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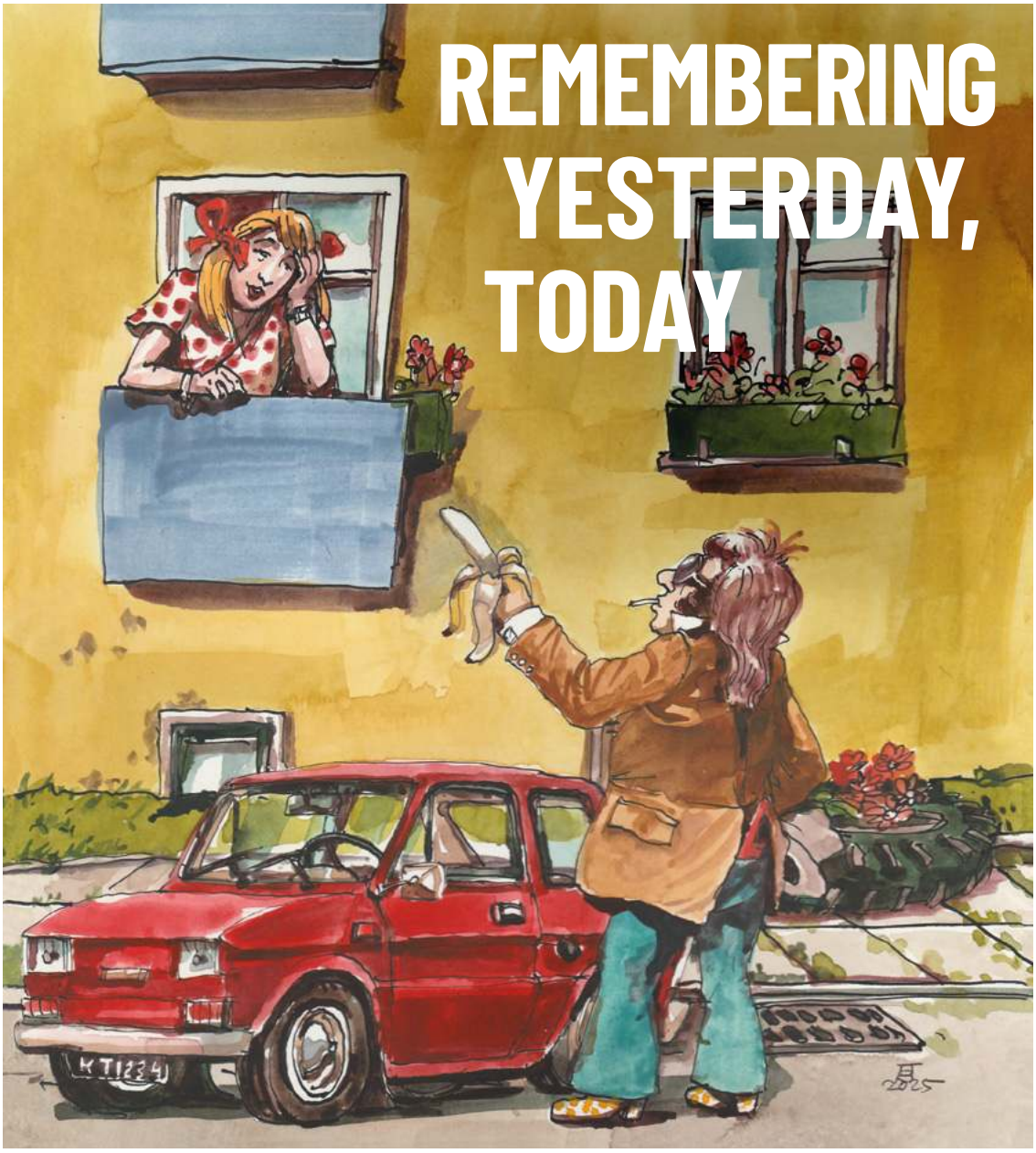

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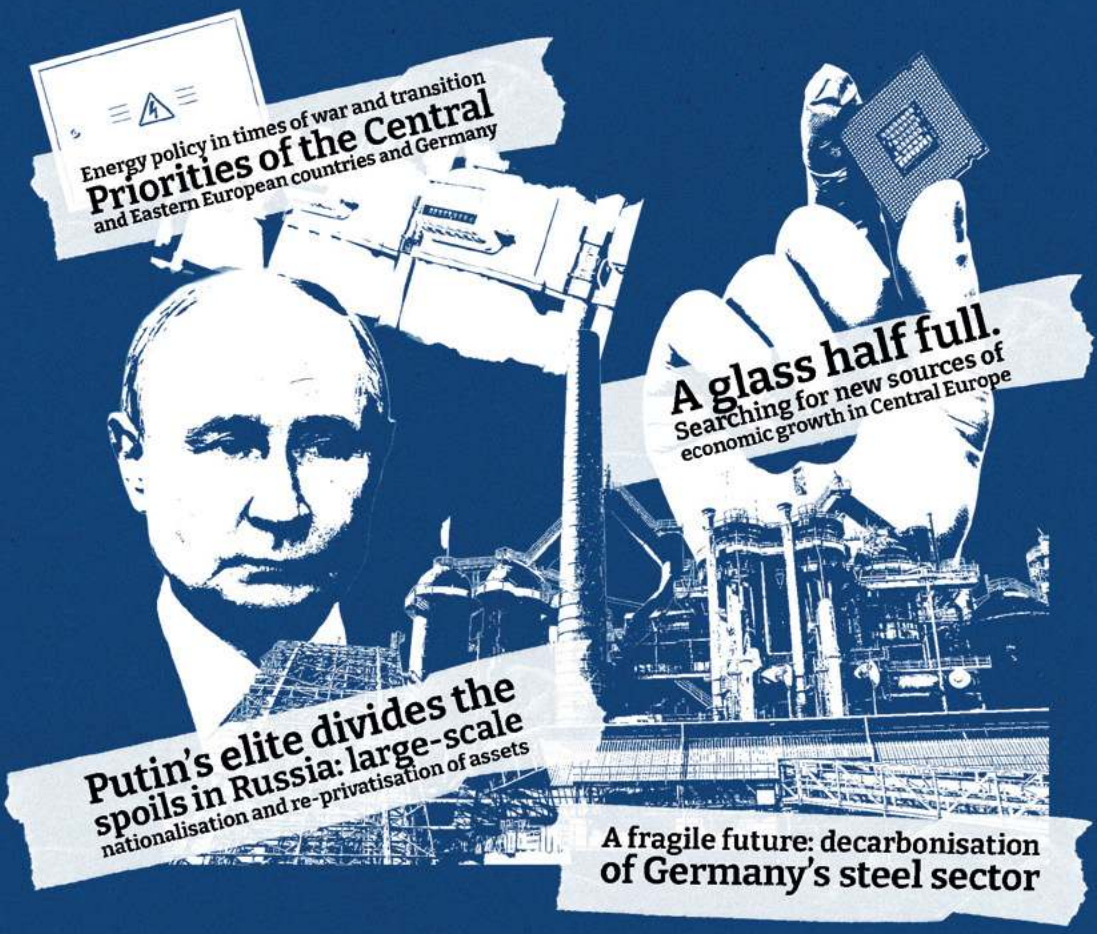

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DEAR READER,

As we send this final issue of 2025 to print, uncertainty hangs over the region and the world beyond. Since Donald Trump returned to office in January, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in US policy toward Ukraine and Russia, most visibly in the form of a newly promoted "peace process". Like all people of good will, we hope for an end to the aggression. Yet we remain convinced that if the international order is to retain any meaning, this war must end justly – on terms accepted by its victim, Ukraine – and not to the advantage of the aggressor, the Russian Federation. Only such an outcome can lay the foundation for a lasting peace in Ukraine and across Europe. Any alternative would carry risks that we should be determined to avoid.

While Ukraine's struggle continues to define Europe's security landscape, it is not the only story shaping our region today. In this issue, we also turn to Belarus, where repression and deepening dependence on Moscow weigh heavily on society, both inside the country and among Belarusians abroad.

With this issue, we would also like to warmly thank Basil Kerski, the director of the European Solidarity Centre (ECS) in Gdańsk and one of the founding fathers of this magazine, for his remarkable work at the ECS and for the unwavering support he has offered *New Eastern Europe* from the very beginning. The ECS, rooted in the legacy of Solidarity, reminds us that even in dark moments, societies can reclaim their freedom through courage, truth and civic responsibility.

This legacy also frames the main theme of our issue: the unsettled memory of communism. Across Central and Eastern Europe, the past remains both a source of identity and a terrain of political struggle. It is invoked, reshaped and at times misused by those seeking to influence today's debates. Understanding how these memories are constructed, contested and lived is essential to understanding our current moment.

Thus, as we enter 2026, still uncertain about what the future holds, we are reminded by the history of the Polish Solidarity movement that democratic change is possible even when it seems unlikely – and that it emerges from persistence and moral clarity. With this conviction, we wish you a good and hopeful new year.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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Goodbye communism

KINGA ANNA GAJDA, MICHAŁ KURYŁOWICZ

The pace of dealing with the communist past has been uneven across Central and Eastern Europe. While Poland intensely debated de-communization in the 1990s, in Ukraine the mass removals of Lenin monuments – the so-called *Leninopad* – began only during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. In the Baltic states, the memory of communism remains strongly negative.

Research into the memory of communism in Central and Eastern Europe points to some shared elements and strong local differences between countries. While people across the region remember political repression, surveillance, restrictions on civil liberties, shortages of goods, and the ideological pressure of the state, each society interprets this era in its own way. Much of this interpretation depends on individual countries' national histories and their relationship with Moscow. For example, in Poland and Lithuania the collapse of communism meant regaining independence. People saw it as a long-awaited return to freedom. By contrast in Belarus, the early 1990s were viewed more as a consequence of the Soviet Union's disintegration than a result of a domestic freedom movement.

Selective remembrance

Overall, the memory of communism unfolds in both official and private forms. Public institutions keep it alive through museums, exhibitions, monuments, and commemorative plaques. In daily life, families pass it down through personal stories, pupils learn it during history lessons in schools, and media weave it into national narratives. While some social groups and institutions place a stronger emphasis on

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suffering and resistance, others nurture nostalgia for the stability and community the system once seemed to offer.

This selective remembrance often hides the regime's darker sides. Simplified narratives reduce the past to "totalitarianism and Soviet occupation", which overlooks the differentiation between the brutality of Stalinism and the later, more liberal, versions of socialism – such as Yugoslavia's self-management model or Hungary's "goulash communism", which opened space for limited economic and personal freedoms.

Each of these perspectives drew legitimacy from different documents, personal histories, and symbolic gestures. With the transition, new memory institutions were created but their critics accused them of imposing a single vision of the past.

Simplified narratives reduce the past to totalitarianism and Soviet occupation.

In Poland, efforts to remove communist symbols began with the dismantling of old monuments, the renaming of streets, and modification of state emblems. Although the new non-communist government framed these actions as anti-communist, they often simply replaced one set of heroes with another, which were just more compatible with the new patriotic canon. In the years following, the Polish parliament passed "lustration" (cleansing) laws, which were meant to vet public officials for past collaboration with the communist security services. Additionally, in 1998 a new legal act was passed which created the Institute of National Remembrance. However, many conservatives found these steps still inadequate. It was thus only after the political victories of the conservative forces in 2005 and 2015 that they felt they had the moment to pursue their vision of a state free from the communist legacy.

Over time, public debate shifted from judging communism to evaluating the systemic transformation that took place in the 1990s, as well as analysing Poland's place within a united Europe. The deaths of the last official communist leaders, General Wojciech Jaruzelski and Czesław Kiszczak, lowered the emotional temperature of these discussions. Yet, quite soon after, attempts to rekindle a strong sense of historical memory – most visibly through the cult of the "cursed soldiers" (anti-communist underground forces after the Second World War, some of whom had been accused of alleged crimes – editor's note) – began to generate new myths rather than resolve old conflicts. Agnieszka Mrozik, a scholar of the communist period and its contemporary remembrance, describes this phenomenon as a form of "prosthetic memory": a space filled with contradictions and ambivalence, where the past endures in the collective imagination as a legacy of shame, guilt, and a persistent need for moral reckoning.

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Archives, legacy and nostalgia

Looking from a regional perspective, we can say that the memory of communism has unfolded in three dimensions. The first involves documenting crimes through historical research and the opening of archives. The second focuses on reflecting upon the material and social legacy of the era – from architecture to institutions. Finally, the third expresses nostalgia for everyday life in socialist states, which can be seen in the renewed interest in the fashion, cuisine, and pop culture of that time and which is often detached from the political context of this period. In Poland, this perspective was first widely discussed after the publication of a book by Filip Springer, a photo-reporter, who through his photos and reports showed the functionality of socialist architecture and argued that its rejection stemmed more from political prejudice than from flaws in design.

By questioning the myths of the post-1989 transformation, left-wing intellectuals have also redefined the understanding of the communist state. For example, the philosopher Andrzej Leder argued that the years from 1939 to 1956 in Poland were a time of deep, though brutal, social revolution that dismantled the feudal order and enabled mass upward mobility, creating the foundations for today's middle class. Thus, in his view, the period of the People's Republic of Poland should not be seen only through the prism of oppression but also as a stage of profound social change. In a similar way the nostalgic image of interwar Poland was challenged by Kacper Pobłocki, Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak, and Kamil Janicki, who exposed the social and economic inequalities that defined that earlier era.

Beneath these debates lies the question as to whether communism can ever truly be forgotten. To answer it, the historian Alexei Miller distinguishes between three types of forgetting, arguing that only what he calls "understanding-based forgetting" can lead to reconciliation. And yet in Poland, reckoning with the past has taken place more through symbols and media debates than through genuine systemic reform. That is why the historian Antoni Dudek argues that, unlike in the Czechia or former East Germany, Poland has never conducted a full verification of its communist past. In Germany, for example, broad public access to Stasi archives and strong civic education programmes facilitated greater transparency, which were aimed at helping the society confront its history.

The pace of dealing with the communist past has been uneven across Central and Eastern Europe.

These instances demonstrate that the pace of dealing with the communist past has been uneven across Central and Eastern Europe. While Poland intensely debated de-communization in the 1990s, in Ukraine the mass removals of Lenin monu-

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ments – the so-called *Leninopad* – began only during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. This process was further accelerated after Russia's aggression in Donbas and later the full-scale invasion that started in 2022. In the Baltic states, the memory of communism remains strongly negative, which is a result of these countries' experiences of Soviet occupation, their proximity to Russia, and the presence of large Russian-speaking populations. In the Western Balkans, the memory of the socialist period is closely tied to Tito's legacy and what is referred to as "Yugonostalgia", which emerged much earlier than similar sentiments did in other states.

Overall, the memory of communism in Central and Eastern Europe remains dynamic, emotionally charged, and full of contradictions. It intertwines trauma with the need for moral reckoning, and nostalgia with ongoing reinterpretations shaped by contemporary challenges. Thus the central task today is to develop a way of remembering that does not erase or deny, but instead weaves the past into a coherent sense of historical identity. Only through such integration can societies move beyond the wars over memory towards a genuine reconciliation – both nationally, within their own borders, and across the region. EE

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From revolution to souvenirs

JOVANA JANINOVIC

The selling of communism across Central and Eastern Europe reveals more than the region's ingenuity in repurposing its past – it exposes how memory itself has become a currency in the post-socialist era. This marketplace of memory is not merely a tourist trend – it is a mirror of broader cultural transformations.

On the outskirts of Budapest, tourists pose for Instagram among the toppled Lenin statues in Memento Park – a surreal open-air museum of socialism, where communist-era monuments are displaced, mismatched, and taken off their pedestals. In Belgrade's railway station, *Playboy* organizes its birthday party in Tito's Blue Train, the rolling symbol of communist Yugoslavia, while in the Brijuni national park in Croatia, Russian oligarchs rent Tito's villas for their luxury coastal holidays.

Across Central and Eastern Europe, the remnants of communism have been reborn as tourist attractions, fashion backdrops, and party venues. The cover of Polish *Vogue* juxtaposes fashion models with the modernist aesthetics of the infamous Palace of Culture, resulting in clashes of style, representation and identity of communist and capitalist symbols. At Berlin's Checkpoint Charlie, fake soldiers charge ten euros for a fake passport stamp, surrounded by real fragments of the Berlin Wall and souvenir shops stuffed with hammer-and-sickle magnets.

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Between history, performance and spectacle

Elsewhere, the transformation takes subtler forms. The former headquarters of Poland's communist party in Warsaw now houses banks, luxury retailers and cocktail bars. In Tirana, Enver Hoxha's pyramid-shaped mausoleum has become a technology hub for Albanian teenagers. A well-known alternative tour company called Crazy Guides, based in Kraków, offers a "communism deluxe" tour through Nowa Huta, featuring a communist-style lunch in a milk bar and a ride in a vintage Trabant car. Ceaușescu's House of the People in Bucharest hosted Top Gear races and Miss World galas, while weddings are celebrated in Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science, as well as Prague's Žižkov TV Tower.

Even the underground has gone mainstream: Erich Honecker's Cold War bunker hosts Berlin's avant-garde rave scene, and Tirana's bunker art has become tourist attractions in the Albanian capital. Across Central and Eastern Europe, museums of communism are flourishing. Prague's Museum of Communism sells matryoshka dolls with vampire teeth – a pop-culture parody of the ideology they once embodied – while new institutions from Tallinn to Transylvania compete to curate, reinterpret, and market the socialist past.

These scenes form a single panorama of paradoxes: across the post-communist world, the architecture, icons, and rituals of socialism have not been erased but repackaged and sold. What was once propaganda is now performance; what was once ideology is now experience. Communism, it seems, has found a second life – as an object of curiosity, nostalgia and profit. Guided tours, heritage sites, museums, monuments, and even themed hotels all became part of the growing marketplace of communist memory, offering visitors curated, often dramatized versions of life under communism. Yet, important tensions lie beneath the surface appeal: between local memories and tourist expectations; between political narratives and market demands; and between trauma, nostalgia, authenticity and identity.

The tourist rediscovery of communism began in the 1990s, as post-socialist states faced the dual challenge of redefining national identity and reinventing their economies. The ruins and relics of the previous regime, such as palaces, bunkers, factories, statues and party headquarters, suddenly became both burdens and assets. Too politically charged to ignore, yet too visible to erase, they became resources for new kinds of storytelling and entrepreneurship.

Initially, this was a spontaneous, grassroots process. In Berlin and Prague, local guides began offering informal walking tours of "everyday socialism", leading visitors through prefab housing estates, Cold War bunkers, and remnants of the wall. In Budapest, taxi drivers turned ad hoc storytellers took curious foreigners to see the statues that had been removed after 1989. Across the Balkans, Soviet-style ca-

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fés, "retro" shops, and flea markets selling communist memorabilia began to appear, juxtaposing communist nostalgia with ironic humour.

By the 2000s, the phenomenon had matured into a regional industry. Tour operators branded entire experiences around "red" or "communist" heritage: from Kraków's Crazy Guides and Berlin Trabant tours to Riga's KGB prison museum and Belgrade's Yugodom, a fully reconstructed socialist apartment. City authorities, once eager to distance themselves from the communist past, began to see heritage tourism as an economic opportunity.

The appeal has proved transnational. Western tourists in particular embraced the thrill of time travel and the possibility to visit material remnants of a distant regime they had only known from media reports. For many Eastern Europeans, the tours became a more ambivalent journey into personal or family memories: a chance to compare myth and reality, nostalgia and aversion. The result was a new cultural economy built on fragments of ideology, blurring the boundaries between history, performance and spectacle. What began as a way of interpreting the past soon became a way of selling it.

How to remember?

Since the relics of socialism entered the tourist economy, they quickly proliferated across the region and diversified into a wide spectrum of experiences, ranging from dark tourism sites to kitschy nostalgic memorabilia. The commodification of communism shows diversity of mechanisms and approaches and thus escapes clear conceptualization and classification – it adapts instead to local politics, market opportunities, and the expectations of both domestic and foreign visitors. Despite this complexity, certain regional patterns emerge, as different urban settings – from capital cities to industrial suburbs and iconic landmarks – tend to produce distinct strategies and outcomes of commodification.

Western tourists liked the thrill of time travel and remnants of a regime they had known from media.

Guided tours are the most visible and dynamic form of communist heritage tourism. Their success lies in their capacity to combine communist landmarks, anecdotal storytelling and performative dimensions into a memorable sensory-field tourist experience. In Berlin, young expatriate guides dramatize Cold War spy stories and celebrate the *Ampelmann* – the communist-era traffic light figure – as a cheerful relic of the city's divided past. In Belgrade, tourists drive Zastava cars past the iconic Genex Tower and the Museum of Yugoslavia, while in Bratislava they cross the UFO Bridge in a

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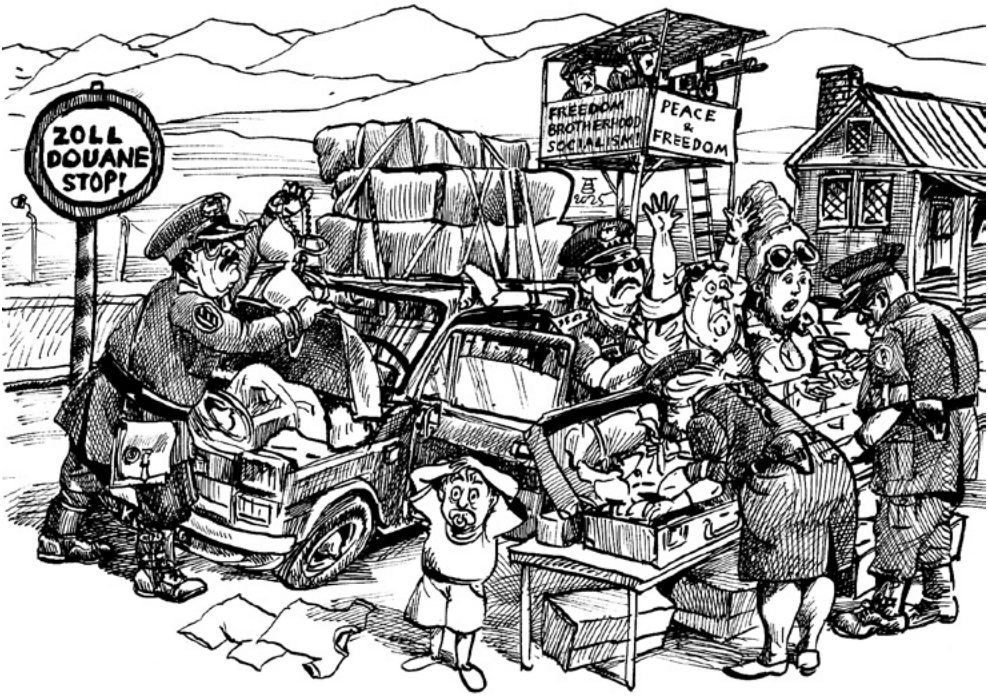

vintage Škoda to take in the sprawling prefabricated housing estates of Petržalka. In Prague, visitors descend into a Cold War bunker to handle gas masks and rifles, while in Budapest and Warsaw, familiar jokes about shortages, inefficiency, and everyday absurdities draw laughter and recognition. In Tirana, the tour ends in a retro café, where guides share family memories of communist Albania over a shot of local drink, in a combination of oral history, personal confession and theatrical performance.

Each tour becomes a negotiation between guide and visitors. Tourists often come expecting tales of drama, surveillance, repression, and daring escapes. The guides respond with narratives that weave together local history and global folklore, enriched with references to popular culture and familiar communist stereotypes. Yet behind the humour and theatricality lies something deeper: an ongoing struggle over how to remember. Guides oscillate between irony and empathy, nostalgia and critique, depending on who is listening. In this sense, every tour becomes a live experiment in collective memory.

Museums of communism mushroomed in the 2000s, emerging through both public and private initiatives. Some – such as Prague's Museum of Communism, Berlin's DDR Museum and Warsaw's Museum of Life in the Polish People's Republic – are privately owned commercial ventures that blend education with en-

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tertainment, often with little public oversight of how communist history is curated and represented. Others, like Budapest's House of Terror or Belgrade's Museum of Yugoslavia, pursue explicit political and socio-cultural missions of remembrance and moral education.

These institutions reveal the dual nature of post-communist curatorship – the need to educate while simultaneously attracting visitors. In order to compete in a tourism market saturated with experiences, many rely on immersive design, such as reconstructed apartments, soundscapes of propaganda, gamified communist experiences, and holograms of party leaders. In doing so, the boundary between authenticity and simulation blurs, as does the line between history and experience. In order to keep the delicate balance between informing and entertainment, the "dark" topics such as labour camps, political persecutions and imprisonments are given no more space in the exhibitions than stories of toilet paper shortages (Prague), communist sexuality and drinking habits (Berlin), or washing powder and sugar (Warsaw).

A retro hospitality

Beyond formal heritage sites, communist imagery has invaded leisure culture. In many cities, themed cafés and restaurants reproduce the aesthetics of the 1970s with enamel mugs, Lenin busts or patriotic posters. In Riga and Bucharest, former workers' canteens are rebranded as retro bistros, while in Tirana a café named "Komiteti" displays relics of the regime as interior décor. Warsaw's milk bars (*bar mleczny*) have resisted capitalist transition and still provide authentic socialist-era settings and food. Retro flats, such as Sofia's Red Flat and Belgrade's Yugodom provide immersion into the aesthetics of socialist chic, while socialist-themed hotels and hostels offer guests both an ironic and nostalgic take on communism, with mismatched furniture, tin cups and propaganda murals.

This form of "retro-communism" functions less as remembrance than as aesthetic appropriation. It sells atmosphere rather than history, becoming a playful encounter with the exoticized past. Yet, paradoxically, it keeps that past materially alive – preserving objects, slogans, and textures that might otherwise have vanished.

Another particularly striking transformation refers to the rebranding of monumental socialist landmarks as event venues. Once symbols of political power, they are now stages for consumption and celebration. Lavish weddings in the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, fashion shows in Bucharest's Palace of the Parliament, or rooftop parties at Prague's Žižkov TV Tower turn ideological architecture into neutralized spaces of spectacle and leisure. The monumental becomes

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photogenic; the political becomes rentable. Objects once designed to inspire collective awe now serve as a backdrop for private pleasure – the ultimate illustration of how socialism's built heritage has been absorbed into the contemporary capitalist imagination.

Together, these practices show that the socialist past is continuously reinterpreted across economic, cultural and emotional registers. From guided tours to designer T-shirts, communism is sold not as a coherent narrative, but as a palette of experiences — sometimes ironic, sometimes reverent, and often contradictory. In this post-socialist marketplace, memory no longer lives only in museums: it is performed on the streets, consumed in cafés, worn on bodies, and broadcast on social media. The question is no longer whether the past is remembered, but how, and by whom.

A delicate negotiation

The booming trade in communist memory is not without friction. As the past becomes a consumable product, the line between commemoration and commodification blurs, raising questions about authenticity, responsibility, and the ownership of history. For many local communities, this transformation of the socialist past into a spectacle can feel ethically problematic, if not daunting. Sites that once carried deep emotional or political meaning are now being framed for entertainment. A Trabant ride through Kraków's Nowa Huta or a photo op with a Lenin statue may amuse tourists, but for those who lived under the regime, these are fragments of lived experience – often painful, complex, or unresolved. The coexistence of trauma and irony remains one of the defining paradoxes of post-communist heritage.

For local communities, the transformation of the socialist past into a spectacle can be problematic.

At the same time, many of these initiatives are locally driven, created by guides, curators, and entrepreneurs who see value in reclaiming their own narratives. The result is a delicate negotiation: balancing authenticity with market appeal, seriousness with play. Some guides deploy irony as a coping mechanism; others use it as teaching tool, transforming laughter into reflection. The ongoing commodification of communism is inseparable from the concept of "authenticity", which is perpetually contested and negotiated. Should heritage sites preserve the material decay and austere socialist aesthetics, or reimagine them through interactive exhibits and anecdotal storytelling? Is nostalgia always regressive, or can it offer a form of reconciliation? As post-socialist socie-

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ties grapple with these questions, tourism becomes a stage where competing interpretations of the past play out in real time.

