in 2024 in the collection of the works of the winners of the "Maladnyak" literary contest, which is, by the way, named after the legendary magazine published in the 1920s in the BSSR which was a platform for the perished literary generation. In "Samnasamasts", the return to the lost tradition is declared literally; the entire first section of the poem is devoted to the achievements and experience of discovering the texts of executed authors.

It cannot be said that today's Belarusian literature inherits the tradition of the perished predecessors naturally, through the continuation of stylistic choices or rediscovered forms. Rather, this tradition is now displayed through allusions, reminiscences, quotes, and inclusions of images or metaphors developed by former

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poets, which are now included in the fabric of modern and postmodern verse. At the same time, today's Belarusian literature continues to "clear the path" of the late Soviet generation. For example, one of the most notable novels, Eva Vezhnavets's *What Are You Looking For, Wolf* builds on the artistic quest of Vasil Bykau and Ales Adamovich, while also delving into the Belarus of the 1920s. Thus, we can say that today's Belarusian literature has inherited two literary traditions at once and that they have become united in a way. These are the almost forgotten tradition of the 1920s and the "newly invented" post-war tradition.

Meanwhile, within modern Belarus, another black hole is forming between generations. The achievements of the new culture, created mainly in emigration, are hardly accessible inside the country. It is impossible to reference them and to address them. This stream has been pushed into the underground again. It is spoken about in secret, or in the aforementioned Aesopian language. And the new generation of young Belarusian writers, who are living in a reality where there is immense pressure and violence, have no choice but to reinvent the meanings and forms which their predecessors have already invented twice.

Well. It is not the first time that we have had to go through the swamp. We have the experience, which means we will get through it again. ЕЕ

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The Vatican and the Eastern Bloc

What the Vatican archives can reveal about Cold War Europe

KATARZYNA NOWAK

Five years after the Vatican unsealed its archives on the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, historians are only beginning to uncover the depth of insight they offer into the post-war transformation of Eastern Europe. Far beyond matters of church history, these documents reveal how the Holy See navigated the rise of communism, supported persecuted Catholics behind the Iron Curtain, and responded to the upheaval of millions across the continent.

In March 2020, the Vatican Apostolic Archives opened to consultation a long-awaited treasure trove of documents spanning the neuralgic years of 1939–1958. Named the Vatican Secret Archive until 2019, its extensive holdings are housed in a „bunker" – an underground storage facility in Vatican City. While scholars around the world braced for revelations concerning the Holy See's wartime diplomacy and the Holocaust, another equally compelling and underexplored story lies within: the history of Eastern Europe during one of its most turbulent transformations from the ruins of World War II to life under state socialism, as seen by the lens of the Vatican.

The newly accessible Vatican fonds, having been open for five years, illuminate the role of the Holy See as a global religious actor, diplomatic player and humanitar-

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ian force in the Cold War order. These documents, counting over 16 million pages, provide extraordinary insight into the inner workings of the evolving Catholic Church, communications with the faithful behind the Iron Curtain, and the global connections of displaced peoples from the East.

This section of the archives was expected to be open to consultation in the late 2020s, as typically it occurs 70 to 75 years after the death of the pontiff to protect sensitive information and allow time for the organization and cataloging of documents. Pope Benedict XVI initiated the organization of the archives to prepare them for scholarly use, and Pope Francis subsequently advanced the timeline for access, authorizing their opening earlier than anticipated, stating : "The Church is not afraid of history but, rather, she loves it, and would like to love it more and better, as God loves it! Thus, with the same confidence of my Predecessors, I open and entrust this patrimony of documents to researchers."

The opening required extensive preparations by the archivists and scholars, with cataloguing and documentation efforts spanning over 12 years. Just to be sure, open stands here for being made available to qualified researchers according to the archive's regulations. Since the opening, for much of this time the reading rooms were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and then operated at limited capacity. On top of that, parts of the fonds are still being inventoried and some of the indexes have been released only recently.

Beyond the Church: Transnational Catholicism in the Cold War

The significance of the Vatican archives reaches far beyond ecclesiastical or Italian diplomatic history. The Catholic Church – transnational in structure and global in scope – was uniquely positioned to observe, interpret and sometimes influence the seismic political and social shifts occurring across Europe. As communist regimes rose in Eastern Europe, the Church remained both a target of repression and a node of underground resistance, while denouncing clergy who collaborated with the regime, the so-called "patriot priests" (*księża patrioci* in Polish).