For visitors, the attraction of communist heritage lies precisely in this ambiguity. It is history that feels recent yet remote, tragic yet exotic, as a world of ideological certainty that has now been rendered safe for consumption. For the hosts, the challenge remains to navigate between remembering and marketing, between honouring their past and capitalizing on it.

Complex choreography

The selling of communism across Central and Eastern Europe reveals more than the region's ingenuity in repurposing its past – it exposes how memory itself has become a currency in the post-socialist era. Through tours, museums and themed experiences, history is translated into an accessible, marketable narrative that satisfies curiosity while sanitizing trauma. This "marketplace of memory" is not merely a tourist trend, it is a mirror of broader cultural transformations. It allows post-socialist countries to renegotiate their identities within Europe's symbolic order, no longer as peripheries haunted by dictatorship, but as dynamic spaces of creativity and self-reflection. The aesthetic of "red nostalgia" is paradoxical: it commodifies memory, yet it also keeps that same memory visible, and accessible. In the absence of a coherent public reckoning with socialism, tourism has become one of the few arenas where the past remains collectively encountered, debated, and emotionally rehearsed.

In the end, the popularity of these experiences says as much about western desire as eastern supply. Visitors seek the thrill of proximity to a vanished world – a sense of otherness that reassures them of their own freedom. Locals, meanwhile, use the same spaces to process, reinterpret, or even reclaim their personal, family or national histories. What emerges is a complex choreography of remembering and forgetting, where nostalgia meets irony and commerce meets conscience. Communism, once an ideological system promising a utopian future, now survives as a tourist product – a past packaged for the global marketplace. But beneath the souvenirs and selfies, the old questions persist: Who owns history? Who tells it? And at what price does memory become a tourist experience? ŁE

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Sensory memory and creating a community of memory

MAGDALENA BANASZKIEWICZ

The feeling of coarse toilet paper bought after hours in a queue, the scent of sweat on a train to a Bulgarian summer camp, the fizz of Soviet *shampanskoye igristoye* on New Year's Eve – these are not just fragments of nostalgia. They are traces of a collective past, an embodied memory of life under communism that continues to shape how a generation remembers itself.

Sensory memory most often begins with taste. It rises from the darkness of the mouth, stirring images that have long been dormant. The tongue, which is one of the body's most agile and intricate muscles, is the organ of both speech and remembrance. As such, it not only allows us to eat and articulate sounds, but also preserve the flavours of the past. Thus, the tastes that we once experienced and which accompanied us in our most formative moments, linger in the subconscious until they are suddenly recalled – triggered by contact with food. In that instant, taste becomes a time capsule, one that allows us to re-experience what once defined us.

In the catalogue of dishes that form a generational identity, we find flavours that are both comforting and melancholic, revolting and delightful. Each, like the legendary madeleine cake in Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, unlocks a passage to the past. It serves as a sensory key to the stories that seek meaning within our labyrinths of memory.

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Goulash socialism

When we turn to the lived experiences of the 20th century in Central and Eastern Europe, a question emerges: what flavours awaken remembrance of this strange, tragic, yet often absurd and anecdotal period we call communism? Proust had his madeleine, and the Hungarians had their "goulash socialism". This second phrase actually captures the oxymoronic essence of life across the region where for over 40 years, repression coexisted with routine, and ideology intertwined with everyday pragmatism.

In that case, how can we talk of a shared memory among those whose lives unfolded so differently? Those who were tortured in Stalinist interrogation chambers and those who faced one another in fratricidal struggles to loosen political control, or those who, within the system's comfort, lived their lives embodying the concept of *Homo sovieticus*? And what about the countless ordinary people – working, loving, standing in queues, often cold, sometimes trembling with emotions – whose quiet endurance shaped the texture of those years?

While collecting their testimonies we get a patchwork that does not form much of a single pattern. This gives us an impression that the lives of people from this generation effectively happened on different planets. This was true even when they were connected by one space and politics. It is just like how a cage can be a torture for an elephant, but not for a fly, for which the cage's bars are only an inconvenience that does not particularly restrict its freedom of movement.

What flavours awaken remembrance of the strange, tragic yet absurd period we call communism?

This means that size matters and our bodies determine our being in our physical space. There are some who can fly and rise high above those who have no wings. At the same time, there are those who were born blind and do not know the colours of the sunset that can bring tears to our eyes. Thus, it is only solipsists who can say that they do not know if the world exists, arguing that it is perhaps only their thoughts about it that do. For all others, experience of the world is physical, immediate and sensual.

Body's memory

Why, then, is it not so obvious for us to think that also our memory is embodied and sensual? Some argue that memory is made up of images that we store just like museum collections are stored in galleries and vaults. We recall through images,

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Photo: Iwona Reichardt

A recreation of an East German café in the GDR Museum in Pirna, Germany. As with many museums of communism, the objects themselves are mute – but they gain meaning when a person fills their emptiness with their own memory.

and images allow us to be remembered. It is just like how ancient cave paintings carry the knowledge of what has long vanished.

The debate over whether memory is inherently visual has continued with varying intensity over time. Philosophers and scientists have long engaged in this discussion, and the question of human sensuality also engaged 19th-century ethnographers and anthropologists. As they encountered other cultures, they discovered that collective memory can be preserved through diverse media: storytelling, dance and rituals. These are all performative and embodied practices sustained not by objects that serve as visual records, but by people who themselves become the medium of memory.

Thus, although now we readily acknowledge that our European civilization is complex and relational, shaped not only by its classical inheritance but also by other (Arab, Byzantine and colonial) influences, its roots nonetheless reach deep into the Mediterranean world. Given all this, we can say that what we call Europe arose from a fusion of Greco-Roman rationalism, Judeo-Christian spirituality, and the ideals of humanism and the Enlightenment.

This heritage implies that not only a certain vision but also language have shaped the European sensorium. And yet the word-centric and sight-oriented Europeans have often forgotten the full complexity of human perception – that the senses are not isolated channels of experience, but interwoven and complementary, together constructing the richness of how we inhabit the world.

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It is thus worth turning to Nadia Seremetakis, a Greek cultural anthropologist and one of the pioneers of the so-called sensory turn, who argued that memory is deeply embedded in sensory experience. As such, it is not merely a repository of ideas. Indeed, it also possesses its own material and sensory coordinates that guide us through the past. Individual memories are always situated within the collective experience of the world.

In her groundbreaking book *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (1994), Seremetakis examined the sensory dimension of memory and historical consciousness in relation to material culture. Focusing on the Mediterranean region, and Greece in particular, she highlighted how rituals, eating habits and mourning practices encode cultural memory through the body. They serve as mnemonic devices, triggering collective and individual memories. It is through the senses – taste, touch and smell – that a person activates his/her body's memory, which is unconscious, emotional, and difficult to articulate.

The bubbles of the Soviet sparkling wine

Anthropologists Paul Connerton and Thomas Csordas described bodily (embodied) memory as memory embedded in corporeal practices: gestures, rituals, postures, and everyday activities. Connerton argued that such bodily practices function as mnemonic devices through which social knowledge and identity are transmitted. Through the body, the past is re-enacted rather than simply "remembered": it is reproduced through the automatic action of muscles rather than through reflective self-awareness.

Both of these perspectives represent attempts to recover the memory of the body and the affective dimension of experience. Crucially, they bridge the individual and the collective, showing how embodied practices sustain shared worlds of meaning.

Consider the rough texture of the toilet paper which in socialist states was hard-won and required hours of standing in a queue; or the body odour after a long train journey to a summer camp in Bulgaria; or the bubbles of Soviet sparkling wine – the famous *shampanskoye igristoye* which tickled people's noses on New Year's Eve. Together, these sensations form an archaeology of personal memory but also a collective experience that was shared by those who lived through the communist era.

What Seremetakis explored in relation to her lost Greek childhood was rediscovered by the Bulgarian writer, Georgi Gospodinov, who is rightly regarded as one of the most significant literary voices in this part of Europe. Gospodinov's writing can be treated as a literary attempt to reconstruct identity after communism, but through the medium of bodily and sensory memory.

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His stylistic devices, which include fragmentary narration, introspection, and irony, allow him to confront the communist past through a kind of bricolage, assembling traces of experience into meaning. Gospodinov conducts mnemonic "workshops", working with memory through objects, places, and his own body. In doing so, he creates images that are not only meant to be seen, but to be touched, smelled, and perhaps even tasted. Let us, for example, look at how in one of his novels he described a school civil defence classroom activity: "I remember the bomb shelter under the gym, where once a month we hid 'for the alarm'. Heavy breathing in the dark, the generator lighting not working, chaos, the smell of sweat and fear, and later the boasts of a classmate that in the dark he had hit the bomb, that is, he had grabbed the chemistry teacher's breasts (in today's language, may she rest in peace) – by mistake, the target was different. When, during military training exercises, I put on a gas mask and it took me a whole 17 seconds, the instructor shouted: 'That's it, that's it! You're dead…' and shoved a stopwatch under my nose. It's not easy to live 30 years after your own death."

Collectors of emptiness and abandonment

With these words, Gospodinov captured a generational experience. Those who endured the boredom of the 1980s were later intoxicated by the transformations of the 1990s, only to find themselves, years on, lonely and disillusioned, searching for an answer to the question of can there be a return to the past, recalling even the smallest details, and engaging all the senses, bring about a critical point of change?

> When taken together, memories of communism form a mosaic rather than a uniform image of the past.

Each generation remembers differently. In Poland, if we agree that socialism lasted from 1945 to 1989, we might speak of three generations that lived under the communist system: the first post-war generation, the Gierek generation of the 1970s, and the Solidarity generation of the 1980s. This typology, although a simplification, shows that the experience of socialism was far from homogeneous. The everyday life of each of these generations, although they all lived under socialism, was different. Thus, their recollections of this period are also different. When taken together, they form a mosaic of memories rather than a uniform image of the past.

We can thus ask how is a community of memory constructed from these different sensory and physically experiences in the past? Two simple experiments may offer an answer. In the first one, we can draw a line between those who lived through the

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period and those who know it only from stories by facilitating their contact with objects from the past. It is just like in a children's game in which a child, with eyes closed, tries to identify an object by touching it. Gospodinov adopted a similar line of thought when he wrote:

"Collection catalogue,
Napkins
Empty cigarette boxes
Matchboxes
Stamps
Calendars
Three-dimensional postcards
Wrappers from imported sweets, paper and gold-plated
Chocolate wrappers, paper and gold-plated
Chewing gum pictures (without gum)
Empty Metaxa bottles
Empty whisky, cognac and Campari bottles…"

It is clear that the items in this collection are abandoned, empty, used. Someone smoked red Marlboros and blue Rothmans, then ate imported chocolate sweets, chewed gum and drank Metaxa. All that is left for us are a few bottles, boxes, wrappers and papers. Collectors of emptiness and abandonment.

A cult cookbook

The second experiment is for those who are willing to visit one of the so-called museums of communism. When there, observe the visitors and their reactions to the displays and the artefacts. You will quickly recognize those who once collected chewing-gum wrappers, beat the carpets in the courtyard, or mastered the art of ration cards. The objects themselves are mute but they gain meaning when a person fills their emptiness with memory.

If you do not have a museum of communism nearby, try another experiment: catch someone from the communist generation in a trap of taste. What could be more sensory than food? Perhaps this is why the most enduring communities of memory form around the table – in the act of celebrating holidays and traditions, cooking, eating, and digesting together.

"Man is what he eats," the 19th-century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach famously observed. Indeed, beyond its obvious biological purpose, food has also a deeply social function: it is a way of spending time, an excuse to meet, and a force that sustains and strengthens bonds between people. If you do not have access to

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a "milk bar", which was a name of those modest, state-run cafeterias of the communist era, you can still explore your generational identity through recipes.

Just as the famous chef and TV presenter Julia Child tried to teach Americans to cook and eat French cuisine, those who long for or dream of the flavours of the Polish People's Republic can take a look at the 700-page *Kuchnia polska* (*Polish Cuisine*), edited by Stanisław Berger. First published in 1954 – and reissued forty-six times by 2020 – this cult cookbook, once a staple in nearly every kitchen of communist Poland, offers not only more than 30 recipes for the traditional home-made fruit drink known as compote (In Polish: *kompot*), but also dishes that are now unimaginable, such as horse tenderloin cutlets. Yet, *Polish Cuisine* is more than a collection of recipes. It is a treatise that links the science of nutrition with the moral and social values a socialist society sought to promote.

Today's post-communist generations cannot experience the tastes, smells and rituals of the past. However, they can use the memories of the previous generations to cope with the present. Thus, the gas mask from the civil defence training in the 1980s that Gospodinov described in his brilliant novel takes on a whole new meaning today, although unfortunately it is not entirely new.

Shadow of the past

In 2024, the Polish social and political psychologist Michał Bilewicz published a book tellingly titled *Traumaland: Poles in the Shadow of the Past*. In its opening chapter, he argues that the defining experience of contemporary Poland is the traumatic legacy of the "bloodlands" – the wartime and post-war violence that scarred the region. What most deeply unites Poles today, Bilewicz contends, is not ideology or faith, but trauma itself: "Historical trauma permeates our culture, our collective mentality, and our daily rituals. It shapes who we are and how we see ourselves. It casts a shadow over our relations with other nations."

It is not my intention here to defend or to disagree with the author of this book. My reference to it has been inspired by the subtitle which is difficult to disagree with and which Bilewicz has skilfully linked to the striking neologism of "Traumaland". Readers familiar with memory studies will immediately recognize the echo of Sharon MacDonald's influential 2013 book titled *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*.

Bilewicz analyses the trauma of the Second World War to trace the roots of Polish fear, aggression and resentment. Yet the experience of wartime darkness is only one among many shades of violence, coercion and suffering that mark the region's past.

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Those who were children in the 1980s will remember Lucky Luke – the French-Belgian cartoon about a lone cowboy roaming the prairie on his faithful horse, dispensing justice, catching bandits, and defending the weak. As the title song proclaimed, he was "the man who shoots faster than his own shadow".

We, too, live in the shadow of the past. The past itself is a shadow – sometimes long, sometimes short, depending on how we stand in relation to the light. It can stretch before us or fall behind, fade in brightness, or vanish for a time. But it never truly disappears. Even when we look ahead, the past walks with us.

Only a comic-book hero can outshoot his own shadow. Ordinary mortals must learn to live with this reality, because the past cannot be conquered. A community of memory is more than a collection of stories passed down to future generations; it is a community of bodies and senses, imprinted with the experiences of those who came before us. It is born from immersion in the present – in touch, smell, sound and gesture – and through this sensory grounding it becomes a space where we begin to feel the meanings of a future not yet born. EE

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The memory of forgetting

DYMITR ROMANOWSKI

After the end of communist rule, many societies sought recognition of their own wartime suffering as part of Europe's shared memory. Although the Allies are often portrayed as a united front against Nazism, the newer member states of the European Union have pressed for acknowledgement of the oppression they experienced under both Nazism and Stalinism, arguing that these histories should be remembered on equal terms.

The 20th century has been in full flight from certain conceptions of personal morality, but what age has ever suffered from so acute an awareness of collective responsibility? Who shall absolve us from the guilt of the Holocaust? Colonialism? The Enlightenment? The failure of the Enlightenment? Who could absolve us from the guilt of a nuclear catastrophe? The appalling moral anxiousness of our age is an oblique recognition that the human being as such waits to hear something; and when we have collectively denied the possibility of hearing something from beyond our corporate culture, we expose ourselves to deep worries about our humanness.

Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*

Within states, official memory is often shaped by its alignment with the goals and values promoted by dominant political groups. As research in sociology, political science, and nationalism shows, such memory is closely tied to group identity and the production of political legitimacy, which makes it a powerful instrument

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for those in authority. This is why ethnic, national, and religious identities so often rest on historical myths that define who belongs to the group, what that belonging entails, and – frequently – who the group's adversaries are.

Perceptions of the past are also essential for delegitimizing previous regimes and for advancing new claims to authority. By shaping collective memory, governments can thus reinforce their own legitimacy while undermining that of their opponents. To achieve this, political leaders often elevate selected memories through official symbols, school curricula, public ceremonies, and speeches. These practices are far from symbolic gestures.

Pluralists versus historical monists

By crafting an authoritative narrative, leaders can assign patriotism a particular meaning – whether to encourage civic duties like paying taxes or to justify broader sacrifices for the state. When deployed in this way, memory helps legitimize national policies and becomes a powerful instrument in a country's political life.

In other words, interpretations of the past are continually reshaped by the concerns and needs of the present, and this flexibility allows history to be mobilized to help individuals or groups pursue their aims, serving as a tool through which various actors strengthen their positions and build support. Dominant groups, in particular, may redefine ethnic categories to preserve their privileged status and to justify unequal treatment of others. These dynamics make it crucial to recognize the link between historical memory and the rise of nationalism, since myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritage all play a central role in cultivating nationalist sentiment.

Interpretations of the past are continually reshaped by the concerns and needs of the present.

Moreover, the actors involved – whether political leaders or influential groups – may interpret collective memory in markedly different ways. Pluralists accept that various groups can hold multiple, even conflicting, understandings of the past, each of which contributes something valuable to society. Historical monists, by contrast, see themselves as guardians of the "true" version of history and dismiss alternative interpretations as incorrect or illegitimate.

From a monist perspective, collective memory is not open to negotiation; their preferred narrative is tied to an idealized era of national success. As a result, present and future challenges must be addressed through policies rooted in the officially sanctioned story. Any narratives that deviate from this standard are typically

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treated as suspect and are often marginalized or rejected in the effort to construct a single, unified national identity.

Many studies in international relations examine how collective memory shapes state behaviour, often assuming that memory is already a fixed component of a country's identity or political strategy. As a result, international dynamics are sometimes treated merely as an additional layer placed atop what is primarily understood as a domestic issue. Yet recent developments demonstrate that this relationship also works in the opposite direction: international politics can influence a state's memory policies, rather than memory shaping foreign policy alone.

Memory diplomacy

Specifically, a country's official narrative can be formed, revised or contested within the international arena, through interactions and negotiations with other states – taking place, in effect, in the space between them. In such circumstances, political leaders can craft and reshape their country's memory primarily as a diplomatic tool aimed at international audiences. This means that a country's collective memory and official narrative are shaped not only by domestic developments but also by external pressures and incentives. Consequently, the link between memory and power – so central to domestic politics – should also be understood as a key dimension of foreign policy.

Memory politics is loosely connected to moral judgments about the past or search for historical truth.

Memory diplomacy should thus be seen as a deliberate effort by foreign-policy actors to use historical memory to gain advantages on the international stage. Diplomats can treat memory as a tool of statecraft, actively shaping their country's historical narrative for foreign audiences. This process matters because the way a country presents its past can directly influence how others perceive it – and, in turn, how they choose to engage with it.

Thus, the politics of historical memory does not operate in isolation; it evolves through interactions between political leaders and the international community that recognizes them. In this context, external actors also gain the ability to shape a country's memory by offering incentives or strategic benefits. When a state seeks international acceptance of a particular historical narrative, it often does so to enhance its status or secure a more favourable position in global affairs.

When memory politics is deployed as a foreign-policy strategy, it is only loosely connected to moral judgments about the past or to any genuine search for historical truth. Although policymakers may reshape memory in response to external

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incentives, they remain constrained by domestic expectations. As a result, using memory for diplomatic purposes can generate support at home – or provoke resistance. Diplomats must therefore balance the pursuit of international objectives with the need to resonate with domestic audiences, whose interpretations of the past may conflict with the message presented abroad. When the state promotes a particular historical narrative as part of its external strategy, the central challenge becomes managing the gap between this outward-facing story and the competing versions of history circulating within the country.

The "good war"

The ongoing debate over how to interpret the Second World War remains a defining feature of the post-Cold War memory landscape. In the United States – and to a lesser extent in Britain – the conflict has even been framed as a "good war". This notion has been popularized by works such as Studs Terkel's *The Good War*, which cast the struggle against fascism as a moral victory and the gateway to a new democratic era. This narrative, however, does not capture the experiences of many parts of Europe, where the end of the war brought new forms of occupation and cycles of repression, particularly in the East.

For decades, Holocaust memory shaped the dominant understanding of this period, and the growing awareness of its scale helped drive emerging discourses on human rights, historical injustice, and the pursuit of justice and reparations. The murder of Europe's Jews came to be regarded as a universal warning. Over time, Holocaust memory even became a foundational element of Europe's post-war identity, tied to the aspiration to prevent such crimes in the future. Since 1989, however, many countries in Eastern Europe have revisited their wartime and post-war histories, challenging Soviet and communist interpretations and often elevating an idealized "golden age" before the communist period.

After the end of communist rule, the Soviet fight against fascism came under renewed scrutiny, communist-era monuments were removed or relocated, and many societies sought recognition of their own wartime suffering as part of Europe's shared memory. Although the Allies are often portrayed as a united front against Nazism, the newer member states of the European Union have pressed for acknowledgement of the oppression they experienced under both Nazism and Stalinism, arguing that these histories should be remembered on equal terms.

In some cases, the symbols used to commemorate communist crimes mirrored those associated with Holocaust remembrance. The gap between Eastern and Western European memories prompted former communist countries to demand

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an official condemnation of communist crimes comparable to the condemnation of Nazi atrocities. The establishment of the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, observed on August 23rd – the anniversary of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact – reflects this effort, underscoring the call for equal recognition of all victims.

This new day of remembrance is not simply an addition to Holocaust Remembrance Day. Rather, it reflects a different perspective: Holocaust Remembrance Day often encourages reflection on the role that national societies – including non-Jewish populations – played in the persecution of Jews, whereas the European Day of Remembrance typically highlights the actions of external totalitarian regimes. As a result, it can sometimes encourage national narratives in which societies appear primarily as victims of totalitarianism, with far less attention paid to their own collaboration or participation in communist rule.

Double genocide

In many Eastern European countries, where societies both endured and at times participated in successive dictatorships, the idea of "double genocide" has become influential. This perspective treats Nazi and Soviet crimes as parallel forms of state violence and insists that the suffering caused by both regimes should be commemorated equally. In this context, calls for greater recognition of the Holocaust are sometimes countered by demands to acknowledge what is presented as greater victimhood under both totalitarian systems, producing competing narratives about the past. These tensions have fuelled ongoing disputes – often described as "numbers wars" – over which regime inflicted more deaths or suffering.

The politics of reconciliation is closely connected to the politics of memory. Reconciliation processes typically involve practices of remembrance, clarification of past events, and efforts to preserve the memory of those who were killed in different ways. Such approaches assume that uncovering the truth about the past is essential for individuals and societies seeking to move forward after violent conflict. They are built on a strong imperative "not to forget". Developing a shared understanding of past injustices and acknowledging the suffering of all parties is often seen as crucial for reconciliation and for rebuilding social relationships.

When silence about the past is broken, the rebuilding of relationships becomes possible. By acknowledging one another's experiences, victims on different sides may reconsider their own identities and revise their perceptions of others. Such practices help reconstruct social ties and reshape how individuals and groups engage with memories of violence. From this perspective, social forgetting is treated

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as a form of denial that obstructs reconciliation, reinforces dominant narratives, and erases uncomfortable aspects of the past. Silence – or "states of denial" – can also be actively maintained to protect existing power structures.

Remembering suffering can foster compassion, helping individuals move beyond isolation, respond to the pain of others, and better understand their mutual interconnectedness. Confronting silence is therefore viewed as essential for both practical and structural reconciliation, since meaningful change cannot occur without first acknowledging past harm. Yet an excessive focus on memory can also hinder reconciliation; at a certain point, sustained attention to past grievances may even deepen existing tensions or reignite conflict.

Post-conflict silence

Memories can be a source of disagreement; while historical memory can support peace, it can also keep old grievances alive. Hostility between groups is not innate but learned, and contemporary conflicts are often shaped by selective interpretations of the past. Leaders or activists may use symbolic politics and ethnic imagery to stir up resentment and consolidate their own power. In many post-war societies, disputes stem from divided memories.

Atrocities become deeply embedded in both personal and collective memory, sustaining "us versus them" narratives and making peace more difficult to achieve. At times, silence exists alongside selective remembrance, as communities cling to "chosen traumas". Political leaders and other "agents of memory" can reinforce group boundaries by advancing divisive narratives, which may, in turn, reignite or intensify conflict.

Silence can restore a sense of normalcy and create opportunities for former enemies to interact.

Therefore, constant reminders of a divided past can sustain conflict rather than promote peace. Forgetting is not always a loss – at times, social forgetting can create space for new relationships and future possibilities. Research suggests that silence may even serve as a strategy for lasting peace and reconciliation, particularly in societies deeply fractured by violence. Dialogue is not always beneficial; in the aftermath of conflict, communities may need periods of silence simply to coexist again.

It is worth asking whether ongoing reconciliation initiatives and "truth-telling" efforts always promote peace in Europe by continually placing the past at the centre of public life. Many of today's conflicts unfold within and between states in the heart of Europe, and in such sensitive contexts individuals and communities often rely

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on silence as a way to coexist. Silence can restore a sense of normalcy and create opportunities for former enemies to interact; in some cases, choosing not to speak may help build a more durable peace. As T. S. Eliot wrote in 1930, "Where shall the word be found, where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence," a reminder that speaks just as clearly in the world we inhabit today.

All said, collective memory – what societies choose to remember or forget – plays a central role in shaping national identity, politics, and international relations. Governments and political leaders often draw on selective memories or official histories to legitimize their authority and justify policies, sometimes fuelling nationalism or deepening conflict. In post-communist Europe, disputes over which events and victims deserve commemoration continue to expose divisions between East and West. Although open remembrance can support healing, deliberate forgetting or intentional silence may at times be necessary for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Both memory and forgetting can thus become powerful tools for shaping society after conflict. EE

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GDAŃSK

GDAŃSK
A CITY OF LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL UNESCO NETWORK

Gdańsk promotes literature as an integral part of urban life and public policy. Awarded in October 2025, the title of UNESCO City of Literature confirms both the strength of local literary initiatives and the city's strategic approach to literature as a tool for education, dialogue, and international cooperation. By joining the global network of cities with this prestigious designation, Gdańsk stands alongside other Polish members – Kraków and Wrocław – linking its local potential with the global circulation of knowledge and experience.

"The title of UNESCO City of Literature is not only a prestigious distinction, but above all recognition that Gdańsk is a place where words have the power to build community, inspire action, and nurture values. It is an achievement shared by all who shape the literary face of our city – authors, researchers, readers, institutions, and culture enthusiasts," says Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, Mayor of Gdańsk.

Gdańsk's success rests on the strength of its literary ecosystem, where municipal institutions, writers, publishers, libraries, and social organisations work together. At the centre of this network will be the new House of Literature in Gdańsk. Located in the historic building of the House of Charity and Orphans, it will offer space for creative work, residencies, educational programmes, workshops, and research into the city's literary heritage. Once open, the House of Literature will integrate the functions of libraries, bookshops, and workshop rooms, providing a contemporary hub for literary activity.

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"I see the House of Literature as the open heart of literary Gdańsk – a place that will allow creators to spread their wings and give residents the chance to encounter literature in a vivid, accessible, everyday way. It will be a space for dialogue, education, and creative courage, where local stories intertwine with an international perspective. I trust that in the coming years it will become a natural home for all who believe in the power of words," emphasises Mayor Dulkiewicz.

Like the newly awarded UNESCO title, the creation of the House of Literature is the result of sustained commitment and dynamic cooperation between the public and private sectors, literary professionals, and individuals for whom literature is a form of leisure and personal expression. Membership in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) is an invitation to continue this exchange, encouraging new synergies not only at the local level but also regionally and internationally.

Gdańsk is also a member of the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), which offers safe haven to writers persecuted in their home countries. In July 2025, two Cuban writers – Javier L. Mora and Zulema Gutiérrez Lozano – were welcomed for a year-long scholarship.

The city provides support to authors from Belarus, Ukraine, the Middle East, and other regions, offering a secure environment in which they can continue their work and participate in local cultural life. Membership in ICORN demonstrates how literature and urban policy can reinforce one another – combining international solidarity with a vibrant local literary community. This environment fosters initiatives such as the Flying University of Human Rights or the Academy of Report-

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age, both operating at the European Solidarity Centre. Gdańsk's history – rooted in values such as freedom and solidarity – makes it a natural centre for projects dealing with freedom of expression and peaceful civic engagement.

Other institutions also play significant roles in Gdańsk's literary landscape. The City Culture Institute coordinates festivals such as the European Poet of Freedom, develops educational programmes for children and young people, and conducts research on urban culture, including ecological initiatives as part of the international campaign called Turning the Tide. The European Solidarity Centre documents human stories and supports local artists and translators, while the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre hosts artistic residencies and literary events.

The Provincial and Municipal Public Library continues to modernise its network of branches, transforming them into spaces not only for borrowing books but also for meetings, book clubs, reading education, relaxation, and leisure. The introduction of book vending machines – available 24/7 – has further expanded access. Currently, four districts in Gdańsk have such machines, with more planned, including those initiated by residents through the Citizens' Budget.

The "I Write in Gdańsk" residency programme enables Polish and international writers to engage with local communities by leading workshops, visiting schools and libraries, and supporting local educational projects. The city also supports artists through Cultural Scholarships and the Gdańsk Publishing Fund, which assists independent publishers and reading-promotion initiatives. Every year, dozens of individuals and institutions benefit from these funds – poets, prose writers, translators, and local bookshops. They receive reduced rents or are integrated with municipal cultural programmes.

The Gdańsk model is built on cooperation between institutions and residents, where audiences become active participants in literary life. Local archives – such as the Pomeranian Digital Library and Gedanopedia, the digital encyclopaedia of Gdańsk – provide historical materials for educational projects, publications, and creative residencies. Bookshops and libraries host meetings, workshops, and discussions that often spark new literary works and collaborations.

The UNESCO title brings Gdańsk into a global cooperation framework – the Creative Cities Network – which facilitates the exchange of ideas, the development of joint educational initiatives, residency programmes, festivals, and literary research. This enables local initiatives to benefit from the experience of partners across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, while increasing the international visibility of Gdańsk's literary programmes. Until the latest recruitment, the network included 350 cities (including five in Poland) across seven fields: Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Music, Media Arts, and Crafts and Folk Art – with Architecture introduced as a new field this year.

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However, the title also comes with long-term obligations. As a UNESCO Creative City, Gdańsk commits to activities related to environmental education, equal opportunities, and cultural heritage preservation. Many of these commitments align with the city's Development Programmes 2030, which highlight literature's contribution to Gdańsk's four strategic objectives: Green City, Shared City, Accessible City, and Innovative City. Since 2004, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network has supported cooperation among centres that recognise the creative sector as a driving force for sustainable development and implement the United Nations' guidelines, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Gdańsk treats literature both as a tool for local development and as a platform for international cooperation. Through scholarships, support funds, residency programmes, the work of the House of Literature, and membership in international networks, the city connects its literary heritage with contemporary social and educational challenges. Literature becomes a means of building a broad cultural space in which freedom of expression, democracy, and cooperation take concrete form – positioning Gdańsk as an active partner in a global network of creative cities.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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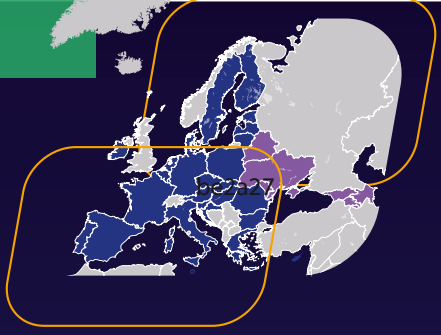

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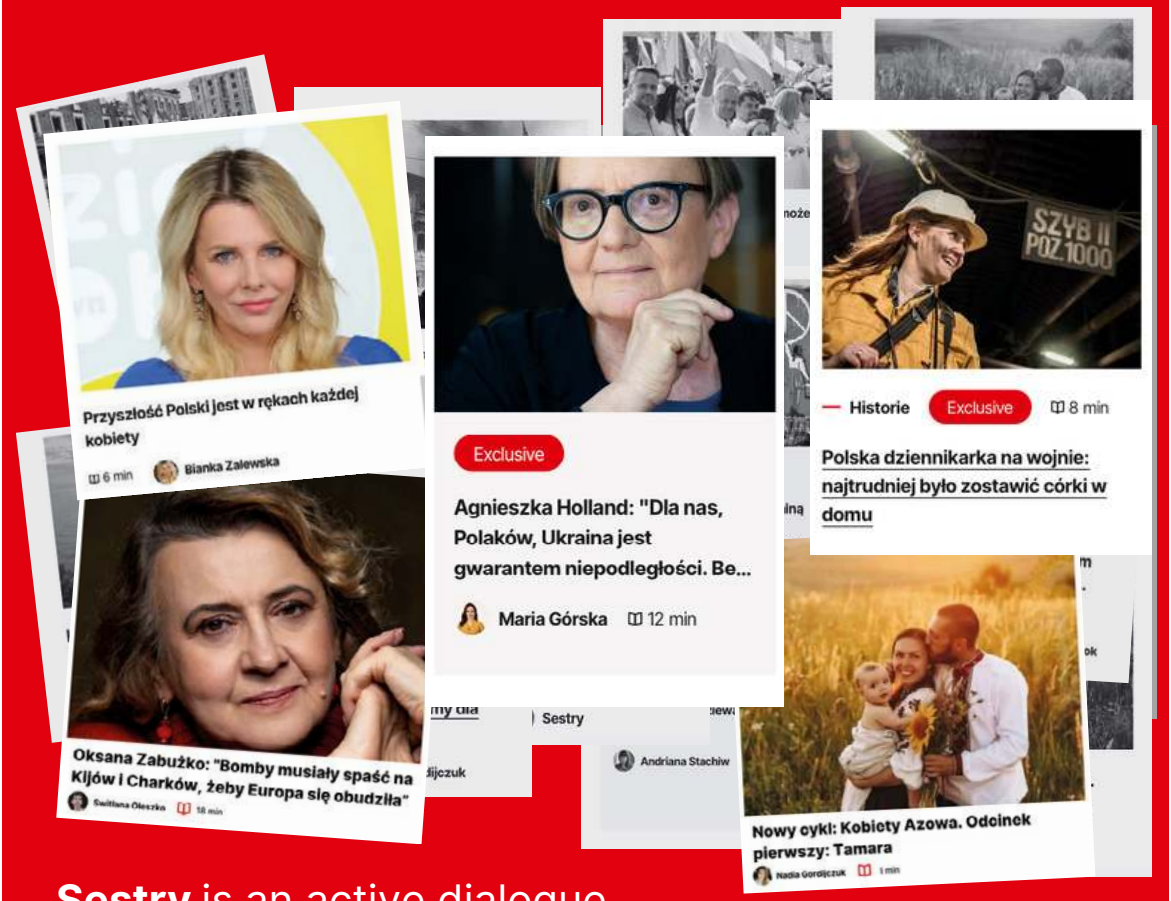

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Rediscovering the People's Poland

ELŻBIETA ŻAK

In Poland, after the initial rejection of the legacy of the Polish People's Republic, a gradual re-evaluation of the communist period has begun. Certain elements of its social reality – those that gave it a distinct local colour and a sense of belonging – came to be reassessed and, in some cases, appreciated.

The socialist revolution that took place in post-war Poland reshaped the country and brought on its society a rapid and unexpected process of transformation. The radical reforms that were introduced after 1945 were widely perceived as a Marxist challenge to the country's independence. In some circles they were even interpreted as an assault on such ideals as "noble freedom". While a term for the historical political liberties and privileges enjoyed by the Polish nobility, it was also used to describe the attack on the myths of the high culture of the interwar period. Yet, the imposed change, and the modernization resulting from it, triggered profound social shifts. Looking at its consequences from today's perspective, we can say that the paradoxical legacy of this period includes a more egalitarian Polish society, and the creation of conditions that enabled many urban Poles to benefit from the very changes that were then so deeply contested.

Peasant versus noble culture

The period of the Polish People's Republic (1945–1989) and its evaluation are examples of both the process of memory transformation and changes in the

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interpretation of what the society has gone through as a result. The plethora of approaches, as well as the constant re-evaluations and redefinitions of the "communist legacy", point to the depth of the identity dilemmas that are characteristic of Polish society right up until today. In other words, the continued tensions that we observe in today's Poland, also with regards to the communist period, clearly stem from the clash that existed between the revolutionary socialist modernization project that was implemented under the dictate of the Soviet Union and some enduring, although reshaped, national myths.

Specifically, the efforts that the communist authorities undertook to remake Poland's social structure through mass urbanization and industrialization collided with the deeply ingrained, traditionalist and hierarchical manor – a peasant system that had existed in Poland for a few centuries. Consequently, both the folk culture, which the communist authorities used for propaganda purposes, and the so-called noble (aristocratic) culture, which was treated as a vehicle for national liberation, became subject to varying degrees of mythologization.

The authorities laid out the foundations of the socialist order in the six-year plan introduced in 1950, and which was one of the defining economic projects of the People's Republic of Poland. Its goals included the electrification of rural areas, the expansion of heavy industry, and a large-scale migration from rural areas to cities. The communist authorities sought to remake a country once dominated by agriculture into an industrial-agricultural state grounded in socialist ownership, guided by centralized regulations and party directives.

Another force that reshaped both the social landscape and structure of Polish cities was the massive post-war resettlement – due to the decisions reached at the Yalta Conference, instituting new political borders in Europe. Poland's territory moved from the East to the West, followed by a mass relocation of peoples. In addition, after the war, many urban areas, earlier inhabited by Jews, gained new residents, which also brought on some new demographic and cultural configurations.

All these processes violently disrupted the previous symbolic order. The Polish philosopher Andrzej Leder illustrates this by noting how the landed gentry, traditionally considered representatives of the Polish conscience, were removed from their role as administrators. Those who declared themselves as "heirs" or the "guardians of identity" therefore became delegitimized.

A brutal social exchange

The most powerful symbol of the dismantling of the old order was the redistribution of noble estates and the breakup of noble landholdings. Not surprisingly,

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among the first properties to be nationalized was the Łańcut Palace, which was the seat and pride of the aristocratic Potocki family, one of Poland's oldest and most influential noble houses. Not far behind was the Porażyn estate, owned by General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, a close associate of Józef Piłsudski, the father of Poland's interwar independence.

Yet, this violent levelling of material gaps undertaken by the communist authorities was carried out in a society where the model of interpersonal relations was based on the traditionalist system of dependencies: nobleman/peasant; bourgeoisie/servant; decision-maker/functionary. Expectedly, the top-down intervention, revolutionary in its nature, was not followed by immediate mental and cultural transformations. The second point required a much longer period.

Instead, the experience of the pre-war social and cultural elite, stripped of its traditional role after 1945, proved to be profoundly traumatic and only reinforced a sense of dispossession among its representatives. This explains the consolidation of their negative assessment of the entire period of the Polish People's Republic. Leder argues that it was the "long memory" of the Polish feudal universe that played an important role in this process.

For him the consequences of the rapid social transformations in the People's Republic of Poland – and which were the result of the emancipation of the lower classes through expanded access to education and urban employment – required the dismantling of feudal social dependencies and, in turn, the collapse of the traditional hierarchical and patriarchal order. Thus, a new social formation resembling a modern urban middle class emerged out of this upheaval.

The relocation of the rural population and its impact on the fabric of urban life brought on a brutal social exchange, which immediately exposed historical disparities between the "well-born" and the poor. The second group were those who had been subjects to their masters, steeped in traditional religiosity, whether as peasants in the countryside or servants in the cities. Importantly, in the context of the accelerated socialist modernization, the existence of these disparities explains why members of the new emerging middle class "suffered from a longing for their masters" and their world of desires was shaped by "petty bourgeois aspirations". Leder explains that these two elements were intertwined with traditional religiosity and the workers' struggle for church.

Promotion of folk culture

With the encouragement to relocate to urban areas, rural dwellers saw new opportunities for social advancement. The communist authorities promoted the

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"democratization" of universities, aiming to eliminate traditional elitism by prioritizing the enrolment of students from working-class, peasant, and so-called "working intelligentsia" backgrounds, particularly those coming from peripheral regions. This policy produced a deep social reshuffling. It resulted in a mixing of elites and a collision of life experiences, intellectual traditions, and creative energies.

However, as stated above, for a part of the society this transformation was deeply traumatic and driven by the Soviet state imposing a new order, one that was widely perceived as a criminal assault on Polish freedom. The process dismantled the traditional elites and undermined the romantic myths of national liberation that had long defined the Polish identity. In their place, new hierarchies emerged. New "notables" received positions of symbolic power, no longer determined by birth or inherited wealth. In parallel, opportunities opened up for the poor and marginalized peasantry.

Official propaganda treated the rural population instrumentally, using it to advance ideological goals.

Despite this, official propaganda treated the rural population instrumentally, using it to advance ideological goals. To that end, the authorities appropriated folk culture and deliberately contrasted it with high culture. They promoted the mass development of amateur artistic movements and encouraged the use of folk motifs in shaping a new national identity.

Simultaneously subjected to propaganda-driven aestheticization and staged reinterpretation, this official folklore was taken away from authentic, lived experiences. Consequently, folk art stopped being an expression of local (or class-based) identity. Instead, it became a symbol of universal accessibility and representativeness. The goal was not to uncover the ethno-cultural substance of Polish folk traditions, but to produce a visually appealing, standardized stylization – one that stripped the rural population of its right to self-expression.

This special privileging of folklore was typical for communist regimes. Across the Eastern Bloc, communist states set up folk "song and dance" ensembles as colourful emblems of state-sanctioned national identity. They operated as representative ambassadors of national tradition. The state transformed them into instruments of propaganda and symbols of collective pride, which often provoked distrust and alienation among independent cultural creators.

Between 1950 and 1980, dozens of new folk ensembles were established – an unprecedented cultural phenomenon. Their surge illustrates how the regime sought to institutionalize and control cultural expression – transforming what had once arisen organically from local communities into a centrally managed tool of ideological representation. There were around 50 created in the 1950s, 65 in the 1970s, and nearly 100 in the 1980s.

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This state-driven revival of folklore, and its impact on artistic freedom, is powerfully portrayed in Paweł Pawlikowski's 2018 film *Cold War*. At its heart, this internationally-awarded film tells the love story of two people from different worlds – one rural, one urban. Set against the divided landscapes of the Cold War, Pawlikowski captures the clash between these traditions and sensibilities, exposing the deeper fractures of post-war Polish modernity.

Researchers, anthropologists, and cultural explorers who accompanied this process often saw themselves as discoverers of an authentic peasant culture – one that lacked the means to define itself. Yet their search for authenticity soon gave way to idealization and exoticization, and finally to the state's propagandistic appropriation of folk culture. Politically, the ruling Workers' Party advanced its own narratives, directed toward the once-oppressed peasantry.

A folk history of Poland

Over the past two decades, Polish historical narratives have undergone a significant shift in perspectives on how the above social transformations have shaped modern Poland. This change has largely been driven by the growing popularity of such topics of exploration as heritage, identity discourse, and cultural memory. The adoption of new research approaches, which seek to deconstruct both the myths of the noble past and the romanticized image of the peasantry, has enabled a more nuanced understanding of the Polish People's Republic and its complex legacy in the collective thinking of Poles today.

Since the early 2000s a striking trend has emerged: there are now more and more publications that question the nostalgic vision of the countryside and peasant life that supposedly existed before the Polish People's Republic. These studies expose the realities of poverty, dependence, and social injustice that a large segment of the rural population endured at the hands of the authority of landowners. The polemical nature of this revisionist approach is already evident in the titles of the key publications: *Serfdom: The True History of Polish Slavery*; *A People's History of Poland: A History of Exploitation and Resistance*; *Bastards of Serfdom: A History of Peasant Rebellions, The Peasant and the Master*; *Rudeness*; *Peasant Women: A Story of Our Grandmothers*; and *Servants for Everything*.

Polish historical narratives have undergone a significant shift in perspectives on the social transformation.

These critical voices sought to highlight how the peasantry and rural poverty had been left out of mainstream history, treating them as signs of deeper social

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Photo from the collection of the Polish National Digital Archive

The communist authorities in Poland popularized folk culture in the 1960s to deliberately contrast it with high culture. They promoted the mass development of amateur artistic movements and encouraged the use of folk motifs in shaping a new national identity.

issues and the need for real modernization. To understand how Polish society has changed – especially throughout the 20th century – it is important to recognize the peasantry's true weight, both in numbers and in shaping national attitudes and social relations. This perspective allows for a more balanced view of the communist period, even within liberal or left-wing circles, by acknowledging its positive aspects: greater social mobility, better living conditions, and the growth of social security.

Folklore's new potential

In today's Poland, amid ongoing debates about history and memory, there is a renewed fascination with the regional and the local. It has become fashionable to

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trace one's roots and rediscover the distinctiveness of peripheral identities, often through a revived interest in folk traditions and their cultural legacy. This trend reflects a broader longing for community and belonging. More than two decades after the political transformation, the era of the Polish People's Republic – once dismissed as a time of ideological conformity – is increasingly recalled beyond politics, as a period that shaped everyday life, education, and shared forms of leisure.

Nostalgic memories of that era often evoke a sense of community and solidarity – children spending hours playing in shared courtyards, neighbours in high-rise blocks of flats who knew one another, and workplaces that celebrated name days and other social occasions. After the system transformation, which started in 1989, and the initial rejection of the legacy of the Polish People's Republic, a gradual re-evaluation of the communist period began. Certain elements of its social reality – those that gave it a distinct local colour and a sense of belonging – came to be reassessed and, in some cases, appreciated. These memories remain powerful, capable of concentrating collective emotions and helping to rebuild a sense of community within new social contexts.

Searching for one's peasant roots is no longer seen as a source of shame, but rather strengthens a sense of identity.

A similar process can be seen in the renewed interest in folk culture – once appropriated by state propaganda, today it is enjoying a genuine renaissance. The socialist authorities had created a vast network of municipal and community cultural centres, organizing regular festivals and reviews that featured regional ensembles. While the ideological framework once imposed on "folklore" has long been forgotten, the tradition of such cyclical cultural events has endured in public memory. As a result, artistic handicraft workshops, folk and traditional music festivals, and community dances have become popular once again. Amateur singing circles are also reappearing, continuing a grassroots cultural practice with deep historical roots.

Searching for one's peasant roots is no longer seen as a source of shame, but rather as something that adds colour and strengthens a sense of identity. The portal zespolyludowe.pl shows this growing fascination with folklore in 21st-century Poland, noting that 90 new folk ensembles were formed in 2000 and another 69 in 2010. In a postmodern world, marked by isolation and a lack of genuine community, this renewed folklore offers a kind of cultural remedy – a source of connection and creativity.

Regional heritage and the many layers of traditional culture now inspire new, often anti-globalist expressions in design, ornamentation and music. The rising visibility of folklore on social media, and its popularity among younger generations untouched by the socialist-era "cultural industry", is particularly telling.

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Normalizing the Polish People's Republic

Among younger generations, negative memories of the Polish People's Republic are gradually fading away. Few are aware of the methods once used to drive modernization – the crude slogans about privileges for the "common people", the limits on creative freedom, and the aesthetics imposed by propaganda. With time, forgetting has softened old resentments. At the same time, changing attitudes toward the People's Republic have been shaped by the transformation of how Polish peasant culture is remembered – and by a renewed turn towards the pre-socialist past.

Efforts to challenge the myth of Polish noble cultural supremacy reveal a long history of peasant marginalization and social undervaluation. Re-examining the realities of that era also reshapes how the achievements of the Polish People's Republic are viewed – particularly its role in a sweeping social modernization. The period brought mass migration from the countryside to the cities, a gradual levelling of economic and educational inequalities, and access for the descendants of the rural population to the privileges and opportunities of urban life.

Combined with the officially promoted folklore of the socialist period, these processes helped shape the foundations of identity that characterizes urban Poles today. Referring once again to Leder's writing, the greatest modernizing achievement of the former system – one from which contemporary Polish society still benefits – is the emergence of an egalitarian "bourgeois model of negotiation", deeply rooted in its peasant origins. EE

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The gradual "forgetting" of communism in Poland

MICHAŁ KURYŁOWICZ, ALEKSANDER NIEPOKÓJ

Featured in communist times as a symbol of abductions, the black Volga has lost its aura now. Today few young Poles even recognize the car or recall the urban legends that once linked it to the KGB or security services. Stripped of these political connotations, it has survived mainly as a retro curiosity – an object of aesthetic nostalgia rather than historical unease.

Remembering is a constant act of renewal. In this sense, the past is never petrified and definitively shaped, but rather constitutes material from which a new present can be continually created.

(Aleida Assmann, What is the purpose of "national remembrance"?)

In the spring of 2025, we conducted a survey among the students of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in which we asked them to answer ten open-ended questions about the communist period in Poland (1944–89). We presented students with photographs and graphics from that period, without indicating what they depicted. Most of the graphics symbolized everyday life (elements of urban landscape, home furnishings, well-known car brands, logos of companies, etc.) while others referred to some cultural codes from that period such as characters from TV series, or famous athletes. Only one image referred directly to the world of politics – it was the image of Edward Gierek, the leader of the Polish communist party in the 1970s.

Although the survey resembled a popular online history quiz, it was only partly intended to test the respondents' knowledge about the past. Our goal was to cap-

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ture the subjective perception of the images presented, as well as the associations (positive or negative) that students had with these symbols. Thus, the respondents had the opportunity to provide a longer answer to each question, and some of them took advantage of this encouragement.

Nostalgia and iconic status

The vast majority of respondents are in the 18 to 25 age group. They were born after the year 2000, which is at least a decade after the collapse of communism in Central Europe. Their ideas about the past thus have been shaped at a time when the socialist era was already a distant memory. And indeed, today the public debate in Poland is less and less focused on what took place before 1989 or in that year. And when it does focus on the past, it tends to focus on the revaluation of the political transformation, meaning the changes that took place after 1989, and the effects of this process that have been seen until today.

The parents of today's young adults would probably have no problem recognizing the symbols presented in the survey and could assign them to a specific period in Polish history, as well as make a clear assessment about them. We were yet interested in how much of this "memory" remains in the minds of the younger generation and their personal attitude towards both the symbols of the past and the past itself.

Elements of everyday life from the communist period evoke positive associations among many young people.

The data from our survey show that an overwhelming majority of respondents can easily recognize and name the symbols of everyday life in the Polish People's Republic. This includes concrete high rises, courtyards with carpet beating racks, the so-called *meblościanka* wall units (characteristic furniture for the 1970s and 80s), or car models that were popular at the time. Importantly, however, for most respondents, these symbols did not evoke any associations with the political system in which they were created (the terms "Polish People's Republic" and "communism" appear in no more than seven per cent of responses, depending on the question). Instead, young people are much more likely to associate these symbols with their own childhood, most often with visits to their grandparents, who lived in similar housing estates, had similar furniture or drove older car models.

Elements of everyday life from the communist period therefore evoke positive associations among young people, with a touch of nostalgia appearing in their responses. This is particularly evident in the example of a photograph of a courtyard with a carpet beating rack in the centre – it is naturally associated with children's

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play and social gatherings, and triggers positive associations in over 60 per cent of respondents. Negative opinions are much rarer and are evoked by photographs of the Fiat 126p car (18 per cent), which was commonly referred to as *Maluch* ("little guy"), as well as the wall units (11 per cent). The negative responses mainly point to the unreliability and cramped nature of the car or the lack of functionality of the furniture. Yet the responses do not reflect the socio-political reality from which the presented products originate. This is very telling, as for young people these are symbols of the past. However, they are rather associated with family, being of an undefined age, social significance, and lacking political references.

In a similar way, the respondents perceive the urban landscape characteristic of the communist era. This is especially true for the concrete high-rise blocks, whose images are widely recognized (91 per cent) by respondents. This is the case because the surveyed young adults have either grown up in them or know these places from their visits to their grandparents. Thus, for them the predominant feeling that they have towards these housing estates is that of nostalgia, childhood memories, or close interpersonal relationships. Only nine per cent of the surveyed participants declared that they had no direct contact with this type of housing estate, yet they were still able to recognize them from the photographs. This lack of contact is justified by the fact that they come from the countryside, where there are no such buildings.

Despite lingering associations with neglect or crime, the image of Poland's socialist-era housing estates remains more positive than negative. According to the survey, 27 per cent of respondents view these concrete high-rises favourably, compared to only 16 per cent who see them negatively. Interestingly, few young Poles – just seven per cent – connect them directly with the realities of the Polish People's Republic. Beyond personal experience, their more positive perception may also stem from the way housing estates have been reimagined in popular culture, particularly through the Polish music since the 1990s, which has often recast them as spaces of shared memory and everyday life rather than symbols of decay.

The weakening of direct memory ties between these symbols and the era from which they originate has made such artefacts increasingly appealing to younger generations, particularly on a visual level. A telling example is the growing popularity of the *Maluch* – the classic Fiat 126p – which is described by 13 per cent of respondents as an iconic car. Another case is the logo of the *Społem* food cooperative, which is described by four per cent of respondents as iconic, while an even larger share – 42 per cent – finds it visually attractive and 58 per cent associate it with positive feelings. In both instances, this favourable perception appears to stem from the distinctive aesthetics of these symbols. They are markedly different from contemporary designs and perceived as more individual and authentic.

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Retro aesthetics

The responses concerning the recognition of figures from communist-era mass culture reveal some intriguing contrasts. The survey presented participants with two pictures. The first one showed the characters from the TV series titled *Czterej pancerni i pies* (*Four Tankmen and a Dog*). It was broadcast between 1966 and 1970 and hugely popular. The plot follows the adventures of a Polish tank crew and their loyal dog, Szarik, as they fight on the Eastern Front during the Second World War alongside the Soviet Army. The second picture shown to survey participants depicted the Polish national football team of the 1970s with its legendary coach Kazimierz Górski, under whom Poland achieved its greatest sporting successes in the 20th century.

While the vast majority of respondents easily recognized the television heroes (84 per cent), only 38 per cent identified Górski's football team. This discrepancy is likely linked to the continued regular broadcasting of the series on Polish public television. Young respondents most often report seeing it at their grandparents' homes or during family gatherings (33 per cent), and they tend to associate it with positive emotions (51 per cent). Interestingly, they are not troubled by the show's overt propaganda message – the proclaimed Polish-Soviet friendship – although a small minority (11 per cent) recognize its historical distortions.

The image depicting "Górski's Eagles" is not only less recognizable but also evokes fewer emotions and associations. Only 13 per cent of respondents express a clearly positive attitude towards this team, while most answers remain brief and detached. This is perhaps unsurprising, as archival footage of Poland's 1970s national football team is rarely revisited in the media. Although Poland has not experienced comparable success in football since that golden decade, this fact is not widely known among younger generations. This gap in awareness reflects the broader transformation of the football world, in which talented players have become global celebrities, featured in the media alongside actors and musicians. For older generations, this team symbolized collective achievement – something rare and deeply meaningful in the context of communist Poland. Today, by contrast, sporting success is more often associated with individual careers and personal fame.

A photograph depicting a black Volga – a car that became a symbol of its era and featured prominently in urban legends about criminals or secret police (often the KGB) abducting children – also received low recognition. Only 38 per cent of respondents correctly identified the make, with many naming other models, and just 27 per cent were able to recall the legend associated with it. Despite its notoriety, the black Volga evokes little emotion today: 16 per cent of respondents expressed positive associations, mostly related to the car's distinctive aesthetics, while none declared explicitly negative feelings.

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This means that young Poles practically do not associate the black Volga with the communist period nor have any political connotations with it. Only four per cent of the respondents associated this car with the communist security services. The vehicle, devoid of political and historical connotations, fits well into the "retro" aesthetic – its image is making a comeback, no longer evoking fear or dangerous associations, gaining a neutral or even positive connotation as a monument or a historical object.

Once a general secretary, now a meme

The photograph most directly associated with Poland's communist past was that of Edward Gierek, the country's leader during the 1970s. Six in ten respondents recognized him. Yet the associations that the surveyed young people have with Gierek are largely unemotional: 11 per cent expressed a positive attitude towards him, and the same proportion a negative one. Understandably, these responses – often more detailed than in other cases – contained stronger political references: 26 per cent associated Gierek with the Polish People's Republic or the communist period in general. He is also remembered as someone responsible for Poland's growing foreign debt (mentioned by 13 per cent of respondents) and the ambitious infrastructure projects (nine per cent) which were undertaken during his rule.