The pontificate of Pius XII coincided with this transition. Once home to some of the strongest Catholic traditions in Europe, countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania came under atheist regimes that regarded Rome's influence with deep suspicion. The Vatican, in turn, became a focal point for pleas, reports, and appeals from clergy, laypeople, and refugees alike.

The documents in the archives detail how the Vatican tried to reach to and unite Catholics behind the Iron Curtain, as well as support young anti-communist intellectuals in exile, especially in the US, expecting them to one day return to Eastern

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Europe. Still, the Vatican was very careful whom to trust. Some of the dissident-groups were very radical, especially in terms of nationalism, and in conflict with each other, as well as with US institutions and thus the Vatican often first tried to find out more about their targets and ideals before offering their support and resources. Furthermore, the archives contain detailed records documenting the systematic persecution of the Catholic faithful and religious institutions across Eastern Europe and the USSR. They also include reports on Catholic dissidents who resisted communist repression, often at great personal risk.

In the aftermath of the Second World War and throughout the early Cold War, the Catholic Church played a significant role in shaping global humanitarian and migration efforts. It dedicated substantial resources to resettlement and welfare of refugees and other migrants. It also sent aid to Eastern Europe, as the archives reveal, for example, to eradicate a typhus epidemic in Moldavia and alleviate hunger in Romania in 1946. This commitment was not purely humanitarian but was also informed by the geopolitical imperatives of the time, particularly the Church's anti-communist stance and its increasing internationalism.

The Vatican's consistent support for refugee resettlement aligned with broader Cold War strategies, framing humanitarian aid as both a moral duty and a political act. The Church's transnational networks provided material and spiritual assistance to anti-communist exiles, as well as to displaced persons residing in camps across Germany and Austria. As has been already established in historiography but can now be understood in a nuanced way with the use of the newly available material, the Vatican also facilitated the escape of Nazi criminals and collaborators from justice via "ratlines", mostly to the countries of South America.

A Glimpse into the Archives

Often referred to as the Pius XII archives, as it rolls better off the tongue than "the variety of documents pertaining to the pontificate of Pius XII preserved in multiple archives", these papers extend far and wide beyond Eugenio Pacelli's biography and his influence on the Church. The archival materials concerning this period are dispersed across several institutions, including the Vatican Apostolic Archive (*Archivio Apostolico Vaticano*) and the Historical Archive of the Section for Relations with States (*Archivio Storico della Segreteria di Stato Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati e le Organizzazioni Internazionali*). Collectively, they encompass millions of documents – letters, diplomatic cables, internal memoranda, and photographic evidence – much of which touches directly or indirectly on Eastern Europe.

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An image of Vatican City.

While much of scholarly work focused on the Second World War and the Holocaust, the post-war years are also now coming into clearer view. Recently published inventories, such as *Le "carte" di Pio XII oltre il mito/The "Papers" of Pius XII Beyond the Myth* (2023) and the index of the papal nunciature in Argentina (2024), are expanding access to crucial segments of the archives. These include, inter alia, the files on the Pope's involvement in aid to ethnic Germans expelled from Eastern Europe and documents on Eastern European refugees settling in Latin America with the involvement of Church networks.

The recently accessible archival materials provide a deeper understanding of the Vatican's interactions with communist regimes in Eastern Europe following the Second World War. To bring one notable example, the archives shed new light on the Vatican's fraught relationship with Yugoslavia in the immediate postwar period, as the Holy See sought to maintain a presence in a country rapidly falling under communist control. In early 1945, Pope Pius XII appointed American Bishop Joseph Patrick Hurley as acting papal regent to Yugoslavia, marking an unprecedented step in Vatican diplomacy that brought it closer to the US.

The files also contain detailed accounts of forced secularization and the systematic surveillance of religious life in Bulgaria, Hungary, Albania, and other countries. Reports documenting the persecution of clergy, religious orders, and lay Catho-

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lics by communist authorities abound. The persecution of Cardinals Mindszenty, Stepinac, and Wyszyński are the best known, with Mindszenty imprisoned and tortured in Hungary (1949), Stepinac tried and sentenced in Yugoslavia (1946), and Wyszyński placed under house arrest in Poland (1953), all in efforts by the state to suppress their moral and political influence. The archives give access also to much less publicized stories that still starkly exposed the hostility of the regime towards the Church. One such example is material on the 1951 Bratislava trial of Bishops Ján Vojtaššák, Michal Buzalka, and Pavol Gojdič in Czechoslovakia, who were accused of anti-state activities, espionage, and treason. Buzalka and Gojdic, who both died in prison, were later beatified by Pope John Paul II while the beatification process of Vojtaššák was halted by the allegations of his complicity in the Holocaust in Slovakia. To contextualize these events, historians reach out beyond the Vatican archives in their scrutiny of the relations of Church leaders to fascism during the war and revival of papal anticommunism in the 1980s.