A further seven per cent of young respondents referred to the anecdotal image of Gierek – most notably the well-known story, which was popular already in the Polish People's Republic, about the promise that he made during a visit to factory workers to give their children sweets. The tale, meant to portray a caring and approachable leader, later came to symbolize both Gierek's paternal populism and his detachment from everyday economic reality. His presence in the consciousness of young people thus appears to be an echo of the intense public debates of 20 to 30 years ago, which focused on both Gierek himself and the historical period that was associated with his rule. However, today, while some respondents are able to link him with specific political decisions, most refrain from offering a definitive assessment of his actions.

Yet, a notable share of respondents (16 per cent) perceive Gierek not through the lens of history, but as a character in popular internet memes. His image – marked by the formal, impassive expression familiar from archival photographs – has become material for a variety of online cultural experiments. In some cases, he has been digitally "revived" with the help of artificial intelligence and given a foreign-language voiceover. These AI-generated videos of Gierek speaking in other languages have gained considerable popularity on social media. His surname, easily adaptable to

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wordplay in Polish, has also gone viral, further cementing his unexpected presence in the digital pop-cultural landscape.

Neutralizing the past

The survey results indicate that young Poles do not strongly associate the symbols of the past with a specific historical period or the political system that existed before 1989. This does not mean, however, that they are indifferent to politics. One of the images used in the survey presented two logos of Polish gas companies: Centrala Paliw Napędowych (CPN), a brand from the communist era, and its contemporary successor, ORLEN. Unsurprisingly, the second was far more widely recognized (73 per cent), and it also elicited stronger emotional responses – both positive (44 per cent) and negative (20 per cent).

A significant share of survey participants (16 per cent) expressed a negative attitude towards the politicization of ORLEN's activities in recent years. This suggests that young people are not indifferent to attempts to use social or cultural spaces for political purposes. Yet, they find it much easier to evaluate events, figures, and phenomena that are closer to them in time – those they can personally recognize and interpret.

The final big question thus is how do young Poles perceive the symbols of the communist past? The survey results point to an increasingly neutral, and at times even positive, attitude. These artefacts belong to a world that lies beyond their individual and generational memory. Stripped of direct political meaning, they become relics of another era – objects that can now be viewed as retro, iconic, or even meme-worthy. This process of cultural neutralization may well signal the gradual "forgetting" of communism in Poland. EE

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Recovering Moldovan identity through literature

OXANA GHERMAN

Contemporary Moldovan novels offer fresh perspectives on how linguistic, social and ethnic identities are formed in the shadow of the Soviet past. Written in tones that range from tragic to ironic, they recreate the atmosphere of Soviet Moldova with striking honesty, exposing the depth of the identity crisis it produced. Taken together, these works become acts of memory and recovery, reaching far beyond the boundaries of fiction.

The Soviet regime's transformations in the Romanian lands between the Dniester and Prut rivers after the Second World War – including administrative and territorial reforms, social reorganization, changes in ethnic composition, denationalization, cultural isolation, economic centralization, collectivization, deportations, famine, persecution and restrictions – left an indelible mark on Moldovan society and its mentality. These Soviet policies that inscribed deep scars in collective memory also found their varied reflection in contemporary literature.

Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, writers from the Republic of Moldova continue to return to this dark chapter of history, seeking to process both collective and individual trauma. The linguistic, moral and identity crises endured by a community living under the weight of totalitarianism are thus most vividly explored in contemporary prose. Often understood as an act of reconstructing identity, the literary return to childhood remains one of the most resonant and enduring creative strategies in Moldovan writing today.

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Revising the Soviet past

Over the past decade, leading publishers in Moldova and Romania have brought out a wave of novels that revisit the Soviet past. The works published over this period of time explore the social, political, and economic realities that not only shaped but also quite often shattered human lives in this part of the world. Among the writers who reinterpret Soviet and post-Soviet childhoods from multiple angles are such authors as Vladimir Beșleagă, Emilian Galaicu-Păun, Dumitru Crudu, Mihail Vakulovski, Constantin Cheianu, Tatiana Țîbuleac, Emanuela Iurkin, Lorina Bălteanu, Alexandru Popescu, and Sașa Zare. Their prose captures the painful struggle for self-definition within a system designed to erase individuality. In their narratives, memory – both personal and collective – becomes the raw material for a new literary language, one capable of turning trauma into cultural renewal.

Publishers in Moldova and Romania have brought out a wave of novels that revisit the Soviet past.

Vladimir Beșleagă was among the few Moldovan writers to emerge in the 1970s and whose work marked a revival of Moldovan prose. He wrote at a time when literature was reduced to an ideological tool, with censorship curbing artistic freedom and bending literary texts to the socio-political demands of the totalitarian regime.

Beșleagă's most accomplished works yet reveal a clear effort to move beyond the rigid formulas of socialist realism. Already in his early novels he shows the world as destabilized by the confusion between truth and falsehood, between authentic values and imposed pseudo-values. It is a world inhabited by individuals who are disoriented and deformed by a foreign ideology.

Thus, in his 1966 novel *Zbor frânt* (*Broken Flight*), Beșleagă transformed the experience of war into an inner drama of conscience. His protagonist, Ion Buzdugan, perfectly embodies the tension that exists between the imagined utopia and lived reality. He experiences an identity crisis that arises from a deep gap between how he understands himself and how others perceive him. Such conflicts mirror the moral disorientation that was experienced by an entire generation that lived under totalitarianism. For them, the search for truth turned out to be a painful ordeal as their world was a space of tensions, discord, and unending conflict.

Beșleagă's second novel, *The Life and Death of the Unhappy Filimon, or the Arduous Path of Self-Knowledge* (*Viața și moartea nefericitului Filimon sau anevoioasa cale a cunoașterii de sine*), written in 1970 but published only in 1987, explores the existential tragedy of an individual crushed by paternal tyranny. After separating his son from his partner, the father conceals the boy's origins, erases his identity,

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and raises him with ruthless severity. In this distorted world, the protagonist, who wants to find the fragile thread of his own truth, has no choice but to navigate through a labyrinth of conflicting emotions and thoughts.

In a family of regime sympathizers

A representative voice of the Moldovan literary generation of the 1980s is Emilian Galaicu-Păun. His novel *Living Tissue. 10x10* (*Țesut viu. 10 x 10*) unfolds in a sort of mosaic, non-linear narrative that reconstructs scenes from the "closed universe of childhood" of the protagonist, who is known only as "…n". The boy's parents are intellectuals – his mother a teacher, his father a writer, both educated in Moscow – which places him in a typical Soviet milieu with a carefully arranged daily routine. As in many families in Soviet Chișinău, a preordained order governs the household. The same gestures, phrases and rituals repeat endlessly, turning daily life into a performance reproduced across the Soviet space. Despite deprivation and misery, the townspeople ostentatiously display cleanliness and culture – they eat well, keep their homes spotless, and decorate their apartments with bookcases that imitate prosperity.

The child …n absorbs this world intensely, internalizing its patterns and contradictions. Everything that happens outside, echoes in his mind, reshaped to fit his own inner logic. Yet one figure resists assimilation. It is his father who is authoritarian, arrogant, and in the child's imagination, fused with the image of Lenin, the emblem of communist power. The father's devotion to ideology distances him from his son; he cannot be absorbed as a moral or human model. The narrative, laced with biblical echoes, reconstructs not only the confusion born of politics turned into a new religion, but also the father's claim to intellectual and moral superiority. His self-styled authority, expressed through pompous rhetoric, slips into the theatrical and absurd. The son is left to submit to – and identify with – a man who, while seemingly devoted to literature, ultimately bows before politics.

Emilian Galaicu-Păun is a representative voice of the Moldovan literary generation of the 1980s.

Galaicu-Păun explores the problems of identity formation faced by a child growing up in a family of regime sympathizers, in a society undergoing intense Russification – such as Soviet Chișinău. The boy's act of rebellion begins when he desecrates the family's sacred symbols, splashing ink on a portrait of Lenin, for which he is violently punished by his father. Through episodes of childish mischief and the rigid norms of school life, the novel reveals the inner workings of Soviet

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society. The children's invented games expose their instinctive longing for freedom – their desire to give shape to life according to their own will and to create their own rules. Some of these games, recalled in the book's final pages, emerge as a reaction to the allure of the forbidden.

Another fragile form of freedom – an escape from "paternal supervision" – arises when the protagonist spends time in the national library. Within the constraints of the Soviet world, such moments of curiosity and imagination become small exercises in liberty, gestures that later make possible a tentative moral and identity renewal.

A captive of the Soviet past

The theme of recovering national identity also runs through the work of Dumitru Crudu, a poet, playwright, and prose writer who also emerged in the 1980s. His 2019 novel *Ziua de naștere a lui Mihail Mihailovici* (*Mihai Mihailovici's Birthday*) is a chronicle of a life shaped – and repeatedly disrupted – by political and social upheavals. Each chapter revolves around the events that unfold on or around June 28th – the date in 1940 when Moldova and Northern Bukovina were annexed by the Soviet Union. The work follows the protagonist, Mihai Mihailovici, from childhood to death.

One of the novel's most remarkable qualities is the way Crudu reconstructs both the context and the social atmosphere of each era. The sense of time and place emerges through the details of everyday life – slogans, place names, and familiar Soviet markers (Ion Soltîs Street, the Molodiojnîi District, the October Palace, "Moldovan" language and literature, the village council, the Soviet militia, Komsomol, the Volga, the rouble, and others) – and the social mentality as it is embodied by his characters. Crudu depicts people not only during the years of Sovietization, when they struggle to conform to the regime's political order, but also in the post-Soviet times, when the promise of ideological freedom reveals a deeper loss: their inability to recover a sense of authentic identity. In the end, the individual shaped by false values remains, even when freedom returns, a captive of the Soviet past.

Crudu depicts people not only during the years of Sovietization but also in the post-Soviet times.

Through concrete examples, Crudu shows how ideology shapes human relationships. Political loyalties become matters of destiny: ideological divisions strain friendships, fracture families, and bring misery into private life. In this way, the author captures the broader moral and social decline of society.

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The 2018 novel *Woldemar*, written by Oleg Serebrian – a Moldovan politician, diplomat, and former President of the Latin Union (2010–12) – explores an identity crisis through psychological, moral, social and historical lenses. The novel intertwines the personal with the political, offering an introspective portrait of a man searching for meaning and a broader reflection on the disorientation of post-Soviet society, where questions of memory, belonging, and truth remain unresolved.

Haunted by what the specialist in Romanian literature, Anneli Ursu Gabanyi, calls the "psychological drama of difference", Woldemar is a man scarred by repeated ruptures of identity that leave lasting wounds. He comes to question the fragile boundary between truth and illusion, reality and imagination, wakefulness and dream – until his very sense of self begins to split into two. The novel's confessional structure, shaped through alternating perspectives, retraces the protagonist's gradual self-(de)formation under the pressure of inner conflict and external constraint.

Woldemar is an abandoned child raised by his aunt in a deeply traumatic environment. Growing up with his adoptive mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, he lives in a constant state of uncertainty about what it truly means to "be a man". Sexuality is a taboo subject; his emotional gestures toward classmates are publicly condemned and violently punished at home. For the young Woldemar, masculinity becomes inseparable from shame, while identity becomes a source of enduring guilt, one that is shaped by the social expectations and rigid stereotypes of masculinity that define his world.

Woldemar's efforts to anchor his sense of ethnic belonging are constantly eliminated by the environment in which he grows up – a Soviet, "Romanian-phobic" republic where any sign of Romanian identity is immediately suppressed. Within this social landscape, he cannot openly identify as German or Ukrainian, while to call himself Romanian is to invite danger. Thus his personal, sexual, ethnic and social identities all remain unresolved.

As he reaches adulthood, Woldemar continues to feel the weight of his difference, trying to accept what he sees as a destiny. The novel unfolds through a blend of retrospection and introspection, where past and present constantly mirror one another.

Lastochka

Belonging to a younger literary generation, Tatiana Țîbuleac offers a fresh perspective on the question of identity in her 2018 novel *Grădina de sticlă* (*The Glass Garden*). Her book, which has already been translated into French, Spanish, Croatian, Albanian and Polish, portrays human destiny during one of the most pain-

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ful chapters in the history of the Republic of Moldova. Through her protagonist's confession, Țîbuleac interweaves private suffering with the collective trauma of a country that was subjected to an experiment in identity erasure.

The protagonist is an abandoned child adopted by a Russian woman from Chișinău. At first, the arrangement appears fortunate: the girl gains security and decent living conditions. Yet from the very first day, she is stripped of her name and given a new one – Lastochka (which in Russian is the name of a bird – the swallow). Lastochka's true identity remains thus unknown throughout the novel. Gradually, she is reduced to an object, a possession of her adoptive mother, and forced into servitude. Only later does she discover that she had been bought from the orphanage for this very purpose.

The most painful experiences presented in the novel revolve around the process of learning Russian – a language that Tamara, the adoptive mother, regards as both prestigious and indispensable. For Lastochka, this process turns into an ordeal. What initially fascinates her soon turns into an object of aversion. The Russian language is forced upon her through humiliation and violence. She endures the nightmare of acquiring a foreign tongue under coercion. At one point, she refuses to speak Russian and is brutally punished. The question of language, presented through a series of deeply emotional episodes, gradually expands into a broader meditation on power, identity and belonging.

The novel also includes scenes from Lastochka's adulthood. Now a doctor living in Bucharest, she looks back on her childhood and confronts the painful truth of her fractured linguistic identity. In Romania, her speech still bears the traces of another world; her Romanian sounds too foreign, too marked by the past. Whether in Chișinău or Bucharest, she remains an outsider – always different, always excluded.

Immunity to ideological falsehood

Mihail Vakulovski's 2020 novel *My Father Reads to Me even after Death* (*Tata mă citește și după moarte*) is a vivid portrayal of Soviet childhood and adolescence. Structured along two narrative planes – the author's fictionalized childhood and his adult perspective – it tells the story of Moldovan children growing up in a village who, despite taboos, prohibitions, and Soviet stereotypes, carve out moments of unexpected freedom within their confined world.

The protagonist, Mișca, grows up in a family of teachers. From an early age he is exposed to what were considered the most "efficient" Soviet methods of education. His father, both disciplinarian and mentor, becomes the key figure shaping Mișca's sense of identity – including his first lessons about manhood.

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Scenes from daily life in a Soviet Bessarabian village, in which the children are active participants, are rendered with striking authenticity. They include *subbotniki* – which is how the "voluntary" Saturday workdays organized for ideological and communal purposes were called – as well as visits to war veterans, the rigid organization of the school system, pioneer camps, and more. The children are required to memorize and repeat official texts and adopt a fixed understanding of the "homeland". They are fed a steady stream of information about the history of the USSR's formation and made to learn ideological poems that, within a few years, would vanish from the curriculum. All of this is taught superficially and repeated in absurd, empty rhetoric. Yet the children, through their own innocent logic, begin to link everyday events to the myths of Soviet heroes. And, in doing so, they quietly dethrone them. As a result, they develop a subtle immunity to ideological falsehood.

All this said, contemporary novels offer fresh perspectives on the formation of linguistic, social and ethnic identity in Moldova, as well as on the recovery of the often-painful historical truth. Their diverse approaches to social and political experiences – and especially to the impact they had on individual lives – continue to engage readers until today. Written in registers ranging from tragic to ironic and sarcastic, these works compose a panoramic portrait of Soviet Moldova. As prose of memory, they imaginatively reconstruct the world of that time, with its typical characters, situations, and ideological distortions, exposing the depth of the identity crisis it produced. Viewed together, these novels constitute an act of identity recovery through memory – one whose effects reach far beyond the realm of fiction. EE

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Looking for heroes

Experiences in Latvia

VITA ZELČE

Latvia's understanding of heroism has been rewritten repeatedly over the past century, shaped in turn by Soviet occupation, the struggle for independence and the challenges of democratic renewal. Each era constructed its heroes – some imposed, some rediscovered, others newly recognised. Today, debates over memory, justice and national identity continue to determine which lives are honoured and which stories are told.

During the Soviet occupation of Latvia, the only legal folk hero for Latvian boys was Lāčplēsis (the Bear Slayer). This was declared by the first chairman of the Latvian People's Front, Dainis Īvāns, who spoke on a public television broadcast on September 26th 2025 dedicated to his 70th birthday. Īvāns was one of the most popular people in Latvia in the late 1980s and early 1990s and a symbol of how Latvia regained its sovereignty. The Latvian People's Front brought together hundreds of thousands of people who played a decisive role in ensuring that Latvia could restore its national sovereignty in 1991.

Īvāns recalled that he had no heroes from his own childhood whom he would wish to replicate. Soldiers and statesmen who fought for Latvia's statehood between 1918 and 1920 were a taboo topic under Soviet occupation. The names of these men were fully deleted from schoolbooks and the public space.

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Secondary heroes

Lāčplēsis, the supernaturally strong hero of Latvia's national epic of the same name, emerged in the cultural revival of the late 19th century. Andrejs Pumpurs (1841–1902), a Latvian serving as an officer in the imperial Russian army, authored the poem while simultaneously composing patriotic verses that resonated widely among his compatriots. In *Lāčplēsis*, Pumpurs evoked a mythic Baltic past in which local tribes resisted foreign incursions, especially those carried out under the banner of the medieval Crusades. These struggles came to symbolize the defence of sovereignty, the community, and pre-Christian traditions.

Īvāns – reflecting on Lāčplēsis at the age of 70 – recalled with amusement how, as a boy, he imagined himself fighting invaders with the same unbreakable resolve as Lāčplēsis, performing heroic deeds for Latvia's freedom. Such fantasies carried a particular weight under Soviet occupation, when Latvian children grew up in a narrative landscape devoid of national heroes. For girls, the epic offered a limited set of models: Laimdota, the devoted companion who stood loyally beside Lāčplēsis, and Spīdala, whose patriotic fervour emerged only after a series of missteps. In the absence of alternative figures, these characters became rare touchstones of cultural identity – fragments of a national imagination that survived in spite of occupation.

Under Soviet occupation Latvian children grew up in a narrative landscape devoid of national heroes.

Once Latvia was absorbed into the Soviet Union during the 1940s, its history was rewritten entirely to present the Soviet idea that the people of Latvia had struggled against aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, tsarism, imperialism and fascists all in the name of establishing a Soviet system that would allow Latvia to become one of the republics. This meant the presentation of new heroes who were dominated by revolutionary members of the communist party, as well as well-known people whose lives ended before the beginning of the 20th century.

Many deceased cultural workers such as Andrejs Pumpurs remained in the annals of history, though their texts were often reinterpreted so that they might better suit the requirements of Soviet ideology. Soviet narratives cast the Latvian poet and playwright Rainis (1865–1929) as an almost sanctified figure. Textbooks smothered his life, poetry and plays in a thick ideological coating, persuading generations of schoolchildren that Rainis had long dreamed of a Soviet Union. In reality, he was a committed Social Democrat who worked to build an independent Latvia.

Still, the Latvian historical heroes were only secondary. The public arena was dominated by the so-called great heroes of the Soviet Union – Lenin and his

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compatriots, as well as heroes from the Russian Civil War and the Great Patriotic War. Monuments were installed in their honour, streets and buildings were named after them, their names were found in school textbooks and the mass media, and their birthdays were noted on holiday calendars and in schedules of dates of commemoration.

Restoration of sovereignty

Recovering the history that was kept under wraps during the Soviet occupation and the relative knowledge that was included in collective memory became one of the main forms of political mobilization in pursuit of the restoration of Latvia's independence. Newly learned or recovered or reawakened knowledge about history led to a freeing of collective memory, and this turned into a powerful force for the public. Most Latvians were aware of the great repressions of the Stalinist era, but when they learnt about the true number of people who were deported and killed in the Gulag, many were shocked. Stories told by survivors about their experiences led to true emotions and compassion. The loss of consciousness and hope for a better future united Latvians, and encouraged them to gather at mass demonstrations, including the Baltic Way, and to create their own calendar of holidays and commemorations, as well as a cult of national symbols. The past of memory was divided up into two periods – the "good" period until the Soviet occupation in 1940, and the "bad" period of the 50-year hating of external forces and Latvians with hostile power.

Latvians faced the stark realities of early capitalism, which brought poverty, unemployment, crime.

During the 1990s, commemorating the victims of Soviet rule shaped Latvia's collective memory and informed its emerging historical narrative. Scholars, journalists and survivors actively gathered, researched and published accounts of repression, documenting the fates of those deported, persecuted or silenced. Anthropologist Vieda Skultans observed that these stories of Stalinist terror had become a defining marker of Latvian identity – much like the Holocaust remembrance for Jewish communities. These revelations forced Latvians to confront a harrowing past, and the trauma they uncovered deeply influenced public attitudes, political thinking and social behaviour. This shock also collided with a second trauma: the upheaval of the post-Soviet transition itself. As the old system unravelled, Latvians faced the stark realities of early capitalism, which brought poverty, unemployment, rising crime and declining living standards and intensified the sense of dislocation that marked the decade.

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Photo: B..Robinson / Shutterstock

Memorial monument to Žanis Lipke and all Latvian saviours of Jews.
The monument consists a wide and high wall which is almost falling.

Self-victimisation encouraged people to think that historical heroes were those who combatted Soviet rule. At the front of the new group of heroes were people who worked for the repressive structures of Nazi Germany and fought in the Latvian Waffen-SS Legion. Their place in the gallery of national heroes was also symbolised by the ceremonial reinternment of the inspector general of the Latvian Legion, Rūdolfs Bangerskis (1878–1958), as well as other officers from the legion in a place of honour at the Riga Military Cemetery.

The heroic narrative of Latvian history also expanded to include figures from the 1920s and 1930s – soldiers who fought in the liberation battles and politicians of the interwar republic – without much reflection on their later role in dismantling Latvia's democracy and ushering in authoritarian rule. The selection of heroes in the years of epistemology and value anarchy did not have respect for universal values or denunciation of collaboration with criminal regimes.

A lack of knowledge about history was also key. Many years were needed before researchers discovered the extent of the Holocaust in Latvia, including collaboration with the Nazi and Soviet occupants and the crimes committed by these regimes, as well as the integration of these things into the Latvian calendar of history, memory, politics, education and commemoration. All these developments gradually pushed Latvia's understanding of historical heroes towards a framework grounded in moral judgment, universal values and democratic principles.

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Convictions about the unbendable

Lidija Lasmane-Doroņina and Marģers Vestermanis both turned 100 years old in 2025. Both were celebrated by President Edgars Rinkēvičs and Prime Minister Evika Siliņa. The media focused on the two centennials and documentary films were devoted to Lasmane-Doroņina and Vestermanis. Journalists interviewed them. Why and how were they heroes of present-day history in Latvia?

Marģers Vestermanis was one of the few Jews in Latvia to survive the Holocaust. Thanks to a confluence of events and his own ambitions and durability, he was able to wait out the Nazi occupation. Only one or two per cent of Jews survived in Latvia – a little over 1,000 of them. After the restoration of Latvia's independence, Vestermanis set up the "Jews in Latvia" museum and researched the Holocaust.

"The position of the Soviet Union was that the Holocaust need not be discussed," Vestermanis said in an interview in 2025. "Emphasis on Jewish suffering would harm the 'friendship among nations' [narrative]. Textbooks had no word about the tragedy of the Jews, and even the texts of mass burial places for Jews stated that this was the 'death of peaceful residents'. No Jewish symbols at all." Vestermanis became director of the publications department at the Latvian National Archive, and during the so-called Khrushchev thaw he tried to publish documents about the slaughter of Jews during the Nazi occupation. He was fired from his job as a result.

On September 18th 2025, Vestermanis's 100th birthday, his book *Humanity was not Lost After All* was released in Latvian. The book took him 20 years to write, particularly focusing on those Latvians who rescued Jews. Vestermanis managed to gather information on about 644 people who did so, 84 supporters and 527 rescued Jews, among whom 388 survived. Presumably the numbers are larger.

> After the end of the Second World War those who rescued Jews kept quiet, fearing repressions.

It took decades for the truth of events to become clearer. After the end of the Second World War those who rescued Jews kept quiet, fearing repressions from Soviet institutions. Vestermanis himself has said that much remains unknown and that the work never ends. His book was meant to ensure that people would not forget incredible human achievements and that faith in humanity does not disappear.

Lidija Lasmane-Doroņina was a Latvian dissident, a resistance activist during the Soviet occupation, and a defender of human rights. She spent 14 years in Soviet prisons, first arrested at the age of 21 for delivering medications and bandages for members of the resistance movement. The second time was when she was 45, and the charge was reading literature that was banned in Soviet Latvia and the dissemination of copies of that literature. Lasmane-Doroņina was

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arrested for the third time at age 58 and charged with anti-Soviet agitation. She is often described as a "prisoner of conscience" because she never gave up her views or values – God, motherland and truth. Lasmane-Doroņina never collaborated with the occupants. Equally unchanging is her faith in God. "I am not a heroine," she has said. "I have held on to my views, which I have never hidden. This is not a matter of heroism. Of everything that is given, choose the things that are of use to you. I am alive, and I survived all of those horrors. But those who were frozen were piled up like firewood … little children were thrown out of the windows of train wagons…"

Reflections on Latvian history have also been shaped by such events as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Lasmane-Doroņina has said that she has forgiven those who harmed her, but that does not mean that she justifies their evil work. People respect her for her poise and the example of a human who follows her conscience and cannot be broken by evil or an unjust government. During the summer of 2025, when Lasmane-Doroņina was celebrating her 100th birthday, the Latvian National Library staged an exhibition alongside several events devoted to her. An English translation of her life story was presented by the author Inga Ābele titled: *Lidija's Little Flower*. In the introduction to the book, Ābele writes that Lasmane-Doroņina "is the most courageous person whom I know. Courage does not arise in action, but in belief – in something intrinsic, rooted deep below the visible, perhaps in the very marrow and down through the spines of our free ancestors."

Heroism in today's context

During the past decade in Latvia's memory space, members of the resistance movement and those who saved Jews have attracted more attention. Commemorative places have been established for them. Žanis Lipke (1900–1987) and Johanna Lipke (1903–1990) and their supporters, for example, managed to rescue some 55 Jews. That is the focus of the Lipke memorial on the island of Ķīpsala in Riga. In 2022 in Rīga, a monument titled "Don't Be Afraid" was dedicated to Latvia's unbreakable Soviet-era dissident Gunārs Astra (1931–1988). During the last several years, commemorative locations have been organised in many of Latvia's regions to resistance groups which picked up arms in an effort to oppose the Soviet military.

Reflections on Latvian historical heroes have also been shaped by global events, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Questions of security have moved to the centre of public history, prompting the removal of remaining monuments that glorified the Soviet system. Public narratives now highlight figures defined by

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conviction – people who refused to yield, who believed in their rights and stood firm against evil.

This shift reinforces a broader belief: that as long as even one person resists injustice, evil can be confronted and ultimately defeated. The heroes who embody this stance share a common moral core – the certainty of their cause and their refusal to bow before foreign domination, much like Lāčplēsis, the indomitable 19th-century epic hero. From this angle, Dainis Īvāns's childhood dream of modelling himself after Lāčplēsis seems, in retrospect, remarkably well chosen. RE

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Lithuania's memory of communism

PAWEŁ PLICHTA

The opening of Grūtas Park, an open-air museum with statues from the Soviet era, in 2001 provoked considerable public debate, with leading politicians expressing both strong support and firm opposition. The arguments on both sides revealed a deeper societal divide over how to evaluate – and what to do with – the heritage of communism.

The Lithuanian memory of communism manifests itself in multiple forms and dimensions. It is also shaped by broader processes characteristic of contemporary societies in Central and Eastern Europe – societies that were crippled by the experience of two totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. Vilnius is saturated with sites that recall both a distant and a not-so-distant past. It is worth emphasizing that cultural memory – which often reaches back to early nation-building traditions – holds particular significance for Lithuanians. This is also true for other nations: those that lived under the Soviet Union's sphere of influence as well as those that, by historical necessity, co-constituted the Soviet state as its republics. In Vilnius, the layers of memory concentrate and refract, bringing together many centuries of Lithuanian history as if through a single, tightening lens.

Casting off Soviet domination

The memory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is inscribed in the city's central buildings and its very urban layout. Rising above the skyline is the Gediminas

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Tower (*Gedimino pilies bokštas*), crowned with the tricolour flag of the restored Lithuanian state. Inside, a multimedia exhibition recounts the unprecedented event known as the "Baltic Way", which took place on August 23rd 1989 – the 50th anniversary of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact – when over two million inhabitants of the three then-Soviet republics, today the independent states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, joined hands in an extraordinary act of defiance.

The remains of the Upper Castle can be traced to the magnificent beginnings of the city and Lithuanian statehood. Slightly below, the Lower Castle (*Lietuvos valdovų rūmai*), a reconstruction of the former seat of power, is an example of Lithuanians' reference to tradition in contrast to and beyond the period of communist oppression. The decision to rebuild the castle was made by the Lithuanian parliament in 2001. Its symbolic opening took place in 2009 – 1,000 years after the first mention of Lithuania in historiography.

This building, together with the Cathedral Basilica of St Stanislaus and St Ladislaus of Vilnius marks the centre of the city. Like other churches and religious buildings, the Vilnius Cathedral was brutally treated by the atheistic Soviet system, which fought against the free spirit of the nation in a senseless and destructive way. During the Soviet era, the cathedral was converted into a warehouse and later a gallery-museum, and the relics of St Casimir (1458–1484), the patron saint of Lithuania, were inaccessible to the faithful for several years and were only open to the public after Stalin's death in 1953.

The return of the relics of St Casimir from the Church of St Peter and St Paul in Antakalnis to the Baroque chapel of the cathedral named after him on March 4th 1989 was a symbolic and solemn act confirming Lithuania's pro-freedom stance against communist enslavement. The Vilnius Cathedral also preserves essential elements of Lithuania's memory of communism. The Chapel of the Exiles (*Tremtinių koplyčia*) commemorates all victims of the Soviet regime. Yet this collective remembrance gains a distinct human face in the Blessed Teofilius Matulionis (1873–1962), a Lithuanian prelate of the Roman Catholic Church who became a symbol of endurance under totalitarian rule. Consecrated as a bishop in secret, he spent most of his episcopal life imprisoned in Soviet labour camps. His death was likely the result of poisoning at the hands of Soviet officials. His portrait now hangs in the Chapel of the Relics of the Blessed Lithuanian Archbishops, established in 2018 in the cathedral's left aisle, binding the memory of Soviet persecution to the sacred space of Lithuania's Catholic Church.

The austere, almost sterile interior of the present basilica in Vilnius still evokes, for some foreign visitors, the atmosphere of its former life as a museum. Almost directly opposite the cathedral's main entrance stretches Gediminas Avenue (*Gedimino prospektas*). During the Soviet period, this prestigious thoroughfare was

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The former KGB building in Vilnius now hosts the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.

first renamed Stalin Avenue and, after 1956, Lenin Avenue. Its restoration in 1989 to the historic name formed part of the broader symbolic effort to cast off Soviet domination. An equally significant gesture came in 1991, when the Lenin monument on nearby Lukiškės Square – known during the Soviet era as Lenin Square – was dismantled, further reclaiming the urban landscape for an independent Lithuania.

The examples above illustrate how centuries-old cultural heritage intertwines with social responses to the experience of communism and with the ongoing work of collective memory. The multimedia, multisensory exhibition in the Gediminas Tower commemorates the tradition of peaceful resistance to an oppressive system. National symbols – imbued with new meanings in a former Soviet republic – now serve as visible markers of regained independence, standing in deliberate contrast to the communist past. The sacred sphere, scarred both in its human dimension and in its religious heritage, preserves and refines the memory of the era and its victims. Finally, one of the simplest yet most potent forms of de-commemoration in Lithuania, as elsewhere, has been the renaming of streets and the removal of monuments dedicated to communist perpetrators.

The microcosm of the memory of communism in Lithuania also seems to take three different forms of commemoration. First is the dark history of repression and

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resistance; second is focused on the urban space marked by socialist architecture; and third, there are the memories of everyday life of people whose youth coincided with the period of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Trauma

While elements of positive memory remain largely confined to individual stories of everyday life, family ties, and close relationships, many of which were subjected to tragic trials under the communist system, the central site of Lithuania's negative memory is the Museum of Genocide Victims, now known as the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights. The institution was founded in 1992 by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture on the initiative of the Association of Political Prisoners and Deportees, and since 1997 it has operated under the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre.

The museum, housed in the former headquarters of the Gestapo, NKVD and KGB opposite Lukiškės Square, is therefore widely known simply as the KGB Museum. Multimedia exhibitions document the methods, structures, and functioning of the communist terror apparatus in Lithuania. At the same time, they preserve the memory of concrete acts of resistance undertaken by the country's inhabitants – men and women from diverse social backgrounds and ethnic communities. In the basement section, the theoretical account of totalitarian repression acquires a tangible, visceral form, confronting visitors with the physical spaces where these methods were enacted.

The layout of the rooms once used to hold political prisoners and those destined for deportation to Siberia or for execution has been preserved. In several cells, fragments of prisoners' original inscriptions – names, dates, brief markings – have been uncovered beneath layers of paint. These etched signs form a desperate plea to endure, at least in the memory of those who, like today's visitors, will discover their existence and the ordeal they suffered: starvation, torture and death in basement cells whose small windows once opened onto the busy streets of Vilnius.

The guides' narration complements the exhibits by detailing the practices employed in the NKVD and KGB torture chambers. The experience reaches its emotional and moral climax in the descent to the execution room, where death sentences were carried out with a single shot to the head. A looping sequence from Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyń* (2007) intensifies this confrontation with the past, animating the information displayed on the museum boards and conveyed by the guides.

The trauma of Lithuania's communist era is preserved in memory through specific names and surnames: those of the victims whose birth and death dates are engraved

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on stone slabs outside the complex, which today houses not only the museum but also the Court of Appeal. Inside, photographs, lists of names, and curatorial notes accompanying the artefacts sustain the memory of individuals who perished through genocide, deportation, and other forms of violence. The exhibitions also present the suffering of entire social and ethnic groups – including children, members of the intelligentsia, Jews, Roma, and figures of the Catholic Church – ensuring that the collective dimension of the tragedy remains visible alongside the stories of its individual victims.

In the cell dedicated to the suffering of clergy, including bishops, a new element of remembrance is a lamp gifted by Pope Francis (1936–2025), accompanied by audio-visual materials documenting his visit on September 23rd 2018. Near the museum entrance stands the Monument to the Victims of Soviet Occupation, at which the pope offered a prayer.

In Vilnius, the main area of Sovietization was the Lukiškės district, dominated by Lenin Square.

The catalogue of Lithuanian memorial sites commemorating the crimes and oppression of communism, but also the struggle against an inhumane system, could be expanded. It is worth noting that the legacy of resistance and the memory of it has also gained a new dimension – for example, in the form of a diaspora scattered across various countries in the world.

Communist heritage

The legacy of the communist era, which is historically significant but not necessarily morally valuable, can be called "neutral memory". It can take the form of material remnants, including the urban layout of cities, transport networks, schools, hospitals and cultural centres.

In Vilnius, the main area of Sovietization was the Lukiškės district, dominated by Lenin Square – a space which, according to the 1953 urban plans, was intended to serve as a socialist *axis mundus* for the city's architectural transformation. Although these plans were never fully implemented, the area was nonetheless reshaped extensively in the spirit of socialist realism.

A defining natural feature of the district was Tauras Hill. In the course of creating a park on its slopes, the existing Muslim and Evangelical cemeteries were destroyed. In the decades that followed, further construction embedded the Soviet imprint on the landscape: in the 1960s the Trade Union Palace rose at the summit, followed in the 1970s by the Wedding Palace, designed by Gedyminas Baravykas (1940–1995).

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In recent years, the hill has been redeveloped to create the Lutheran Garden and adapted to the needs of a modern capital city. The surrounding transport network has likewise been modernized. After two decades of public debate, Lukiškės Square has also been revitalized. Now at its centre stands a tall mast bearing a 25-metre historical flag of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, adorned with the Pahonia emblem, which has flown there since 2013.

Another example of what might initially appear to be a case of Lithuanian neutral memory of the communist period is the Sports Palace in Vilnius. Constructed between 1965 and 1971 to a design by Eduardas Chlomauskas (1927–2004), the building was erected on the site of a former Jewish cemetery. Debates and disputes over its future – whether to preserve, repurpose, or demolish it – have persisted ever since. Closed in 2004 due to its deteriorating and unsafe condition, this striking example of European brutalism has become part of the dissonant heritage of independent Lithuania. The most recent plans abandon last year's proposal to transform the site into a memorial to the Jewish community, favouring instead the creation of a conference centre within the structure, which has now been officially added to the register of monuments.

Continuing with the interdisciplinary perspective on buildings "modernized" by the communist authorities, it is worth highlighting an example that has almost certainly become a lasting component of Lithuania's active memory of communism. This is the Baroque Church of Our Lady of Consolation and St Augustine, treated in a manner markedly different from the Vilnius Cathedral. After the Second World War, the church was used as an agricultural warehouse. Abandoning the initial intention to demolish the structure, the authorities divided its high nave with reinforced concrete floors and installed a goods lift. For safety reasons, these alterations now make it virtually impossible to restore the interior to its original form.

The blocks of flats and public buildings stand as silent witnesses to the era that produced them.

At the very top of the building, a small chapel now offers space for limited religious use. Near the entrance, the ground floor houses a unique social restaurant, Pirmas blynas, which employs people with disabilities. After the organizations co-managing the church complex and the adjacent former Augustinian monastery reached new agreements in 2020, the site opened more fully to social, cultural and educational initiatives, giving new life to a space profoundly shaped by its communist-era transformation.

A daily reminder of Lithuania's communist past can be found in the blocks of flats and public buildings, especially those constructed with yellow brick. They stand as silent witnesses to the era that produced them. Yet this status will likely diminish

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as renovation projects continue and the buildings are adapted to meet the evolving needs of current and future residents, as well as EU construction and environmental standards.

Communist nostalgia

In his essay on nostalgia for communism, *When They Catch White Cupids*, the prominent Lithuanian writer Marius Ivaškevičius wrote: "For a person raised under the Soviets, nothing is impossible. We grew up to be incredibly strong. I feel this especially when I look at the naïve faces of people from the West. The Gruto Park in Lithuania … is an example that illustrates the different opinions Lithuanians have about the recent past. The controversy surrounding Gruto Park shows how strong the fear of nostalgia for the Soviet era is."

Grūtas Park, an open-air museum dedicated to statues and artefacts from the Soviet era, has become emblematic of the nostalgic dimension of memory of the communist period. Created by Viliumas Malinauskas and opened to visitors on April 1st 2001, the park is located near the spa town of Druskininkai, within the boundaries of Dzūkija National Park. Its collection consists of nearly 90 Soviet-era sculptures dismantled across Lithuania at the turn of the 1990s. Alongside figures such as Lenin and Stalin, the park also displays monuments to Lithuanian communist activists and revolutionaries, including Vincas Mickevičius-Kapsukas (1880–1935) and Pranas Eidukevičius (1869–1926), as well as Soviet partisans like Marytė Melnikaitė (1923–1943).

The park also features a cattle car commemorating the deportation of Lithuanian residents to Soviet labour camps. A small museum evocative of the cult of Soviet leaders has been arranged in a wooden building modelled on the community centres of the 1940s and 1950s. The site's multisensory character is further enhanced by cafés offering Soviet-style food and by a distinctive playground with amusement-park elements. Its unusual combination of Soviet themes with a mini-zoo adds to the park's peculiarity.

The opening of Grūtas Park provoked considerable public debate, with leading politicians expressing both strong support and firm opposition. The arguments on both sides revealed a deeper societal divide over how to evaluate – and what to do with – the material heritage of communism.

In May 2016, a mural titled *Make Everything Great Again* appeared on the wall of the Keulė Rūkė restaurant, created by Dominykas Čečkauskas and Mindaugas Bonanu. The artwork portrayed Donald Trump – then a candidate for the US presidency, evoking his campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" – kiss-

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ing Vladimir Putin. The mural caused a sensation not only in Lithuania but also internationally. Its impact stemmed largely from its clear reference to the iconic photograph of Leonid Brezhnev kissing Erich Honecker on the lips. In 1990, the Russian painter Dmitri Vrubel famously transformed that greeting between the two communist leaders into graffiti on the Berlin Wall, accompanied by the caption "My God, help me survive this deadly love," rendered in both German and Russian.

The visual codes of the era of "brotherly friendship between socialist nations" were used to frame – and continue to inform – the debate about political relations between the leaders of the United States and Russia. Commentators repeatedly stressed the potential consequences that the actions of these "big players" might have for countries such as Lithuania. As the example above illustrates, the natural process of forgetting many details of the Soviet era is accompanied by the transformation and selective commemoration of others within popular culture, which tends to be fragmentary, selective and playful.

Ivaškevičius aptly observed, with reference to those born before 1990, that nostalgia "cannot be banned or eradicated, especially when it concerns the most important things, such as youth or love, childhood or ordinary life, when relationships between people were more intense, time passed more slowly and it was easier to unite." A short essay cannot hope to gather the full range of arguments and examples that confirm this insight. Positive memories of the past are dispersed across both the individual experiences of specific people and the countless personal recollections preserved within a wider community.

The intergenerational transmission of such individual and collective memories contributes to the formation of a post-memory of communism. In Marianne Hirsch's terms, post-memory arises primarily from the legacy of trauma. In this context, generational trauma derives from an oppressive and criminal system that penetrated every sphere of life. The ways in which this difficult legacy is transformed, reinterpreted, and negotiated across different layers of social and cultural life are therefore particularly worth observing – and studying – in a society such as Lithuania. EE

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Russia's religion of victory

BARTŁOMIEJ BRĄŻKIEWICZ

In Russia, the May 9th Victory Day celebration has become a disciplinary date. It enforces participation in the cult and delineates the boundaries of loyalty to the state. Outside, the myth of Soviet victory of fascism has become one of the central instruments of Russian foreign policy.

Collective memory should never be seen as a neutral reservoir of memories. Rather, it is a construct which is constantly shaped by choices, interpretations and reinterpretations of history. Forgetting, in this sense, is not simply a flaw in the mechanism of memory but an essential feature of it. By discarding what is deemed excess, forgetting allows for the emergence of patterns and generalizations that give meaning to a community's shared experience. In shaping historical memory, forgetting is often the rule, while remembering becomes the exception. This basic anthropological and psychological trait of human cognition has, in turn, long been subject to political manipulation. As a result, those who are in power continually seek to influence not only what is remembered, but also how it is remembered.

In this process, the manipulation of facts is one of the tools. On the one hand, it involves spreading falsehoods and offering interpretations that distort the narrative. On the other, it means deliberate concealment – erasing inconvenient episodes from collective memory. While such mechanisms can be found, to varying degrees, in democratic systems, they are especially characteristic of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, where a monopoly over historical memory often translates into a monopoly over truth itself.

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Re-commemoration

Understanding the history of the celebrations of the May 9th Victory Day in Russia requires taking into account the broader context of the creation of the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War. This myth followed the logic of a collective memory, whose strength depends not only on what is remembered and commemorated but also, paradoxically, on what is forgotten. In this sense, commemoration and forgetting become inseparable: each new ritual of remembrance comes at the expense of silencing other stories. In the Soviet Union, this process was especially intense. The selection and reinterpretation of the past became a fully institutionalized practice, shaping not only public memory but also the very framework of political legitimacy.

Consequently, the global discourse of the victorious powers, which framed the 1939–1945 period as a struggle between good and evil, was recast into a myth of the heroic clash between the Soviet people and fascism. In this narrative, the Soviet victory over the Third Reich did not only erase the moral dilemmas related to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact or the crimes committed by the Red Army, but also became the very foundation of the Soviet system's legitimacy. For the Kremlin it turned into political capital, which brought it profits both at home and abroad. Thus, the official propaganda portrayed the USSR as the defender of humanity – a message that helped the Soviet authorities both secure social loyalty within the union and reinforce the country's international standing.

The Great Patriotic War ceased to be a story of historical events and became a political construct.

In the months following the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich, Soviet propagandists moved quickly to construct a coherent and politically useful narrative of the war. They narrowed the conflict to the 1941–45 period, meaning the war was declared to have started with the German invasion of the USSR. The earlier events that took place during this war, including the 1939 invasion of Poland, the 1939–1940 Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union, and the annexation of the Baltic states in 1940, were removed from the official narrative. In this way, what was inconvenient was cleaned out and replaced with a new heroic foundation for collective memory.

As a result, the Great Patriotic War ceased to be just a story of historical events. It turned into a political construct in which victory over fascism became the primary source of legitimacy for the Soviet power. Presented as the result of the heroism of the nation and Joseph Stalin's brilliant leadership, this victory served a dual purpose. Internally, it cemented the community around the myth of suffering and

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triumph, which allowed the regime to present itself as the natural heir and guarantor of national heroism. Externally, it placed the Soviet Union in the role of a liberator, which provided the Kremlin with a moral foundation for its ideological expansion into Central and Eastern Europe.

The glorification of Stalin's role, the downplaying of allied material aid, the omission of Soviet crimes, and the consistent suppression of facts that clashed with the triumphalist narrative – this was a classic case of re-commemoration. In other words, the earlier experiences and interpretations were replaced with a new, centralized myth that set up the framework of collective memory across the Soviet empire.

De-commemoration

The history of May 9th celebrations in the Soviet Union illustrates how collective memory was shaped by alternating processes of de-commemoration and re-commemoration. The 1947 decision to strip the day of its status as a public holiday signalled its deliberate marginalization in the state calendar. Under Stalin, the memory of this victory was subordinated to the cult of the leader and overshadowed by the central ritual of November 7th – the anniversary of the October Revolution – which became the main stage for displaying the regime's military and ideological power.

Yet May 9th never fully disappeared from the public sphere. In newspapers, on the radio, and through local veterans' initiatives, the holiday persisted as a fragment of memory – though it was stripped of grandeur and largely confined to the private realm. This "official silence" was thus a form of de-commemoration, as the Soviet state deliberately curtailed the commemoration of the victory in order to prevent any rivalry between the myths of the revolution and the war.

The turning point came in 1965, when the Soviet leadership, under Leonid Brezhnev, reinstated May 9th as a public holiday to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Red Army's victory and stage a ceremonial parade at Red Square in Moscow. This act of remembrance elevated the day to the core state ritual and transformed the myth of the Great Patriotic War into a central pillar of late Soviet patriotism.

In the following two decades, May 9th, though no longer celebrated with the same grandeur, remained a cyclical moment of remembrance. The 40th anniversary in 1985 held particular significance: an enormous parade, the participation of veterans, and an extensive media campaign marked the culmination of the Soviet narrative of triumph. State rituals reinforced the official image of victory as a cornerstone of Soviet identity, while at the social level, the day became an occasion for

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intimate family and local remembrance. This fusion of personal experience and collective ritual gave the holiday remarkable resilience – one that outlasted the collapse of the USSR and allowed for its later revival under new political circumstances.

Adapting to new realities

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered a profound reshaping of state symbols and rituals. The newly established Russian Federation found itself in an identity vacuum: the old pillars of collective memory had lost their unifying force. November 7th – once the key national holiday commemorating the October Revolution – was discarded, yet no new celebration emerged to replace it as a source of cohesion. The result was a period of symbolic disorientation, during which the state calendar underwent a series of chaotic transformations.

Throughout the 1990s, several attempts were made to establish new commemorative dates with nation-building potential, yet their public reception remained limited. Russia Day, celebrated on June 12th and introduced in 1992, long remained a "dead date". It was formally recognized but lacked genuine social resonance. A similar fate befell February 23rd, which had been formerly the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy and which in 1992 was renamed Defender of the Fatherland Day. While it preserved its military character, it failed to evolve into a celebration that could mobilize broader national sentiment, becoming instead an unofficial "men's day". Russia still lacked a holiday capable of serving as a truly unifying ritual – one that could transcend political and social divisions to become a celebration for all citizens.

In this context, May 9th gradually began to reclaim its former significance, even though in the early 1990s the commemorations were far more modest than they are today. The events were largely limited to the laying of flowers, veterans' gatherings, and televised ceremonial concerts. The authorities, preoccupied with the political and economic transformation of the country, devoted few resources to developing a broader politics of memory. Yet it was during this period that May 9th started to re-emerge as an important point of reference for a society searching for stable symbols of identity.

A symbolic turning point came in the mid-1990s with the 50th anniversary of the victory in 1995. The commemorations now took on an international dimension, featuring foreign guests and a wide-reaching media campaign. It was the first deliberate attempt to transform May 9th into an event that was not merely commemorative, but also instrumental in reinforcing the national identity of the newly independent state.

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Vladimir Putin's speech during the military parade commemorating the 80th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War on May 9th 2025.

By the late 1990s, the commemoration of May 9th was gathering momentum. Increasingly, it was accompanied by elements of state-sponsored spectacle: fireworks, concerts at Red Square, and the participation of top officials surrounded by veterans. It was not yet the full sacralization of the holiday, but May 9th was gradually evolving into a vehicle of collective memory – one capable of adapting to new realities.

An ideological synthesis

Vladimir Putin's rise to power at the turn of the 21st century marked a decisive reorientation of Russia's politics of memory, transforming the May 9th holiday into a quasi-religious ritual. The most striking manifestation of this shift was the revival of large-scale military parades featuring heavy weaponry at the heart of the celebrations. In 2008, on the 63rd anniversary of victory, tanks, armoured personnel carriers and rocket launchers once again rolled through the streets of Moscow, as Red Square was restored to its role as a stage for the state's military spectacle. From that moment on, the parade began to serve a dual purpose: it commemorated the triumph over Nazism and showcased the modern power and defensive might of the Russian Federation.

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At the same time, the grassroots initiative known as the "Immortal Regiment" emerged. It originated in Tomsk in 2012 and was fully appropriated by the central authorities in 2015. Initially, the movement had a distinctly social character: families of veterans and war victims carried portraits of their loved ones in memorial marches. Soon, however, it was transformed into a state-sponsored ritual that complemented the military parade with both an intimate and mass dimension. The "Immortal Regiment" came to embody the sacralization of memory – the sacrifice of individuals absorbed into a narrative of the nation's eternal victory, in which every family is invited to take part in the state's civic cult.

Symbolism also played a crucial role in the transformation of May 9th. Since the 2000s, the black-and-orange St George's ribbon (*georgiyevskaya lentochka*) originally associated with the decorations of the Russian Empire, most notably the Order of St George – has gained wide popularity. Worn on jacket lapels, cars and backpacks, it has become a visible marker of allegiance to the state's official narrative. Paradoxically, a symbol born in a monarchical context and later associated with the White movement during the civil war was reimagined under Putin as an emblem of reconstructed memory – one that fuses imperial, Soviet and contemporary elements into a single ideological synthesis.

On the narrative level, May 9th increasingly came to function as a sacred founding myth. In official discourse, the Soviet Union's "holy war" was transformed into a "holy victory", and the memory of that triumph became the cornerstone of Russians' identity as a historical community. Through the repetition of rituals, symbolic gestures and relentless media glorification, May 9th evolved into a state ceremony that now serves a function akin to that of a religious feast day.

From anniversary to dogma

Today, the "religion of victory" functions as a substitute for state ideology. In this sense, it represents a textbook example of the instrumentalization of memory: the past is not so much a subject of reflection, but rather a reservoir of useful content that can be activated whenever there is demand.

Domestically, the annual rituals serve to remind citizens that they are the descendants of a victorious nation, while any challenge to this narrative is cast as an act of betrayal. In practice, May 9th has become a disciplinary date. It enforces participation in the cult of victory and simultaneously delineates the boundaries of loyalty to the state.

Outside, the myth of victory has become one of the central instruments of Russian foreign policy. A key mechanism here is the so-called *argumentum ad Nazium*,

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meaning the invocation of Nazism as an absolute evil that must be confronted by all possible means. In practice, this has translated into the stigmatization of political opponents – both states and entire societies – by accusing them of "fascism" or "Nazism". Such rhetoric has been directed, for instance, at Poland and the Baltic states, which are accused of falsifying history and "betraying memory" by removing monuments to the Red Army. In the Russian narrative, these acts are framed as manifestations of "Nazi revanchism".

The conflict over monuments exposes yet another dimension of the "religion of victory". It is a tool of symbolic domination over the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. While in Poland, the Baltic states and the Czech Republic the presence of the Red Army is interpreted as the beginning of a new occupation, Moscow continues to obstinately define it as "liberation".

Ukraine also occupies a special place in this arrangement, whose authorities – since the Orange Revolution and later the Revolution of Dignity – have been systematically referred to as "fascists" and "heirs of wartime collaborators". The war in Donbas and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have also been presented as a continuation of the "holy war" against Nazism. In this way, the rhetoric of May 9th has been transformed into a geopolitical weapon, justifying Russian claims and aggressive actions.

An important component of Russia's politics of memory is the management of the past through selective silence and revisionism – exemplified by ongoing attempts to deny or relativize the Soviet Union's responsibility for the Katyń massacre, in which over 20,000 Polish officers and members of the intelligentsia were executed by the NKVD in 1940. This practice forms part of a broader process of reconstructing historical memory, in which the myth of the 1945 victory remains the only uncontested point of reference.

All in all, May 9th has evolved from an anniversary into a dogma. It is a holiday whose meaning has been sacralized and closed to reinterpretation. From the perspective of research on the memory of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, it offers one of the most striking examples of how an event of undeniable historical significance can be transformed into a myth. Over time, this myth becomes detached from historical facts and begins to function as an instrument of power, perfectly embodying the triad of de-commemoration, re-commemoration and forgetting. RE

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Poland's borderland on fire

JAN FARFAL

Russian hybrid attacks are meant to increasingly disrupt our everyday reality. When positioned together, these incidents form a troubling pattern: disinformation campaigns, foreign intelligence groups, acts of sabotage, explosives discovered in cemeteries or mailed in envelopes – all contributing to a general state of anxiety and heightened alert. Strengthening preparedness to meet security challenges is one of the most reliable ways to mitigate such concerns.

In less than 48 hours, the Polish frontier became subjected to an unprecedented drone attack and a complete border closure with Belarus. These two critical moments were not isolated events. They were a continuation of a hybrid conflict that has been ongoing since August 2021, when Minsk first began orchestrating illegal border crossings. These acts form a broader pattern that reflects the evolving nature of confrontation – the weaponization of everything from migration and trade to technology, all meant to increasingly disrupt the Polish reality and to set our borderland on fire.

"Neither war nor peace," Leon Trotsky famously remarked. Nearly 100 years later, this quip is more relevant than ever. Just recently, the German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, stated "we are not at war, but we are no longer at peace either." The ongoing confrontation with Russia necessitates a new rationale of action. We need to come up with new ways of reacting to Russian provocations, rethink our escalation ladder, ensure continuous European support, mitigate the economic fallout of hybrid attacks, and search for new means to enhance our deterrence potential.

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And we must do all of the above (and much more!) to make the aggressor aware that each new security challenge will become costlier and counterproductive. Insufficient determination invites further provocations and there is little hope in searching for other means when confronting a belligerent who recognizes only the law of force.

Shutting the border

On September 10th at 3:48 in the morning, the Operational Command of the Polish Armed Forces issued a communiqué, warning that Polish airspace had been repeatedly violated by drone-type objects. It stated that "An operation is underway aimed at identifying and neutralizing the objects." Polish and allied aircraft reached the highest state of readiness and were deployed for action. Citizens were warned to stay at home while the military operation was ongoing. According to reports at the time, "The most threatened areas are the Podlaskie, Mazowieckie, and Lubelskie voivodeships."

On September 10th the Armed Forces stated that Polish airspace had been violated by drone-type objects.

The army dispatch reflected the first instance of NATO shooting down enemy drones over its territory. This Russian attack marked an unprecedented escalation in a long series of Kremlin-led tests of NATO's resolve. Yet, several hours before the Russian drones violated Polish airspace, another critical milestone took place. Citing security concerns over the joint Belarusian-Russian Zapad-25 military exercises, the Polish government announced the temporary closure of its border with Belarus. Justifying this decision, Poland's prime minister, Donald Tusk, emphasized that "We are also dealing with a growing number of various provocations from Russia and Belarus."

In light of the Russian drone attack, the decision to proceed with the border closure assumed a new sense of urgency. It has been one of the most retaliatory measures that the Polish government has introduced thus far. The border was shut down on September 12th.