The archives detail how the Vatican tried to reach and unite Catholics behind the Iron Curtain.

The Vatican's Anti-Communist Crusade

The post-1945 Vatican increasingly viewed its global mission through an anti-communist lens. Pope Pius XII framed it as a moral and spiritual battle, not merely political. In 1949, he issued a decree against communism, declaring that Catholics who openly professed atheistic communist doctrines would be excommunicated. The archives offer ample evidence of these Cold War struggles, with documentation on support for anti-communist groups in Eastern Europe; approaches towards "patriot priests" who tried to build an alliance between Catholicism and Marxism; assistance to Catholic organizations in exile, and much more.

One particularly illuminating source is the documentation concerning the Vatican Radio transmissions. These broadcasts offered news, encouragement and religious programming to Eastern Europe in local languages. Archival records are a resource to assess the influence and importance of these transmissions behind the Iron Curtain. In the 1950s, nuncios and the local hierarchies voiced a lot of criticism against the Vatican Radio. For instance, Hurley wanted it to become a substitute of the priest, but he was disappointed that it did not use its full potential. Still, many Catholic representatives hoped that Vatican Radio could speak in place of the Church of Silence. As journalist Eugenio Bonanata put it, referring more to the period of the pontificate of John Paul II while commenting on a new book on

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the Vatican Radio: "It is the Radio that speaks in place of the Church of Silence, that brings catechism to children condemned to atheism, that transforms a kitchen table into a hidden altar from which to listen to Mass."

Another dimension is the Vatican's role in strengthening global anti-communist networks by supporting initiatives and organizations that aimed to bolster Christianity as a force capable of containing the spread of communism. In the *Archivio Storico* one can find examples of how Rome helped sustain diaspora communities intellectually and spiritually. For instance, it was done through encouragement and strengthening the anti-communist message embedded in programmes in Russian and Eastern European studies at Catholic universities in the US, such as Fordham, a world-renowned Jesuit university at the forefront of the rapid development of Sovietology.

Letters to the Pope

Alongside the high diplomacy and institutional maneuvering lie intensely personal voices. Among the most compelling items are letters from individuals – refugees, dissidents, and everyday believers – writing to the Pope. While the Vatican maintained public neutrality during the Second World War to preserve its diplomatic position (and as a result faced criticism for its limited public condemnation of Nazi atrocities, in particular persecution of Jews), in the postwar period it took a more active role by promoting peace, aiding refugees, and aligning politically with the West against communism. During and in the aftermath of the war, people wrote to the Pope as a respected moral and spiritual authority, seeking guidance, justice, aid, and support amid widespread suffering and upheaval. These letters often detail lives of hardship and personal struggles of people trying to rebuild their existence after the total war.

During and in the aftermath of the war, people wrote to the Pope as a respected moral and spiritual authority.

One such example, filed in the Vatican Apostolic Archive, is a letter from Jan, a worker from Lublin in Poland, pleading to the Pope for food aid for his family living in poverty, a wife and four small children, two of them at risk of tuberculosis. Another letter, penned in 1947 by a Romanian woman by the name of Ada living in Trieste, asked for help in bringing her parents from Romania to Italy. Similarly, a woman, Helena, in exile in Paris, asked for help for her daughter to flee Czechoslviaka to join her. A Hungarian photographer asked the Pope for a photo camera so he could work again in his studio in Szarvas.

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Rachela, a Jewish woman, penned a desperate plea to reclaim the daughter she had been forced to abandon while fleeing the Germans in Poland. Hiding in the forests with her 15-month-old in tow to evade deportation, she was unable to feed the child during the harsh winter and left it to be found by a Catholic family. "My child was blond, had blue eyes, and a scar on her upper thigh," she wrote in German, full of anguish and hope to locate her lost child. These testimonies not only shaped Vatican humanitarian efforts but also provide historians with vivid snapshots of lived experience during the early Cold War.