Poland also placed a break on one of the logistical choke points for trade between China and the European Union. Although it accounts for only 3.7 per cent of the entire trade volume, it still amounts to 25 billion euros worth of goods and remains an important railway path to Chengdu. The consequences were immediate and far-reaching: Belarus was stripped of transit revenues and Russian freight was blocked as far back as Kazakhstan.

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The harsh reactions of Russia and Belarus only testified to this reality. The Belarusian foreign minister presented the decision as an instance of Polish imperial ambitions, while the Belarusian dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed that "Poland is acting like a show horse for the benefit of other countries." At the same time, Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman for the Russian foreign ministry, warned Poland by stating that "We urge Warsaw to bear in mind the consequences of taking such destructive steps and to reconsider its decision as soon as possible."

Politically, the closure signalled Warsaw's willingness to use geography as leverage against both Minsk and Moscow, with Beijing watching closely. However, once the blow was done, it reduced the room for manoeuvring. Warsaw showed that it can introduce painful retaliatory measures, but the question remained how to move forward? The border closure outlived the Zapad-25 war games and continued on the ambiguous claim that movement will be resumed once "we are sure that the safety of Poles is guaranteed and that we are not threatened by any provocations," signifying that Warsaw wanted to gain the upper hand through calculated ambiguity.

Radosław Sikorski declared that Poland would shoot down any flying object violating its airspace.

It might have seemed that the longer the border remained closed, the fewer the benefits for Warsaw. Mounting complaints from Polish transport companies who were recording losses, a lack of coordination with the Baltic partners who kept their crossings open, and potential pressures from our western partners to reopen, all led to an increasing price tag with every single day. Furthermore, with the prolonged closure of the border, there was a risk that alternative trade routes via Turkey and Southern Europe would be increasingly contemplated by economic actors. This left Warsaw with a classic dilemma: how to reverse the closure without seeming weak? The answer came on September 22nd.

You have been warned

Ten days after the drone attack in Poland, three MiG-31 fighters violated Estonian airspace for 12 minutes. This incursion triggered NATO's Article 4 consultations, already the second time that month. Estonia also requested an emergency session of the UN Security Council. During that session, Radosław Sikorski declared that Poland would shoot down any flying object violating its airspace: "If another missile or aircraft enters our space without permission, deliberately or by mistake, and gets shot down and the wreckage falls on NATO territory, please don't come here to whine about it. You have been warned."

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Photo courtesy of the European Commission

Antonio Costa, European Council President and Kaja Kallas, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy attend a side discussion during the European Political Community Summit at in Copenhagen. The summit in early October revealed that achieving political consensus on the financing European defence can be just as challenging as addressing practical constraints.

A day later Tusk declared Poland would reopen its border crossing with Belarus. Taken together, these statements reflected a dual posture – a blend of conciliatory actions and credible threats. In other words, they signified de-escalation coupled with a readiness for escalation. Sikorski's message was delivered with deliberate bluntness and was soon followed by Berlin's rebuff. The German defence minister, Boris Pistorius, would stress caution concerning the escalation trap and "frivolous demands to bring something down from the sky". However, within just two weeks prior to Sikorski's statement, Russia had violated Polish, Romanian and Estonian airspace. From the eastern shores of the Baltic to the fringes of the Black Sea, the Kremlin continued testing NATO's resolve week after week.

To emphasize that these were not only violations of national borders but also of NATO and the EU's frontiers may sound obvious, yet it remains essential. It reinforces the urgency of a collective stance and challenges the risk of isolation. After all, the logic behind Russian attacks rests on the premise that NATO's Article 5 is not set in stone. By probing different countries, it aims to expose a lack of unity, sow ambivalence, and single out individual states – so that, one by one, they are in-

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creasingly destabilized and ultimately coerced into the Russian orbit. The Kremlin ultimately hopes to convince itself into believing that western resolve is insufficient.

The initial American response could be described as lukewarm at best. European partners fared far better, with rapid commitments made by the Dutch, French, Swedes and Czechs, among others. Several hours after the Russian attack, Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, declared the creation of a drone wall in which "Europe will defend every inch of its territory." The drone wall is expected to become a multi-layered defence system capable of neutralizing drones and using them for precision strikes against ground targets. Together with the EU-supported East Shield – a robust defensive infrastructure system – these initiatives form major commitments that significantly enhance Polish security. Mission accomplished? Far from it.

Mounting challenges

European support neither absolves us from our own responsibilities nor satisfies all of our security needs. While promising in principle, the drone wall remains problematic in practice. The pace of innovation is overwhelming, yet the speed of EU joint procurement remains inversely proportional. What is more, military procurements are usually calculated years in advance while also needing to account for diverse strategic cultures and requirements.

To make matters worse, the EU Copenhagen summit in early October revealed that achieving political consensus on the drone wall and its financing can be just as challenging as addressing practical constraints. Poland should seek international support as much as possible. But as Tusk acknowledged at the Warsaw Security Forum, this must be done while saying "if you know how to count, rely on yourself."

During the drone attack, four airports suspended their activities: Warsaw, Modlin, Lublin and Rzeszów.

Russian hybrid attacks are meant to increasingly disrupt our everyday reality. So far, this might seem like a far-fetched scenario. However, if positioned together, these incidents form a troubling pattern: disinformation campaigns, foreign intelligence groups, acts of sabotage, explosives discovered in cemeteries or mailed in envelopes – all contributing to a general state of anxiety and heightened alert.

During the Russian drone attack, four airports had to suspend their activities: Warsaw, Modlin, Lublin and Rzeszów. Three days later, Lublin Airport had to suspend its activities again. Meanwhile, Poland's border with Belarus was closed. For

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business leaders, the signal was clear – Europe's eastern frontier has become a volatile chokepoint where geopolitics directly shapes supply chains. While accounting for the significance of Russian provocations, one should also account for the negative economic side-effects. So far the markets have not reacted in panic, but the question of conducting business in an increasingly volatile environment – with the borderland on fire – will not disappear. If hybrid attacks become more frequent, eventually, this could affect foreign investments in Poland. Likewise, it would make Polish entrepreneurs question the security of their operations in the country. One can only think about the growing popularity of Alicante… not because of nicer weather, but as a contingency in case "something happens".

Making an aggressor understand that hostile acts carry real costs is the essence of deterrence.

Strengthening preparedness to meet security challenges is one of the most reliable ways to mitigate such concerns – for local and foreign business alike. The ongoing modernization of the Polish armed forces, large-scale procurement, and civil-defence training come as encouraging signs. Increased military preparedness reduces anxiety and raises our deterrence potential. However, deterrence should not be limited to the ability of meeting future provocations alone. Above all else, it is meant to reduce the likelihood that those provocations will occur. Making an aggressor understand that hostile acts will carry real costs is the essence of deterrence by punishment. We could give Kremlin a taste of its own medicine without resolving to military means.

Open questions

The recent closure of the border shows that we can strike hard and inflict considerable pain, yet border closures cannot act as revolving doors. Instead, we should reflect on expanding our escalation ladder and determine if disinformation campaigns, disruption of trade in Kaliningrad, and cyber operations would serve our cause. Likewise, there is an open question about resorting to offensive information operations and whether it would be as disruptive for the Kremlin as beneficial for our home society – debunking the myth of an invincible Russia and terminating a widespread sentiment that we are helpless in face of Russian provocations, which would always corner us on the defensive. Answering those questions remains critical as new provocations are on their way.

Signed on September 29th, another Russian conscription wave is mounting and is expected to draft another 135,000 people by the end of the year. Meanwhile,

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Dmitry Medvedev has already described the draft 2026 budget as a wartime budget. This is supported by the Russian foreign intelligence service having "warned" that the regime in Kyiv is planning new provocations, which aim to drag NATO countries into a military confrontation with Moscow: "Another provocation is on its way. This time, the plot revolves around a sabotage and reconnaissance group (DRG) deployed to Polish territory, allegedly consisting of Russian and Belarusian special forces personnel. Candidates for participation in the staging have been already selected."

The Kremlin hardly falls short of demonstrating its "unlimited benevolence" in sharing such sensitive data. However, rather than following this advice, Poland will continue its advocacy for donating Russia's frozen assets to Ukraine and decide how to meet security challenges on its own terms. We will not make mistakes when it comes to who is an aggressor and who wants to set our borderland on fire. EE

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Establishing NATO's "East Shield"

ALICJA ZYGUŁA, TOMASZ STĘPNIEWSKI

The situation on the Polish eastern border has demonstrated that threats to Poland and the European Union are no longer purely military. Hybrid warfare directed westwards is made up of a composite of orchestrated migration, cyberattacks, disinformation and acts of border sabotage. This complex threat landscape demands an equally sophisticated and multidimensional response.

The contemporary international security environment is marked by profound fluidity and unpredictability. The traditional paradigm of security, with its clear distinction between war and peace, is eroding in the face of complex, multidimensional hybrid threats. Poland finds itself at the epicentre of these transformations, largely due to its geostrategic location on the Eastern Flank of both NATO and the European Union. The situation on Poland's border with Belarus, artificially engineered by the regimes in Minsk and Moscow, together with the full-scale war in Ukraine, constitutes a direct challenge to the state's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In this context, the national deterrence and defence programme known as the "East Shield" (in Polish *Tarcza Wschód*), announced by the government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk in May 2024, emerges as a comprehensive and strategic response. In this essay, we analyse the East Shield programme as a crucial mechanism for strengthening the military security and resilience of Poland and, by extension, the entire Eastern Flank of the Alliance. The central research problem is to define the role and tasks of East Shield in countering contemporary hybrid and conven-

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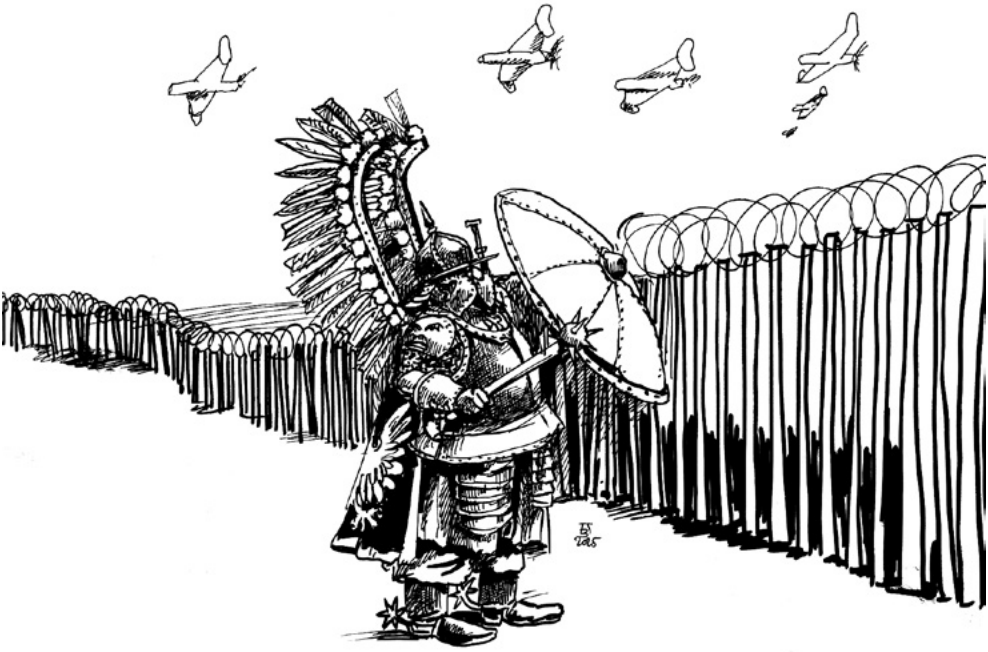

tional threats. The thesis here is that the East Shield represents a qualitatively new, multi-domain, and interagency approach to border security, integrating military deterrence with civilian resilience to address the full spectrum of hybrid warfare.

Context of Poland's eastern border

Poland's accession to the European Union and NATO fundamentally redefined its security environment. The country's eastern border simultaneously became the external frontier of these Euro-Atlantic structures, elevating its strategic significance as well as its vulnerability. In recent years, this border has evolved from a zone of cooperation into an arena of persistent crisis and hybrid confrontation.

The origins of the current situation date to 2021, with the onset of the artificially engineered migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. This crisis was a deliberate strategy orchestrated by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime with the tacit approval of Vladimir Putin. The objective was not merely to facilitate irregular migration to Europe, but to generate pressure designed to sow chaos within Polish society, destabilize the country's political landscape, and test the resilience of EU border governance. This tactic bears all the hallmarks of hybrid warfare –

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operating below the threshold of conventional military conflict. The cynical use of migrants as instruments of political coercion, accompanied by disinformation portraying Poland and the EU as aggressors, exemplifies the "grey zone" tactics employed by adversarial states.

The statistics are telling. The Podlasie Border Guard Unit recorded an alarming rise in illegal crossing attempts – from 246 in 2020 to 2,877 in 2021. These attempts evolved from isolated incidents to coordinated, often violent efforts by groups of 60 to 80 people, all acting under the supervision and with the active assistance of the Belarusian security services. The introduction of a state of emergency in the border regions and the subsequent construction of a physical and electronic barrier reduced the number of successful breaches but they did not eliminate the threat. Acts of vandalism, assaults on Polish patrols, and the tragic killing of a Polish soldier in May 2024 underscore the persistent and aggressive nature of this hybrid campaign.

This ongoing crisis, set against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has produced a "perfect storm" of security challenges for Poland. It demonstrates that threats to the state are no longer purely military but are a composite of orchestrated migration, cyberattacks, disinformation, and acts of border sabotage. This complex threat landscape demands an equally sophisticated and multidimensional response.

Objectives of the East Shield

Announced as the largest initiative to fortify Poland's eastern border since 1945, the East Shield programme is conceived not as a mere infrastructure project but as a comprehensive defence operation. Its overarching goal is to protect Poland by deterring aggression, impeding the mobility of adversary forces, facilitating the movement of Polish troops, and safeguarding the civilian population.

We need to understand that modern border security requires a whole-of-government approach.

The programme's structure is inherently interdepartmental, involving close coordination between the ministry of defence, the ministry of the interior and administration, the ministry of state assets, and the ministry of infrastructure. This reflects an understanding that modern border security requires a whole-of-government approach. Although designed to complement the ongoing modernization of the physical border barrier, the East Shield's military character distinguishes it as a separate yet "synergistic" endeavour.

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Spanning approximately 700 kilometres of Poland's eastern border, the East Shield is made up of several key components:

- Enhanced detection and monitoring: the deployment of advanced electronic surveillance systems, thermal imaging, and sensors to establish a dense network of reconnaissance and early warning capabilities;
- Fortification of the border zone: the construction of anti-tank barriers, fortified positions, and civilian shelters to create a layered defence system;
- Development of military infrastructure: the establishment of forward operating bases, logistics hubs, and secure communication infrastructure, including communication towers;
- Counter-drone capabilities: the implementation of systems and facilities to detect and neutralize the growing threat of unmanned aerial vehicles.

A central strategic element of the East Shield is its regional dimension. The Polish government has emphasized cooperation with NATO and EU partners, particularly the Baltic states. This aligns with NATO's broader strategy of reinforcing the Eastern Flank and transforms the East Shield from a national undertaking into a cornerstone of regional defence architecture. By presenting the programme at the NATO level as a "transformative security initiative", Poland positions itself as a proactive security provider within the Alliance.

The role of resilience

At its core, the East Shield represents a direct investment in national military security. The programme strengthens Poland's territorial integrity and sovereignty by establishing a defence-in-depth system that would delay and wear down an aggressor, providing critical time for national mobilization and NATO reinforcement. At the same time, the East Shield contributes significantly to societal resilience – a concept central to Poland's National Security Strategy. Resilience refers to the ability of the state and society to withstand, adapt to, and recover from crises and shocks.

The programme fosters resilience in several ways. First and foremost is the protection of civilians. This includes establishing civilian shelters to safeguard populations, a lesson underscored by the ongoing war in Ukraine. The second issue is securing critical movement. By ensuring the mobility of Polish troops and securing communication nodes, the programme bolsters continuity of government and command during crises. Finally, the focus is also on deterrence through presence – a fortified, actively defended border conveys a strong deterrent signal, demonstrating that the costs of aggression would be prohibitively high.

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The Polish government's parallel initiative to introduce a new civil protection and civil defence act is a logical and necessary complement to the East Shield. As Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, Poland's defence minister, emphasized, building a "resilient society" equipped with basic first aid and civil defence knowledge is essential. The East Shield provides the "hard" military backbone, while civil defence legislation strengthens the "soft" societal dimension – together forming a coherent national defence ecosystem.

Paradigm shift

The East Shield programme marks a paradigm shift in Poland's approach to border and national security. It transcends a reactive, single-domain model in favour of a proactive, multidimensional strategy attuned to the complexities of hybrid warfare. By combining advanced military engineering, electronic surveillance, and critical infrastructure with regional cooperation and societal preparedness, East Shield addresses both conventional and "grey zone" threats emanating from Belarus and Russia.

Its implications extend beyond Poland's borders. The East Shield constitutes a tangible contribution to NATO's collective defence on the Eastern Flank. In an era when hybrid threats blur the thresholds of conflict and complicate the invocation of NATO's Article 5, national initiatives of this nature are indispensable for sustaining the Alliance's deterrence posture. They illustrate a member state's commitment to self-defence, thereby reinforcing the credibility of NATO as a whole.

Although the full implementation of the multi-year plan (2024–28) will face logistical, financial and political challenges, its strategic logic remains compelling. The East Shield is not merely a border barrier – it is a sophisticated, integrated shield designed to protect Polish sovereignty, enhance regional stability, and serve as a bulwark of Euro-Atlantic security in an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment. EE

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When grief becomes routine

POLINA VERNYHOR

After the start of the full-scale invasion, I began recording the first stories of those affected by the war. Every conversation struck me. The pain of others, which I had to let pass through me, was so exhausting that I still do not remember what happened to me in those months. Over the course of three years, I wrote down more than 200 stories. I remember each of them. They are a huge part of my consciousness.

"Why was a day of mourning declared throughout Ukraine for those killed in Kryvyi Rih? After all, there are no days of mourning for those killed in Kharkiv, Kupyansk, Kramatorsk," said a girl with beautiful black hair, sipping tea in the kitchen of her Kyiv apartment. We were meeting for the first time. My former partner Vanya, who had been mobilized six months earlier, got away to Kyiv for a few days and decided to gather friends for a Sunday lunch.

The day before, on April 4th, Russia struck a residential area in Kryvyi Rih, killing 19 people, nine of whom were children. This is a terrible case that once again cuts the ground out from under the feet of many Ukrainians – those who have not yet completely exhausted their reserves of empathy. To me, the very concept of a "day of mourning" looks like something from pre-war life, when people died from a gas explosion in a residential building or a major road accident. Now it seems that all of life has turned into a continuous day of mourning, in which the boundaries of each individual tragedy, each lost life, destroyed home, or broken psyche have long been blurred and smeared.

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There are dead

According to data from the United Nations, as of early 2025, more than 12,000 civilians have officially died in Ukraine. This is a very approximate figure and, probably, the number of Ukrainians killed by Russia is much higher, since international monitoring missions do not have access to the occupied territories (for example, Mariupol, where, according to rough estimates, about 25,000 citizens died). It is therefore not possible to confirm each individual death there.

These figures may not seem too terrible, because the brain processes the number without visualizing it. However, 12,000 dead is, for example, about 45 nine-storey buildings exploding due to a gas leak and burning to the ground with all their residents. Twelve thousand dead is about 30 Boeing passenger planes that suddenly crashed, in which no one survived. Twelve thousand dead is the population of a small town that disappeared from the map in one day. After all, 12,000 dead is four times the number of deaths in the Al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11th 2001, which is still considered one of the most brutal terrorist attacks in history.

"We have another attack. It seems someone died. But today it's not us," I can hear from my mother.

"We have another attack. It seems someone died. But today it's not us, so we are fine." This is how conversations with my mother, who lives in Zaporizhzhia, a couple dozen kilometres from the contact line, often begin. Someone died. Today it's not us. We are fine.

The brain refuses to accept what this conversation is really about. "There are dead" is a typical postscript to reports of airstrikes in civilian areas. How many dead do you have to see to feel pain?

Conveyor of grief

After the start of the full-scale invasion, I began recording the first stories of those affected by the war. Later, I went to Zaporizhzhia to meet evacuees from occupied Tokmak, Vasylivka, Melitopol, Berdyansk, and then Mariupol. Every conversation struck me. The pain of others, which I had to let pass through me, was so exhausting that I still do not remember what happened to me in those months, except for work.

One of the first, most difficult stories was recorded in March 2022. I spoke via video link with a woman who was evacuating from Kyiv to the Chernihiv region

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in the first days of Russia's invasion. The family decided that it would be safer for them, but on the highway, the Russians shot their car, which was packed to the brim with civilians.

"I was sitting on my mother's lap. All that was left of my mother was her knees." I remember this quote from the woman verbatim.

Then the first civilians began to leave Mariupol. I collected their testimonies like a conveyor belt: a young boy who lost his leg and survived; a fire in the hospital he was taken to under bombardment; an ambulance doctor who saved a wounded child whose heart was visible through a hole in his chest; a woman whose 17-year-old son was bleeding from shrapnel; dozens of people who personally buried their relatives and neighbours in the yards near the destroyed buildings.

A deep sense of empathy makes a journalist a good war correspondent, but it is very exhausting.

A year after the occupation of Mariupol, I was collecting stories of witnesses to the terrorist attack in the drama theatre, nearly 50 recorded conversations about every detail of life and death in one of the largest shelters in the city. Against the background of what I heard, Russian news about the remains of bodies rolled into concrete and a concert near the ruins of the building for May 9th caused me real nausea and a sharp pain in my head.

The theatre began to appear in my dreams. In them, I walked through the ruins, saw blood stains, smelled the burning and old plaster, took photos of the rooms where people had lived, and then two explosions rang out – the same two air bombs that the Russians dropped on March 16th 2022.

At journalism school, they teach you not to let the stories of your subjects pass through you. They say this is a kind of professional deformation, like that of doctors who empathize with their patients' pain. But what is written in books does not work in practice. In parallel with trips to the front, I was once asked to write a column about how to preserve my psyche while working with the topic of war. I sat down in front of my laptop, opened the editor, and realized that I had nothing to say. All the advice and life hacks about "not taking it to heart", "discussing experiences with friends" and "resting more" did not work. Over the course of three years, I wrote down more than 200 stories. I remember each of them. They are a huge part of my consciousness. How can I not take it to heart?

A deep sense of empathy makes a journalist a good war correspondent, but it is very exhausting. However, everything has a limit – the nervous system too. Oversaturation with grief causes emotional numbness. Then, in my head, stories begin to be ranked as "horror" – when someone died; "average horror" – when the person has, for example, amputations; and "not very interesting" – losing a home,

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evacuation, etc. Such callousness begins to cause self-loathing. But this is how grief feels when it has become routine.

Together with my partner, we travelled through most of the de-occupied territories, and visited the front-line communities. Exhumations, the cloyingly sweet smell of rotten flesh that seeps into things so strongly it takes ten washes to get it out. Ruins in a place marked on the map as a village, not a single surviving wall. Dead bodies of civilians on streets just liberated from the Russians. Corpses of occupiers. Torture chambers, the contents of which only hint at what those who passed through them endured. Shot-up cars on highways. Destroyed equipment, Russian and Ukrainian. Empty cities. Birds that now live in abandoned apartments with broken windows. Flowers grown by locals next to bombed-out homes. Huge fields densely covered with shell craters. Half-flooded Kherson, the shelling of evacuation boats. Beatings, murders, kidnappings, rapes. Soldiers, civilians, volunteers, children, adults, old and young. And grief. Enormous grief – collective and individual.

Hardened or tired

It is rude to talk about "war fatigue". This phrase has become a meme used to humiliate those not involved in the fight against the enemy. But in my opinion, such fatigue exists and has developed over the past three years in everyone who has been immersed in the context of the war. When there are too many tragedies, the line between them blurs, and the brain refuses to accept so much grief. Tragedies have become commonplace.

I think something similar is happening among the audience of my materials. In the first year, texts about the war gathered tens of thousands of views. Somewhere in early 2023, the reach began to drop. My readers are tired of the war. They are tired of reading about pain, of empathizing, and not seeing an end to the suffering. For them, a strike on an apartment building has become just another notification from a Telegram channel that they do not want to open so as not to see the consequences. And when they do see a photo, video, or description of another war crime by the Russians, they mostly just scroll past it.

My readers are tired of the war. They are tired of reading about pain, of empathizing, and not seeing an end to the suffering.

Have they become callous? More likely, they consciously or subconsciously avoid the feeling that arises when witnessing suffering. This is one of the strategies of survival, of self-preservation. Russian drones and missiles hit residential buildings

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almost daily. There is simply not enough strength to process each unjust death, let alone the stories of those who are still alive and suffering.

Yet some stories do pierce the armour. It is difficult to predict what exactly becomes a trigger for a particular person: Palm Sunday; a father who buried his wife and children; a red manicure or a yellow-blue bracelet on the hand of a corpse; a dog sitting on the ruins of a house under which its owners lie. The whole horror of war, like the devil, lies in the details. They catch your attention and again plunge you into reflections on the grief that has happened to all of us over three (and actually eleven) years. Then the emotion of regret, sadness and despair nails you to the wall so hard that you cannot move. A real day of mourning; sincere and not performative.

It hurts. But in the end, you calm down. "No, everything is fine with me, I'm still alive and I feel everything," you have to say to yourself. Then you get up from the pit of death and get ready for work, it's Monday. You have to live. "It's not our side, so everything is fine." EE

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Taking Ukraine's corruption seriously

ALESSANDRO VITIELLO

Ukraine's fight against corruption has become a cornerstone of both its democratic transformation and EU integration efforts. The current political establishment rose to power with Zelenskyy's campaign promise of zero tolerance for corruption. Yet, despite undeniable progress in the last few years, it remains deeply systemic and persistent.

Corruption remains one of Ukraine's most systemic challenges, a pervasive force that erodes democratic governance, undermines justice, weakens social welfare, and touches all socio-cultural levels of life. Against this backdrop, Ukrainian civil society has been the principal engine of anti-corruption reforms: vibrant, resilient, and uniquely positioned to expose abuses and advocate for a fairer political system. Yet, its role is now under severe strain due to unprecedented pressures, including strong interference from the country's political leadership. The latest setbacks in Ukraine's anti-corruption efforts jeopardize its path to membership in the European Union, but also place Brussels in a politically delicate position, compelling it to take a decisive action.

Unmet expectations

Corruption has been an entrenched challenge for independent Ukraine since 1991, inherited in part from Soviet-era practices. For decades, graft and bribery were not isolated abuses but systemic practices of everyday life, sustained by politicians,

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oligarchs and criminal networks. This pervasive issue stifled economic growth, undermined the development of a more accountable political system, weakened social welfare, and slowed the country's aspirations toward EU membership.

With millions of Ukrainians taking to the streets in 2014, the Revolution of Dignity (or Euromaidan) made clear that the people were fed up with corruption and demanded both a genuine renewal of the political elite and a firmly pro-EU course. The presidencies of Petro Poroshenko (2014–19) and Volodymyr Zelenskyy initiated relevant anti-corruption reforms aimed at transparency and accountability in public administration, including improvements in asset declaration, public procurement, management of state-owned enterprises, and the delivery of public services. Moreover, in response to people's demands and pressure from civil society, specialized bodies were established to investigate high-level corruption in the country, such as the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU), the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) in 2015, and the High Anti-Corruption Court in 2019.

Nonetheless, the public expectations raised by Euromaidan were not fully met. During Poroshenko's tenure, high-level scandals continued and the presidency failed to deliver on many important fronts so that, by 2017, the majority of Ukrainians still viewed corruption as the country's most pressing problem. Although his "zero-tolerance" approach has curbed the misappropriation of public funds, Zelenskyy's track record has been uneven. Mismanagement of procurement during the COVID-19 pandemic, corruption scandals within the governmental team, and limited progress in judicial reform have undermined earlier anti-corruption momentum and tempered public optimism.

To date, despite progress in the last decade, Ukraine has not succeeded in eradicating corruption.

To date, despite the undeniable progress in the last decade, Ukraine has not succeeded in eradicating corruption, a cultural challenge that still permeates all levels of political, social and economic life, and thus proves especially difficult to eliminate. The relevant authorities continue to uncover serious corruption cases across public sectors, while recurring high-profile scandals expose the fragility of anti-corruption efforts. These setbacks cannot help but deepen public disillusionment with a political system that, though born out of the 2014 protests and promises of radical change, has repeatedly failed to deliver.

Since corruption adapts to historical circumstances and thrives in times of instability, Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 adds another layer of complexity. Draft-evasion schemes based on bribery have emerged, alongside scandals involving overpriced food supplies for soldiers and unfulfilled arms contracts, fuelling

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widespread public anger. At the same time, the influx of urgently needed international military and humanitarian aid, together with billions of euros in massive foreign financial assistance for Ukraine's recovery, create fertile ground for even more corruption.

Beyond undermining social welfare, economic development, and political stability, Ukraine's high level of corruption also slows its path towards EU membership. Under Chapter 23 of the EU *acquis communautaire*, candidate countries are required to make tangible progress in areas such as judicial independence, the rule of law, and public sector transparency. The European Commission and EU member states have repeatedly emphasized anti-corruption policies as a critical benchmark for Kyiv.

Tackling corruption

Civil society organizations, or CSOs, in Ukraine are among the most vibrant and resilient in post-Soviet Europe, especially when compared to the more fragile civic spaces in many neighbouring countries. Despite the breadth of civil society activity in Ukraine, a number of specialized CSOs have been some of the primary driving forces behind the anti-corruption agenda since 2014.

As part of their actions, they also act as watchdogs regarding public institutions, especially in the judiciary and law enforcement sectors, in order to expose corrupt practices and prevent politically motivated nominations. CSOs inform Ukraine's international partners about corruption-related developments in the country and hold the Ukrainian political leadership accountable on anti-corruption reforms. As these measures often encounter widespread resistance, CSOs coordinate relevant efforts to keep them on track and in the public spotlight. In addition, they collaborate with European counterparts to exchange knowledge, contributing not only to strengthen domestic initiatives but also to integrate into the broader European civil society network (ex. EU Anti-Corruption Initiative).

Most importantly, the civil society contributes directly to Ukraine's legal and institutional anti-corruption framework. Beyond driving the creation of institutions such as NABU and SAPO, Ukrainian CSOs also pressed for more transparent procurement systems (such as ProZorro), open property registers, and the electronic declaration of assets for public officials. Influential coalitions like the Reanimation Package of Reforms have functioned almost like think tanks, helping draft legislation, advocate for key reforms, and build public consensus.

Thanks to CSOs' activities focused on education, citizens are better mobilized against corruption. Organizations such as ACREC, based at the University of Kyiv-

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Mohyla Academy, for example, offer training and online courses for legal professionals and civil servants. Others work with local communities, particularly youth and activists, to foster public oversight and civic participation in anti-corruption initiatives.

Through this array of activities, Ukrainian CSOs play not only a reactive role by fighting new corruption cases, but also a proactive one, seeking to prevent the perpetuation of this problem and promote long-term transparency. In this sense, civil society works as a catalyst for a cultural and societal transformation that addresses corruption at its very roots, problematizing it as a systemic issue, promoting political accountability, and laying the groundwork for meaningful and lasting change in Ukraine.

Unprecedented challenges

Today, Ukrainian anti-corruption CSOs face unprecedented challenges. These include, first and foremost, financial uncertainty, especially after Trump's re-election and the suspension of USAID funding for programmes. Anti-corruption groups also have to deal with organizational fatigue as three years of Russia's full-scale war of aggression have clearly taken a toll on capacity, morale, and long-term sustainability. Similarly, security threats, even far from the frontlines due to Russia's ongoing capacity to strike across Ukraine, creates additional burdens. At the same time, legislative pressure in the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, to tighten regulations on NGOs and foreign-funded organizations is still present.

Civil society and anti-corruption organizations are facing political attacks from ruling elite.

As highlighted at a recent European Policy Centre event on Ukrainian civil society and anti-corruption agencies, these organizations are facing political attacks from national ruling elites, undermining their ability to monitor and report on anti-corruption developments. Such pressures are consistent with what the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, has described as "alleged intimidation and other forms of harassment" involving Ukrainian journalists, lawyers, civil society, and political and opinion leaders who have criticized the government. O'Flaherty also denounced the so-called "personal sanctions" imposed by Ukrainian state authorities, which may restrict certain individual rights and bypass regular judicial mechanisms.

After NABU and SAPO conducted high-level investigations this year, Ukrainian security and law enforcement agencies carried out some raids against their

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Photo: Vitaliy Holovin / Shutterstock

Young protesters came out in the streets to protest the Ukrainian parliament decision to shut down the country's anti-corruption bodies. As a result of social pressure, President Zelenskyy quickly reversed the decision.

staff, raising public concern both domestically and internationally. Official charges range from traffic violations to alleged links with Russia, but many observers viewed these actions as attempts to undermine the independence of Ukraine's two key anti-corruption bodies. Concerns deepened when, on July 22nd, the Verkhovna Rada approved (and the President signed) a new legislation granting the Prosecutor General greater control over NABU and SAPO investigations. This move sparked widespread protests in the country and pressure from the EU, prompting Zelenskyy a week later to sign a new bill that restored much of their independence. Still, one key amendment remained in place, leaving doubts about prosecutorial independence and the fairness of top-level appointments.

While the situation appears calmer now than in the summer, concern still persists. Soon up for a second reading in the Rada, draft law n. 12439 does not solely include significant business-friendly reforms, but also controversial provisions limiting the Bureau of Economic Security's power to investigate embezzlement of state funds and property. Similarly, draft law n. 13423 would grant impunity for crimes committed by certain defence companies during the execution of defence contracts.

This environment reflects harsh political pressure on entities that are active in fighting high-level corruption, including not only governmental agencies but also civil organizations. According to Clemens Mueller (DG ENEST, European Com-

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mission), such attacks are likely to persist as long as these organizations deliver effectively on their mandate, though they may increasingly take subtler and more sophisticated forms. The reason is clear: anti-corruption bodies have come too close to the heart of the political establishment. At the same time, that establishment is undermining Euromaidan's core promise: namely, that no one is above the law.

What the EU can do

While some political measures have been embraced, deeper systemic reforms proposed by specialized anti-corruption institutions and civil society have often been delayed or resisted by Ukraine's political elites. Given Kyiv's determined path towards EU accession and the high level of public trust Ukrainians place in Brussels, the EU has significant political leverage to alter the cost-benefit calculus of Ukraine's ruling class, making genuine anti-corruption reform not only unavoidable but also the most advantageous path forward.

To achieve this, however, the EU should be stricter in criticizing recent developments in Ukraine's anti-corruption efforts. Political solidarity with Kyiv is a matter of justice, but it should not translate into overlooking persistent issues. At the same time, policymakers in Brussels must ensure that their criticism remains constructive and is framed in a way that strengthens Ukraine, rather than providing opportunities for its adversaries.

To turn this commitment into action, the EU should consider the following measures:

1) Apply informal, non-public pressure on Ukrainian senior representatives during every meeting to convey the EU's strong disappointment with the current state of anti-corruption in Ukraine. Key political figures have not fully grasped the extent to which the EU, as well as public trust, was damaged after the July events. The EU should consistently remind them of the consequences such setbacks have for Ukraine's EU accession prospects and its democratic future;
2) Mediate a structured, genuine and substantive political dialogue on corruption among Ukraine's state leadership, anti-corruption public institutions, and civil society. The EU must insist that this collaborative approach be inclusive, responsive and supportive of CSOs, which function both as a democratic engine and a co-pilot in reform, rather than as rivals to the state. The EU should also emphasize that such cooperation is essential for the proper implementation of the EU *acquis* and, ultimately, for advancing Ukraine's accession trajectory;

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3) Launch a new EU funding project to provide immediate economic support to Ukrainian anti-corruption CSOs, particularly in the aftermath of the withdrawal of USAID programmes and the July events. The Ukraine2EU Programme offers a useful precedent, but new initiatives should definitely be larger, more structured, and continuous in order to reduce the burden of fundraising on CSOs alone;
4) Open the 'Fundamentals' cluster to give Ukraine's state authorities a clear institutional incentive to frame EU accession as a tangible process. This signals the EU's commitment to enable accession, putting the responsibility on Ukraine (and, specifically, on anti-corruption reforms). Without such an incentive, there is the risk that Ukrainians may perceive the EU as reluctant to admit them in, potentially fuelling growing Eurosceptic sentiments;
5) Enhance judicial cooperation between EU member states and the Ukrainian authorities to facilitate the extradition of Ukrainians residing in the EU who have been convicted of corruption. This would show that Brussels is not merely imposing accession criteria, but is actively supporting Ukraine's anti-corruption efforts;
6) Integrate anti-corruption into the EU's dialogue on Ukraine's post-war recovery. At this summer's Ukraine Recovery Conference, there was little appetite for discussing corruption issues related to the present and future recovery of Ukraine. Yet, the EU should make it a central theme of member states' contribution. With billions in aid expected to support the reconstruction and revitalization of the country, these funds risk being wasted if diverted through graft and bribery.

Comprehensive transformation

Ukraine's fight against corruption has become a cornerstone of both its democratic transformation and EU integration efforts. The current political establishment rose to power with Zelenskyy's campaign promise of zero tolerance for corruption. Yet, despite undeniable progress in the last few years, it remains deeply systemic and persistent. Even if it was elected for its hardline stance, the current political class has shown resistance when anti-corruption investigations have proven too close to the core of political power.

The persistence of corruption demonstrates that it cannot be dismantled through a top-down approach from Ukrainian state institutions alone. Instead, a comprehensive transformation of the entire system is needed. The magnitude of such change requires empowering not only public anti-corruption entities but also

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CSOs at every level of Ukraine's social and political life, enabling them to fully exercise their watchdogs and their informational, advocacy, policy, educational and networking functions.

Public demand for change is clear and unmistakable: a recent KIIS poll shows that 92 per cent of Ukrainians see corruption a serious problem, nearly matching the 95 per cent who cited the war. This pressure calls on Ukraine's political leadership to find a *modus vivendi* with civil society and top anti-corruption organizations, as well as address a challenge that can no longer be postponed.

The EU, in turn, should leverage its political influence to strengthen and fund Ukrainian civil society, ensure that Kyiv implements necessary reforms, facilitate collaboration between state institutions and anti-corruption bodies, and foster a political environment conducive to accountability and transparency. Such support would respond to Ukrainians' immediate demands for justice and represent a long-term political investment for a more democratic, accountable and resilient Ukraine. EE

The views expressed in this article are that of the author and in no way reflect the views of the European Commission.

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Ukraine's education reform amidst the war

OLEKSII LIONCHUK

In Ukraine, the new school curriculum allocates between 70 and 105 hours per school year to civic education and history for fifth to eighth grade pupils. This amounts to just one hour per week for Ukrainian history, half an hour for world history and half an hour for civic education. In Russia, the situation is the reverse.

The Facebook posts of my teacher and mentor, Viktor Mysan, from my time studying in Ukraine motivated me to write this text. However, to understand the current situation, it is necessary to briefly describe the state of Ukrainian education during the period of independence.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's education system – like many other sectors of public life – was left in a precarious state. Under Soviet rule, education was treated as a low-budget priority, receiving only residual funding, with teachers often regarded by the state as dispensable. Independence in 1991 did little to improve this situation. In fact, many of the challenges facing Ukrainian educators only deepened. Low wages, particularly for young teachers, became the central problem, further eroding the social prestige of the profession. Yet, despite meagre salaries, payments were at least made with relative regularity. This dynamic partly explains why teaching in Ukraine remains a female-dominated profession: women are unfortunately still more likely to accept lower pay, whereas many men with teaching degrees either avoid the profession altogether or leave it early in their careers, rarely returning. History teachers formed somewhat of an exception within Ukraine's education system. In the early 1990s, a brief demographic upswing

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brought more children into schools, which created a heavy academic workload and allowed many history educators to secure full-time contracts (18 hours per week). Yet the hardships of that decade soon reversed this trend.

Constant reforms but little transformation

The widespread uncertainty about the future that characterized the 1990s led many families to delay or abandon plans to have children, resulting in a sharp demographic decline. As pupil numbers fell, schools reduced their teaching staff, while kindergartens in both towns and villages were closed en masse. During this period, curricula for Ukrainian and world history were subject to constant reform. Since 1992, the number of teaching hours dedicated to these subjects has steadily declined. At the same time, the system experimented with different grading scales and oscillated between the introduction of a 12-year cycle and a return to the traditional 11-year model. It is thus not surprising that many talented educators who could not make a living off their teaching salary, left the profession. Many of them even left the country.

In the 1990s, curricula for Ukrainian and world history were subject to constant reform.

Overall, the school curriculum for Ukrainian and world history has remained largely unchanged since Soviet times. The ideological layer was removed together with Marx, Engels and Lenin, but the underlying principles and approaches to teaching history saw little transformation. In the fifth grade, pupils are introduced to history as a discipline, though within the New Ukrainian School (NUSH) framework this introduction is often vague and inconsistent. At this stage, children are encouraged to explore their country's past through accessible, story-based narratives. While epochs such as the Middle Ages or Early Modern times can still be presented almost as fairy tales, the complexity of the 19th and 20th centuries makes them far more challenging, even for older pupils.

The structure of the Ukrainian system – whether old or reformed – remains linear: each grade from the sixth to the eleventh (or twelfth) covers a specific historical period, from antiquity to the present day. This model is not unique; in Poland, for example, students revisit the full span of history when transitioning from primary to secondary or technical schools. Such repetition helps reinforce earlier knowledge and better prepares students for the final secondary school exam. By contrast, Ukraine's current system does not provide a second chance to revisit key topics. Thus, if eighth-grade students fail to grasp the history of the Cossack

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era, they are unlikely to have another opportunity within the school framework to close that gap.

The number of hours allocated has long been insufficient to cover even the basic material. Ukrainian history is given at most two hours per week, while world history is usually limited to just one. In practice, this means that in a single 45-minute lesson, teachers are expected to explain complex processes such as the unification of Italy and Germany or the history of Latin America to ninth-grade pupils. The same pattern holds across other grades and across curricula approved by the Ukrainian ministry of education in different years. On paper, the requirements appear adequate, yet in reality the system remains in urgent need of improvement.

Difficult reform process

The reform of education in Ukraine has been underway for more than seven years now and it remains one of the most extensive and contentious reforms in the country's history. The New Ukrainian School (NUS) is not an indigenous concept but rather an adaptation, often criticized as a superficial imitation, of Finnish and German models. At its core lies the principle of "child-centredness", placing the pupil and their needs at the centre of the educational process. While laudable in theory, its implementation in Ukraine so far has been far from ideal.

In an effort to reduce stress, especially among younger pupils, grades were replaced with broader categories of achievement, while the traditional red pen used to mark mistakes was substituted with green, on the assumption that red causes unnecessary anxiety. Yet, as experts cautioned at the outset, any colour of correction inevitably acquires the same negative connotation over time. Such methods may be defensible in primary education, where they help reveal children's individual inclinations and abilities, but they prove far less suitable for middle and secondary school. Under the reform, subjects are now grouped into broad categories – languages and literature, mathematics, science, civic education, history, art, and others – though the practical benefits of this restructuring remain uncertain.

In the eighth grade, the curriculum allocates between 70 and 105 hours per school year to civic education and history. In practice, this amounts to just one hour per week for Ukrainian history, half an hour for world history and half an hour for civic education. Under such conditions, it is extremely difficult – if not impossible – for pupils to properly master the material. These plans were introduced and circulated to schools even as Ukraine faced more than a decade of Russian aggression. According to the teachers, Ukrainian history receives the fewest hours of instruction within the New Ukrainian School framework.

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By contrast, in Russia the situation is the reverse. There, history education (or one may prefer to say, historical propaganda) has been expanded considerably in grades five through nine. As noted by scholars from the Institute of History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences, Russian pupils at this level receive a total of 476 hours of history instruction, compared to just 156 hours offered under Ukraine's reformed curriculum.

Imperialistic education

My earlier mentioned mentor from the years I was a student in Ukraine, Viktor Mysan, has analysed Russian textbooks that present schoolchildren with imperial narratives. While what he discovered is nothing new, it is clear that in Russia the assumption on which history instruction is based is that national consciousness and identity can be shaped in pupils from an early age. That is why, the Russian ministry of education has orchestrated the distribution of Russian history textbooks to the occupied territories in Ukraine, where they are now used in classrooms. The long-term consequences that we will most likely see in the generation which is now subjected to such materials will be most likely deeply troubling.

One of the authors of a textbook on 20th century Russian history is Vladimir Medinsky, the controversial dean of the Moscow State Institute of Fine Arts and close advisor to Vladimir Putin. His interpretation is clearly and overtly one-sided. If such distortions were limited to Russian pupils – who are thus deprived of a clear understanding of the Stalinist era or the real costs of wartime victories – they might be regarded as an internal Russian matter. However, once exported into occupied Ukraine, they become a deliberate instrument of aggression.

This problem would be less pressing were it not imposed on neighbouring nations. Yet these narratives directly affect Ukrainian citizens in the occupied territories, where children are compelled to study them in schools and other institutions. Many, however, continue to learn the Ukrainian curriculum in parallel, often in secret, hoping that eventually they will be able to move to Ukraine-controlled areas and resume their education there.

Now in the eleventh year of war and the fourth year of full-scale aggression, the importance of teaching history in schools for shaping the next generation of Ukrainians should be self-evident. Yet the Ukrainian ministry of education and science, along with its leadership, has repeatedly criticized the school curricula for Ukrainian and world history throughout the country's independence. World history, notably, was even excluded as an elective subject from the external independent testing/national multi-subject test (EIT/NMT) required for university admission.

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At the same time, teaching hours continue to be reduced, and courses on local history have disappeared from the curriculum altogether.

History education – and Ukraine's education system more broadly – therefore requires profound transformation. Such reform, however, cannot be achieved through further reductions in hours or other superficial adjustments that only exacerbate the crisis. A clear symptom of the system's weakness is the steady departure of experienced teachers, many of whom leave the profession in search of higher pay and greater social recognition. For example, there are proposals to create integrated history courses that combine history with other subjects. It seems like a good approach to create an integrated course of world and Ukrainian history because many global events impacted events in Ukraine, and vice versa. However, when I examined the existing programmes, I was dismayed by their lack of specifics, vague objectives, and ambiguous student learning goals.

Respected educators stress that the New Ukrainian School reform is ineffective and needs revision.

Many respected educators have stressed that the New Ukrainian School reform is ineffective and in urgent need of revision. A petition calling for the cancellation of the reform and its system of student evaluation, known as "Results Groups", was recently submitted on the website of the cabinet of ministers of Ukraine. Having gathered the required 25,000 signatures, it now obliges the government to review the issue, although it remains unclear when this will take place. Most observers expect the response to be negative, leaving the current system unchanged.

For now, the history curriculum will remain as it is – a matter of growing concern. In the context of war, this could create serious long-term consequences. Whether pupils – the future generation of Ukraine – grasp the complexities of historical processes increasingly depends on the convictions and dedication of their teachers. Many of these educators, however, are currently serving on the front lines. Their psychological condition after returning from combat will present another challenge for the education system. Ideally, they will be able to rejoin the profession after therapy and treatment, helping to prepare a new generation of Ukrainians to think critically and to defend their rights when needed.

Integrated history curriculum

Significant changes are needed in Ukrainian education in general, and in the teaching of history in particular. Yet, there is little debate on this point. The idea of an integrated history curriculum is not new: in neighbouring Poland, for example,

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this approach has long been both common and effective. Ukraine's curriculum should likewise be structured so that national history is presented in close connection with global developments. The events that unfolded on Ukrainian lands have shaped the course of European history from the Middle Ages to the present, and this reality must be reflected in programmes, textbooks and teacher training.

For younger generations to fully understand the phenomenon of the Sixtiers (*Shistdesiatnyky* in Ukrainian – a generation of intellectuals who revived literature and Ukrainian identity within the Soviet intelligentsia – translator's note), they must also be able to situate it within a broader context. Did historical figures from different countries interact with each other? How did the rise of Polish Solidarity in Gdańsk in 1980 influence the developments in the Soviet Union in general and Ukraine in particular? These are only a few examples of how an integrated course can be designed without losing national identity, while also strengthening students' analytical and comparative skills. Depending on age, such a course should be taught at least two hours per week in grades five to seven, and three to five hours in grades eight to 11/12, depending on the school's profile.

Yet the challenges run deeper than curriculum design. The school system as a whole requires fundamental transformation. Above all, this means improving the status of teachers and ensuring working conditions that restore the prestige of the profession. Teachers should be granted greater freedom in presenting materials, while the bureaucratic burden of unclear semester and year-end reporting should be significantly reduced. Today's crisis is driven not only by the pressures of war, but also by the entrenched indifference of officials and the rigidity of the system itself. EE

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A test of Sandu's success

PIOTR OLEKSY

Have Moldova's ruling leaders correctly interpreted the outcome of the recent elections? If they take the results as proof of their own infallibility and political invincibility, the country's European path could encounter serious obstacles. This is especially true as Russia may change its approach towards Moldova. And that is hardly good news.

The result of Moldova's parliamentary elections marks a victory for the European Union and for the ruling Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), in power since 2021 – and a clear setback for Russia. The order of this list is not accidental: many signs suggest that voters chose, above all, a European future rather than simply endorsing the governing party. Moldova now stands more closely aligned with the EU than any other country in the region, and even Moscow's unprecedented financial measures have failed to alter this trajectory. Yet, it is too early to breathe a sigh of relief. Both the EU and PAS must be aware of the possibility of becoming victims of their own success – particularly as Russia may soon recalibrate its strategy toward its former "brotherly" republic.

When analysing Moldova's proximity to the EU and the erosion of its ties with Russia, we should keep in mind that this story did not start with PAS coming to power. In fact, European integration was declared as the overriding goal of the country's foreign policy as early as 2004 by then President Vladimir Voronin. Three years earlier, his Party of Communists had gained sole power in parliament by promoting the idea of rapprochement with Russia. However, forced by Moscow

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to accept a solution to the Transnistrian conflict that was unfavourable to Chișinău, and tempted by the West, Voronin made a geopolitical – or rather rhetorical – about-face. In doing so, he responded to the EU's eastward enlargement and the emerging new neighbourhood policy.

Towards the European market

In reality, this shift was primarily formal, as the communists continued to pursue a policy of international balance, maintaining confrontational rhetoric towards Romania, which is Moldova's natural partner on the path to rapprochement with the West. Nevertheless, certain mechanisms within the EU's neighbourhood policy began to work, and most importantly, relations with Moscow cooled significantly. The Kremlin may have already begun to reflect on the fact that Moscow did not really have "its own party" in mainstream Moldovan politics.

Two oligarchs, Filat and Plahotniuc, used European integration as a tool to legitimize their rule.

The year 2009 brought the so-called April Revolution, which replaced the communists with a coalition of formally pro-European parties. This shift coincided with the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership programme, which shows how the dynamics of Moldovan politics have often mirrored the rhythm of Brussels's engagement with the region. In the next decade, however, Moldova was ruled by two oligarchs, Vlad Filat and Vlad Plahotniuc, who captured the state and waged ruthless battles for power, all while using European integration as a tool to legitimize their rule. The two Vlads did much to discredit the European idea in Moldova, exploiting it as a façade for corruption, including the notorious theft of one billion US dollars from the banking system which happened in 2014. Yet despite all of this, in the 2010s Moldova's ties with the EU were cemented, which reduced the country's socio-economic dependence on Russia.

This shift was driven primarily by the 2014 Association Agreement that Moldova concluded with the EU and its integral component, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Even back then, EU leaders and diplomats were well aware that the standards of Moldova's pro-European coalition governments fell short of the Union's requirements and expectations. It is thus quite possible that these agreements would not have been signed had Russia not annexed Crimea and started its aggression in Donbas. At that moment, the EU began to act as a geopolitical actor in its own right, prioritizing the expansion of its sphere of influence. While this approach provoked unease and scepticism at the time (including my

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own) about the potential erosion of the European project's normative foundations, hindsight shows that it was the right decision. Russia's nervous reaction only accelerated the intended processes: by closing its market to Moldovan agricultural products, Moscow pushed local producers to turn rapidly toward the newly opened, more lucrative and stable European market.

Short of expectations

However, the liberalization of the visa regime with the EU has caused the ratio between the number of Moldovans living in the EU and Russia to shift dramatically in favour of the former. While these groups were of similar size until then, there are now no more than 300,000 Moldovans living in Russia (many of whom are emigrants from the 1990s and 2000s), and about one million in the EU (most of whom are young and middle-aged). This had a significant impact on political choices. For most Moldovans, the European Union and *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world) were not abstract entities, but part of their own or their family members' life experience. The analysis of the benefits began to have an obvious effect. Russia's ability to fight for the "hearts and minds" of Moldova also melted away with the shrinking and passing of the generation for whom the overriding political emotion was sentimentality for the USSR.

When Maia Sandu won the presidency in 2020, followed six months later by PAS securing a parliamentary majority, European integration was not the immediate driving force behind their success. The party had emerged as a civic response to oligarchic rule – above all to the dominance of Plahotniuc – and it was the promises of de-oligarchization, anti-corruption reform, economic renewal, and effective governance that attracted voters to PAS. It was evident that the group's natural partners would be western countries, yet Sandu and her allies initially employed culturally and identity-inclusive language, deliberately avoiding geopolitical polarization. This strategy appealed to a broad centrist electorate for whom Moldova's international neutrality remains a central political myth. Over the years, maintaining the support of this group has been essential both for winning and for holding onto power.

The liberalization of the visa regime with the EU profoundly altered Moldovan migration patterns.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the intensification of hybrid activities against Moldova in recent years have made the political landscape in the country far more challenging. To maintain the support of western partners,

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which is crucial for resisting Russian pressure in the information, social and energy spheres, PAS was forced to take a clear and unequivocal stance. The current accusations of excessive polarization are therefore not without basis. However, it must also be remembered that Chișinău did not create these conditions. A much bigger problem, however, was the government's clumsiness in the very areas that underpinned its 2021 success: building effective state institutions, reforming the judiciary, and improving living standards.

Mistakes and lessons learned

The presidential election and the 2024 referendum on European integration sent a clear signal of deep public disappointment with the PAS government. The ruling camp ultimately owed the positive outcome of both votes to the diaspora. Discontent had been brewing for some time, and the very idea of holding the two votes simultaneously was driven by a desire to secure an easy re-election for Sandu. In practice, however, the strategy backfired: many Moldovans interpreted the dual vote as a plebiscite on PAS itself. Russian disinformation and widespread electoral bribery undoubtedly affected the result, yet it was evident that even without the actions attributed to the so-called "Șor network", the performance of the pro-European camp – after three years in power with EU backing – fell well short of expectations.

The much-celebrated independence from Russian gas came at a steep price: energy costs soared eightfold.

The conditions of governance changed dramatically after 2022. As a frontline state without the protection of military alliances and with Russian troops still stationed on its territory, Moldova became an unattractive destination for investment, which was so needed to revive its struggling economy. Chișinău faced successive crises: first the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees, and then Russian energy blackmail. The much-celebrated independence from Russian gas, praised by western partners, came at a steep price: energy costs soared eightfold, stifling economic growth and hitting household budgets hard. In this context, the narrative that ordinary citizens are paying the price for energy sovereignty and solidarity with the West and Ukraine found fertile ground. Meanwhile, the crisis also exposed severe capacity shortages within the state administration: when a deputy minister performs tasks normally delegated to an assistant or secretary, it is difficult to speak of efficient governance.

PAS itself has made a number of mistakes. Judicial reform has not only stalled but has also generated internal conflicts and divisions within the ruling camp. Sev-

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Moldovan president, Maia Sandu, (left) and Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, hold a joint press conference during a summit in Moldova last July. The president and her ruling party ran on the platform of mobilization in the name of European integration – and in opposition to Russia. The real danger now is demobilization – a complacent belief that reforms and investments will somehow take care of themselves.

eral decisions in the energy sector have proven equally contentious, fuelling mutual accusations and public dissatisfaction. Communication with society has been another major weakness: both the consistency of the message and the manner of communication have been flawed. The ruling party's problem is often the tone of its members' statements, which reveal not only their conviction that they are right and have a historic mission, but also their contempt for those who do not appreciate their efforts.