Towards a new history of the Cold War East

Until recently, much of the scholarly debate around Pius XII focused on his silence regarding the Nazi extermination of Jews and his relations with Nazi Germany, with some earlier critics branding him as "Hitler's Pope". These longstanding controversies informed the Pope Francis's decision to grant scholars access to the records with the hope that "serious and objective historical research will succeed in evaluating in its proper light, with appropriate criticism, the praiseworthy moments of that Pontiff and, no doubt also the moments of grave difficulty, of anguished decisions, of human and Christian prudence." While those debates remain important, the new research is pushing beyond the polemics. As scholars such as Simon Unger and Nina Valbousquet argue, we are now seeing a shift toward a broader, more nuanced analysis of the Vatican's global role during this era: "Historians are now venturing beyond the confines of the 'Pius Wars.'"*

The material concerning Eastern Europe is central to this shift. It offers insights into the origins of the Cold War, the interplay of faith and ideology, and the lived realities of people in Cold War Europe. Moreover, it reveals the Vatican not just as a reactive institution but as a proactive global player, attempting to connect Catholics in a divided world.

As more inventories are released and access improves, the Pius XII archives will continue to yield new insights. For historians of Eastern Europe in particular and of Europe in general, these records offer an unparalleled opportunity to explore the religious, diplomatic, cultural and humanitarian dimensions of the Cold War. They bring into focus not only the Vatican's strategies and dilemmas but also the voices of those who looked to Rome for solace, solidarity, and survival. For years

* Simon Unger-Alvi, Nina Valbousquet, "Conclusion. Documents for a Revised History," in *The Global Pontificate of Pius XII : War and Genocide, Reconstruction and Change, 1939–1958*. Berghahn, 2024, p. 359.

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to come, these immense multilingual archives, with inventories and the majority of documents in Italian, will be a vital resource contributing to writing a new transnational history of the Cold War East. EE

The examples used in the article come from primary sources in the Vatican Apostolic Archive and the Historical Archive of the Section for Relations with States. This work has been funded by the European Research Executive Agency (REA) under the Grant Agreement No 101106155 (COMREF-VATICAN). I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Marriot Dotter, Dr. Elena Serina, Dr Alejandro Mario Dieguez and Dr. Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ for their valuable feedback and critical input in preparing this article for publication.

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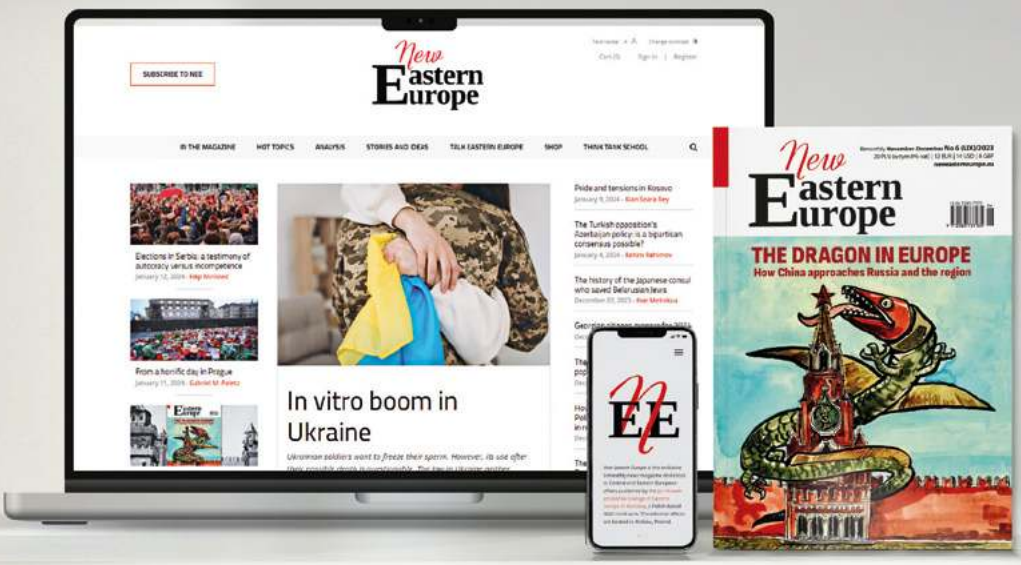
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