In less than a year since the presidential election and the European referendum, PAS has learned some of its lessons. First of all, external interference in the form of mass bribery was prevented, demonstrating the resilience of the state. Efforts were made to improve communication and ensure that EU funds finally reached the citizens. Until then, the fact that successive diplomatic successes only resulted in price increases had caused considerable dissonance and social bitterness.

Ultimately, in the final stages of the campaign, an alarmist tone was adopted, calling on Moldovan citizens to defend the state against Russian interference and

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the return of the oligarchs to power. Sandu even warned that if the opposition won, Moldova could become a platform for aggressive actions against Ukraine.

For Europe, against Russia

Pre-election polls suggested that PAS and the pro-Russian Patriotic Bloc were running neck and neck, with a significant share of voters still undecided. It has now become evident that many of these undecided voters were former PAS supporters who, disappointed with the party's four years in power, felt little enthusiasm for its continued rule. The final outcome of the election was therefore shaped by mobilization in the name of European integration – and in opposition to Russia. PAS ran an effective campaign, positioning itself as the political beneficiary of both prevailing public sentiment and Moldova's structural socio-economic ties to the European Union.

PAS must be aware of the risks that come with concentrated power and belief in its own popular mandate.

The key question now is whether the leaders of Moldova's ruling camp have correctly interpreted the election results. If they take them as proof of their own infallibility or political invincibility, Moldova's European path could face serious obstacles ahead. PAS must remain aware of the risks that come with concentrated power and an excessive belief in its own popular mandate.

The real danger now is demobilization – a complacent belief that reforms and investments will somehow take care of themselves once Moldova joins the European Union. Yet the country's economic performance tells a different story. In 2024, Moldova's growth was almost flat, at just 0.1 per cent, a stark contrast to Georgia's 9.4 per cent despite Tbilisi's far more ambivalent position toward the EU. In the case of Moldova, the lack of economic recovery threatens a demographic collapse of society.

A further challenge – one familiar to many political movements in PAS's position – is the relaxation of moral standards regarding corruption and nepotism. The comfort of western support, combined with the knowledge that no major elections are due for another three years, may breed complacency. These temptations threaten to pull PAS away from the ideals on which it was founded. At this critical moment, the ruling party must commit to internal discipline and ethical governance to avoid repeating the trajectory of Romania's political elite – who, despite Europeanization, came to symbolize corruption and partisan self-interest.

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Russia will not let go

It would be naïve to assume that Russia will simply let Moldova go. There is, however, a growing risk that the Kremlin will redefine its approach to this former Soviet republic. Until now, Moscow has viewed Moldova as being in its "near abroad" where it could still compete for the hearts and minds of the population and potentially reverse its western trajectory. Yet, after another electoral defeat of the pro-Russian camp, the Kremlin may start to perceive Moldova as a hostile but weak state – one that can be punished as a warning to others. In such a scenario, tensions with the West could escalate further, but without triggering a serious risk of retaliation.

Firstly, Moscow must have noticed that Moldova has been consistently, albeit at varying speeds, moving closer to the West since 2004 (and had previously built strong ties, primarily with Romania). This shift has created numerous structural interdependencies with the European Union. Moldova has already curtailed Moscow's use of energy as a tool of coercion, and the planned high-voltage interconnection with Romania will soon eliminate this leverage entirely.

Secondly, the Kremlin is aware of how weak its hand is in Moldovan politics. The Patriotic Camp, which was the main pro-Russian force in the last elections, was formed by former presidents Vladimir Voronin and Igor Dodon. The first leader spectacularly outwitted Russia once, while the second has repeatedly shown that his own financial interests are more important to him than the Russian world. The other two leaders of the bloc are Vasile Tarlev, a rather uncharismatic prime minister from the era of the Party of Communists, and Irina Vlah, the former Bashkan of the autonomous area of Gagauzia, whose active participation in politics has just been restricted by a court decision. Earlier attempts to build a new political formation by former oligarch Ilan Șor, who currently lives in Moscow, were also prevented by the judiciary. Once again, it turns out that the maximum support that a pro-Russian group can obtain in Moldova hovers around 25 per cent. At the same time, the post-election protests called for by the leaders of the bloc attracted little interest. As Mihai Sirkeli, a journalist and political commentator from Gagauzia, once told me: "Russia can make a lot of noise here, but no one is going to die for *Russkiy Mir*." These words seem to be accurate not only in relation to Gagauzia but Moldova as a whole.

The maximum support that a pro-Russian group can obtain in Moldova hovers around 25 per cent.

Finally, as the recent elections have demonstrated, Moldovan security services have grown far more adept at countering Russian attempts to interfere in

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the country's political system. With Moscow's influence now limited largely to its poorest and oldest supporters, the prospects for orchestrating any kind of "revolution" are slim. At some point, the Kremlin may conclude that Moldova should be treated differently – in line with the narrative of Sandu's "fascist regime", a theme already echoing through the Russian media. Notably, even Russian "liberals" such as Ksenia Sobchak and Alexei Venediktov have recently taken up the criticism of the Moldovan government's attitude towards democratic norms.

So far, Ukraine's resistance has shielded Moldova from direct military threats. Yet a change in Russia's *modus operandi* could bring other forms of aggression – sabotage of critical infrastructure by "unknown perpetrators", or staged drone incidents designed to create fear and instability. Moscow already possesses a convenient platform for such operations: its troops and services in Transnistria. EE

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Moldova's pro-West forces need to set a new agenda

DAN NICORICI

In the September 2025 parliamentary elections, Moldova's pro-West Action and Solidarity Party won with 50.20 per cent. During the campaign the party promised nothing new, and it appears to have been enough. In the end, Moldovans voted for no change and trusted the current set of affairs. The new goal is to sign the EU accession treaty by 2028 and for this to happen, a set of ambitious reforms should be implemented and the government should look beyond adopting new European laws.

In Moldova, the incumbent Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) that was founded by the current president, Maia Sandu, won a simple majority with 50.2 per cent in the parliamentary elections held on September 28th this year. The numb election campaign and debates showed less interest from the people and politicians to talk about real reforms, widespread disinformation, fear and foreign interference. People trusted the current government and have a strong desire to be closer to the European Union, giving PAS a new mandate as a result. Moldova has a fast-track indicator to sign the accession treaty by 2028 and the new government will be tasked with achieving better convergence with the EU.

Surprisingly, this year's campaign was far calmer and more relaxed than those we have seen in the past. The debates were not centred around stringent issues

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such as low wages, economic stagnation or corruption. Instead, it was an over-simplified battle of polarization, existential crisis, and who scares the voters more. PAS argued that should they lose, the country will consequently be handed to the Kremlin, a threat that should not be underestimated. The party also said that accession to the EU would be halted. On the other hand, the pro-Russian forces argued that Moldova should be friends with everyone, criticizing the EU, and promising cheap gas from Russia. Up until the last week of the election, fear remained at the heart of the campaigns.

Preparing for the test

During the previous presidential election in 2024, which was held in conjunction with a referendum on EU membership, Russia employed a set of tactics on meddling in Moldovan affairs. This included disinformation, vote buying, cyberattacks and church engagement in politics. The Moldovan institutions were not ready for such pressure and local democracy proved vulnerable. The actions continued on a larger scale in 2025. Yet the authorities have learnt their lessons and came to this test with their homework prepared.

The church is trusted by Moldovan citizens, and this is why pro-Russian forces played the religion card.

First and foremost, fines for vote buying were raised for those who sell their vote, and now people can even face jail time as organizers of such bribes. Law enforcement agencies intercepted money smuggled into the country to be used as bribes and were able to disrupt many schemes. It is fair to say that Moldova was more resilient to vote buying no matter how much money was sent, which, by some estimations, amounted to 200 to 300 million euros – or two to three per cent of the country's GDP.

The church is trusted by Moldovan citizens, and this is why pro-Russian forces played the religion card. Before the elections, several hundred priests and church workers went to Russia for pilgrimages. As Reuters reported, they set up dozens of social media channels to criticize the EU while not specifically pointing at Russia as a friend. The same old arguments were brought up that the EU will bring LGBTQ+ communities to Moldova and that freedom of religion will be affected. Cheap gas was also used as a trap. Last winter's energy crisis hit the pockets of most Moldovans. Anti-EU forces promised to negotiate a better deal with Russia's Gazprom, but without any explanation as to how they plan to do this and what other hidden prices the country should pay. Gazprom currently has no extra pipeline capacity to send more gas to Moldova.

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At the same time, several parties were banned from participating in the elections due to illegal financing. The popular electoral bloc *Pobeda* (Victory), which was founded in Russia, was banned alongside Moldova Mare, a small political party, as well as other groups prosecuted for illegal financing or being part of organized crime right before the elections. The question is whether these actions can be seen as a crackdown on the opposition. Future court rulings will give a clearer picture. Dropping parties so close to the vote also removed any chance of a judicial appeal for them. However, the biggest opposition anti-EU parties that have proper financing and are not backed by criminal organizations, such as the Socialist Party, enjoy political freedoms and free and fair elections, and there were no attempts to crack down on them.

More of the same

The current ruling party, PAS, won a majority with 50.20 per cent, securing 55 parliament seats, eight less than in the previous elections. The party promised nothing new, and it appears to have been enough. Their vision revolved around the continuation of the current reforms, peace, investments in infrastructure, and EU integration as the centrepiece of the campaign. People voted for no change and trusted the current set of affairs.

Sandu was still perceived as the leading personality of PAS and the people voted for her as well. But the fact that they did not have another leader was also a strength. There was no target to be attacked by the opposition. The leaders of the party could capitalize on their public positions within the government. PAS worked efficiently at the local level, conducting door to door activities and efficient community engagement. PAS was also able to mobilize its supporters in the central parts of the country and in the diaspora, as well as attract indecisive voters by answering questions at the debates and not making serious mistakes.

PAS was also able to mobilize its supporters in the central parts of the country and in the diaspora,

PAS also managed to adequately respond to disinformation. For example, when the opposition showed a video with farmers who cannot sell apples in EU markets, and fruit "rotting in the streets", the minister of agriculture gave an interview with that farmer, saying that actually the apples are waiting to be taken to the EU market. PAS managed to attract important public figures such as the heads of the main universities, activists, business people, cultural figures and sport stars. During the campaign, the opposition claimed that the majority was disappointed

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in PAS. However, the ruling party managed to gain even more total votes than in previous elections.

Just as in recent contests, the Moldovan diaspora, counting more than one million people, again saved the day for the pro-EU path. Out of 277,964 voters abroad, 78 per cent voted for PAS. The party however reached only 44.13 per cent within the country. Thus, without the diaspora vote it would not have been able to secure its majority. Interestingly, in Russia, only two polling stations – in Moscow and St Petersburg – were opened and only 4,000 people voted from the Russian Federation. Moldovan authorities argued that there is a security risk of opening more polling stations in Russia. In Germany, with a similar number of Moldovans as in Russia, 36 voting stations were opened and almost 29,000 people voted.

No polling stations were opened in the breakaway region of Transnistria, which has more than 300,000 inhabitants, yet is not controlled by the Moldovan constitutional authorities. Citizens there were left during this campaign, as candidates had no clear messages for them. Pro-Russian candidates running in Moldova's elections saw them as voters whom they could bring in via buses to polling stations. In the 2024 EU referendum, 30 per cent of them voted in favour of the EU, which was considered a good result, taking into consideration the low level of media literacy in the region. PAS has no strategy on how to solve the issue of Transnistria. The assumption is that Moldova will develop economically and be closer to the EU so much that the Transnistrian part will change its orientation and choose to eventually reintegrate.

There is no pro-EU alternative

PAS cemented its role as the only pro-EU force in Moldovan politics, making it difficult to compete with, even for other pro-EU parties. The other eight pro-EU candidates accumulated less than one per cent each. People voted for the party that has a real chance to get into the parliament, as they do not want to lose their votes. One might even say that PAS cannibalized its opponents within the pro-EU market, bringing into their lists some of their former opponents. However, many parties neglected to focus on economic development, proposing solutions that would not allow them to secure solid political power over the next four years.

On the other side, four pro-Russian parties formed the electoral Patriotic Bloc (BEP), consisting of recycled politicians and ex-presidents. It is led by former President Igor Dodon and his Socialist Party, together with the former president, Vladimir Voronin. Other figures include a former prime minister, Vasile Tarlev, and the former head of the Gagauzian region, Irina Vlah. The bloc was chaotic. It

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looked like a group of old friends who have not spoken since high school and once they met, there was actually nothing to talk about. It promoted the same promises and narratives that Moldova should be friends with everyone, that Maia Sandu is authoritarian, and the EU is a disaster and threat to peace in Moldova. They also promised to build a new public institution and public banks as an answer to every issue. The bloc gained only 24.4 per cent of the vote and 26 seats in the parliament, six fewer than at the previous elections.

The centrist forces, by the same playbook, formed an electoral bloc among themselves. They obtained third place with 7.96 per cent of the vote and eight mandates, seen at the same time as both a weak and strong result. The bloc aimed to be a pro-EU alternative and focused on centrist voters, as well as those that are undecided and disappointed by the ruling party. The bloc also has big names, including Ion Ceban, the current mayor of Chișinău, and Alexandr Stoianoglo, a former opponent of Sandu in previous elections. On paper, it was a pro-EU force, but their actions illustrate a different picture. Stoianoglo did not support the EU referendum. Other leaders of the bloc earlier supported the Russian-proposed federalization of Moldova. Ceban's MAN party was seen as the most pro-EU in the bloc. However, the communist and then socialist past of Ceban is contradictory, as he was protesting in Brussels against the Association Agreement between the EU and Moldova.

The biggest surprise was the *Democratia Acasa* (Democracy at Home) party, which gained six seats in the parliament.

Renato Usatii and his "Our Party" have been trying to get into the parliament since 2014. He is a prominent politician and businessman, with most of his voters in the north of the country, where his party has many mayors, and in both the eastern and western diaspora. He is seen as a populist and can be described as a pro-Moldova figure, wanting good relationships with both the West and Russia. His party consists of professional public servants, who have served successfully as mayors and public administration leaders. His party achieved six per cent in the elections (six seats in the parliament), which is considered a good result.

The biggest surprise of the elections was the *Democratia Acasa* (Democracy at Home) party, which also gained six per cent and six parliament mandates. It reached voters primarily through social media, mainly Facebook and TikTok. The party does not use traditional political communication or strategies, and did not present any sort of vision for the country. Its leader, Vasile Costiuc, is a friend of George Simion – the former candidate in the Romanian presidential election who is branded as a nationalist and right-wing politician. It is not clear if the party absorbed the vote of citizens who are pro-unification with Romania or just those

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who are disappointed with the status quo. It is also not clear if the party is pro or anti-EU and what their vision is, as there is no political programme.

Challenges ahead

Following the elections, PAS formed the government and will solely rule in tandem with President Sandu. Alexandru Munteanu, nominated by the president, is the new prime minister. Munteanu is an investment banker from Moldova who has experience mostly in the private sector in the United States, France and Ukraine, and no prior political experience. It is fair to say that few people knew about him before the nomination. With Munteanu's appointment and a more technocratic government, especially with the new ministers of economic development and finances that are not politically affiliated, it seems the president and the ruling party aim to set a new tone for the next four years with a focus on economic development, raising local service companies' contribution to GDP, and bringing foreign direct investment into the local economy.

The main goals of PAS in this new term are to sign the EU accession treaty by 2028; carry out ambitious reforms, particularly in the justice sector, which remains the most challenging area and was widely seen as a failure of the previous mandate; and to ensure peace and steady economic growth. The party also faces the task of fostering greater public participation in decision-making and ensuring that consultations are meaningful. PAS has the added responsibility of strengthening social cohesion, bridging polarized groups, navigating geopolitical challenges, and delivering prosperity to citizens.

Beyond politics, PAS must demonstrate openness toward the opposition – showing that even in victory, it is willing to give others a voice, engage them in shared goals, and allow their policy proposals to be debated in parliament. Building a healthy political culture requires inclusivity. Although PAS's parliamentary majority technically removes the need for compromise, dialogue with the socialist and communist parties was absent in the previous term, and no constructive engagement has been established with the MAN party in Chișinău's city hall, an attitude that may well persist in parliament. Nevertheless, some political allies can still be found. One priority should be to bring more parties and politicians into cooperation on EU integration, along with their supporters. While parties may disagree on other issues, EU integration should serve as a unifying objective.

At the same time, EU membership must not become an end in itself. The government should also focus on improving people's everyday lives and pursuing policies that bring prosperity, regardless of the EU path. For the European Union, Moldova's

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third consecutive pro-European vote represents a strategic victory, a much-needed success story for the EU's enlargement policy, and a validation of its support for Eastern Neighbourhood countries. Yet, this victory also places an obligation on Brussels to prove that the path to membership is credible. If the process drags on too long, public disappointment could become evident in future elections.

The ultimate test for PAS will be to govern so effectively that the prevailing crisis narrative loses its relevance. The authorities must build strong institutions with the understanding that they may not hold a majority next time. Whoever governs after PAS should inherit a system where the rule of law protects citizens' interests, minorities are respected, and democratic institutions constrain political overreach. Democracy must rest on institutions, not merely on electoral victories. If, four years from now, the question once again becomes whether Moldova needs to be "saved" from the "bad guys", and PAS presents itself as the sole saviour, that narrative may no longer succeed. EE

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Shifting ground in Russia–Azerbaijan relations

MURAD MURADOV

The tensions between Moscow and Baku seemed to thaw in Dushanbe this past October, as Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev met for the first time since the catastrophic downing of an Azerbaijani passenger jet last year. In a rare gesture, Putin offered a guarded apology – a move seen as an attempt to halt months of escalating hostility. Yet, beneath the optics of reconciliation, the meeting revealed the limits of the two leaders' once pragmatic relationship.

On October 9th 2025, presidents Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin held a bilateral meeting during the CIS Summit in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe. It was their first encounter since relations between Azerbaijan and Russia sharply deteriorated following the tragedy of the downing of an Azerbaijani Airlines jet heading to Grozny in December 2024. In Dushanbe, the Russian leader finally apologized (in his typical ambiguous manner though) for the catastrophe, admitting that the plane had been struck by a Russian air defence missile. He also promised to bring the culprits to justice and pay state-level compensation.

At this meeting, Putin and Aliyev also broadly discussed a bilateral economic agenda, hailing growing trade figures and ongoing logistical projects. Soon after the meeting, the director of the now-closed Baku office of the Russian media agency Sputnik, Igor Kartavykh, who was arrested this June, was released. At the same time in Moscow, Mammadali Aghayev, the ethnically Azerbaijani former director

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of the famous Satire theatre, was released as well. These events prompted Azerbaijani media and experts to talk about a de-escalation between the two countries.

Sour relations

In the immediate aftermath of the airplane tragedy, Moscow, despite Baku's expectations, refused to openly admit its responsibility. Meanwhile Aliyev, who on that very day was heading to St Petersburg for an end-of-year CIS Summit, returned to Baku and gave a press conference during which he, contrary to many expectations, openly voiced his concerns about the Russian role in the tragedy. As new facts surfaced that proved the plane had been damaged by a Russian missile, and while Moscow continued to actively deny this, certain developments happened to gradually poison bilateral relations. Russia was accused of conducting a cyber-attack against Azerbaijani governmental websites and government-related media, while Moscow refused to allow an Azerbaijani member of a parliamentary bilateral friendship group to enter the country for an event. Aliyev's decision to skip the May 9th military parade in Moscow irritated the Russian elite and Putin personally.

Things took a really sinister turn after June 27th, when the brutal detention of a group of Azerbaijanis in Yekaterinburg, with two of them even passing away after prolonged beatings and torture, sparked outrage in Baku. Azerbaijan did not hold back in its response, which included the cancellation of the visit of Russia's deputy prime minister, Alexey Overchuk, and of the planned meeting of the two countries' parliamentarians in Moscow. Baku also announced the cancellation of Russian performances in Azerbaijan and the arrests of several Russian citizens, including two journalists working for Sputnik's Baku office. A series of remarkably critical publications regarding Russia was published in Azerbaijani media, castigating its state ideology as "chauvinistic" and even fascist. On July 18th the Baku authorities announced they would not take part in the CIS Economic Council session.

Aliyev's decision to skip the May 9th military parade in Moscow irritated Putin personally.

While Russian media simultaneously launched a vicious anti-Azerbaijani campaign, expert-level commentaries have been more reserved but still rather menacing: Timofey Bordachev, the director of the influential Valdai Discussion Club, wrote that while similar "misunderstandings" between Moscow and post-Soviet states would inevitably happen from time to time, "Russia's patience is not unlimited."

Soon after, the crisis intensified as Russian missiles started to hit the infrastructure of SOCAR, Azerbaijan's oil and gas company, in Ukraine. This first affected a

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petrol station near Kyiv and, later on, oil reservoirs and a compressor station in the Odesa region. These strikes happened just as Baku began to sell part of its Europe-bound natural gas to Ukraine. Given that last year Moscow itself expressed interest in a gas swap scheme whereby Azerbaijan would partly replace Russian shares in Ukraine's gas imports (though the deal failed to materialize), the latest strikes represented a profound U-turn in Moscow's attitude to Baku's relations with Kyiv.

The crisis intensified when Russian missiles hit the infrastructure of SOCAR, Azerbaijan's oil and gas company, in Ukraine.

Yet another remarkable incident involved the contamination of Azerbaijani export oil in the Baku-Tbilisi-Jeykhan pipeline with chlorides, which were discovered in Romania in early August. Soon, the possibility of Russian involvement was openly admitted to by the Romanian authorities and Azerbaijani sources widely mentioned this issue. This story gained more publicity when on September 6th, Adnan Ahmadzada, a former SOCAR employee and founder of the CLS trading company, was arrested, officially on suspicion of being linked to this sabotage effort. Given that CLS was widely said to conduct large-scale trade in Russian oil and oil products, many rumours immediately linked the arrest to Moscow's anti-Azerbaijani activities.

Decoupling

The general context of developments between Azerbaijan and Russia in 2025 has shown that this crisis is neither situational nor accidental, but rather embodies a profound decoupling process. Attempts to resolve it using customary means, taken both by Baku and Moscow during the first half of 2025, had proven ineffective. At the same time, the scope of the response by the Azerbaijani side has surpassed even the boldest expectations, leaving most observers quite stunned. Aliyev's refusal to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) event in July was symbolically important. While Baku has often opposed Moscow and generally tried to keep its distance, it had nonetheless remained actively involved in the CIS. This participation served as a signal to the Kremlin that, despite its fiercely independent foreign policy, Baku did not intend to alienate itself from Russia – unlike the Baltic states, Georgia and Ukraine. At the same time, it was also seen as a way for Azerbaijan to strengthen its ties with other post-Soviet countries, thereby limiting Moscow's unilateral dominance within the bloc.

This summer demonstrated a "gentleman's agreement" between Putin and Aliyev, which had constituted the backbone of their relationship for many years and

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overshadowed the bilateral institutional dynamic. Yet this relationship ultimately expired and seems to be no longer working. The meeting in Dushanbe then can be best interpreted as the formal recognition of this fact and an attempt to check whether a new one may eventually take shape.

The biggest elephant in the room for bilateral relations remains the war in Ukraine. Lasting for nearly four years, it has gradually weakened and undermined the balance between different elite groups in Russia, pushing Putin to increasingly concentrate power and resources and accelerate the state's repressive machine. One of the war's unwanted outcomes for the Kremlin is the growing importance of the *siloviki* lobby – members of the armed forces, special services and police – at the expense of the other groups' influence. Moreover, Moscow now has to appeal to the mixed lot of nationalists and chauvinists, particularly those with fighting experience, who have been forging a new brand of aggressive Russian nationalism. Growing paranoia regarding any foreign influence has naturally placed wealthy diaspora members in the spotlight as potential agents of unfriendly states.

These developments directly endanger the Russian government's "pact" with business and bureaucratic elites. On the one hand, ethnic diaspora groups (Azerbaijanis being among the most numerous and successful) constitute an important part of Russia's socio-economic landscape. For example, businessmen of Azerbaijani origin are strongly represented in the retail and construction business. These groups have long been among the major objects of ire for Russian nationalists, who have called them "Trojan horses" of their countries of origin, eager to allegedly exploit Russian resources for their own needs.

The biggest elephant in the room for Russian-Azerbaijani relations remains the war in Ukraine.

Since the start of Russia's invasion these opinions have been moving from the margins of current discourse towards the mainstream. Growing apprehension towards foreign influence has made the government more receptive to those voices that call for tight controls over any personalities and groups within Russia with extensive foreign connections. The "Crocus City Hall" terror attack in March 2024, perpetrated by citizens of Tajikistan, exacerbated anti-migrant sentiments within Russia and gave the *siloviki* an ideal opportunity to launch a full-scale crackdown. The location of the tragedy – the event venue belongs to the ethnic Azerbaijani billionaire Araz Aghalarov – also prompted many nationalistic bloggers to speculate about the "Azerbaijani trace" in this attack.

Unashamedly xenophobic sentiments revealed during this campaign are being made worse by the deep resentment linked to various limitations on permissible speech in Russia. For many nationalist Russians, powerful Chechens represent a

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strong irritant they cannot openly challenge due to these current limitations. Many episodes of intimidation and persecution, up to the cancellation of citizenship against notable members of the Azerbaijani diaspora, had already taken place, albeit without so much publicity and consistency. The latest crisis has just dispelled any doubts that these episodes constitute a systematic pattern.

Geopolitical shifts

This growing pressure on diaspora groups from South Caucasus and Central Asian countries fits a larger policy shift whereby business elites are increasingly viewed as "cows to be milked" rather than key stakeholders. Many opinion-makers openly claim that now, since Russia faces a number of challenges due to the "special military operation", is the time for oligarchs and corporations to give away large chunks of their wealth for the nation's needs. At the same time, right-wing populist media groups such as "Tsargrad", "Rybar" and a number of Telegram channels linked to the so-called *"voenkory"* (self-proclaimed military correspondents who are working or used to work in the occupied territories of Ukraine) are receiving more publicity and endorsements from the government. To keep the population mobilized enough to continue the war, Moscow has to heat up patriotic narratives, gradually getting rid of nuances and marginalizing the voices of peace.

Moscow seems to have thoroughly underestimated the significance of the airplane tragedy for Baku.

With all that being said, the rapid escalation between the presumed "allies" can hardly be explained only by internal Russian processes. At its core, it all stems from tectonic geopolitical shifts that challenge centuries-old conventions about Russia's global and regional status, as well as its traditional *modus operandi*.

First, Moscow seems to have thoroughly underestimated the significance of the airplane tragedy for Baku. The traditional boorishness of Russian political communications, which regard apology as the gravest sin and a symbol of weakness, clashed with Azerbaijan's changing self-perception as a middle power worthy of respect and honesty. Aliyev's irritated reaction to the Kremlin's refusal to apologize for the tragedy and conduct a transparent investigation was seen in Moscow as a stance too bold. As Baku started to leak the details of the tragedy to the media, clearly implicating Russian air defence officers, the Kremlin's frustration multiplied. This is probably due to the uncomfortable fact that it does not have a monopoly over sensitive information anymore and could not conceal the facts.

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The countries have definitely developed an expectation mismatch with each other. While Moscow increasingly wants all the countries from the "near abroad" to keep distance from the West and avoid expressions of solidarity with Ukraine – Azerbaijan failing on both conditions – Baku believes that retaining friendly and formally even "allied" relations with Moscow, inviting Putin for a state visit last year, which inflicted significant reputational costs, are the maximum it can do without hurting its own interests. This mismatch was proved by the parties' reactions to the plane crash: Russia's expectations from Aliyev to blame, at least partly, the Ukrainian side for the incident, proved completely futile. Moreover, Baku has significant reasons to be disappointed in Moscow's behaviour: while it pinned significant hopes on potential integration with BRICS at the summit in Kazan last year, Azerbaijan was denied even partner status. While this decision was allegedly made due to an Indian objection, Russia did not do much to help.

At the same time, Russia likely views the rise of Azerbaijan's influence and capacities with suspicion, even though Baku has never promoted any intentions to confront or at least contain Moscow. While avoiding Manichean rhetoric of "NATO versus Russia" widespread around the former "Eastern Bloc", it has steadily worked on limiting Russia's deep-seated influence within the country by gradually replacing Moscow-associated cadres. Economically, Baku has never been much dependent on Russian ties, as its export revenues overwhelmingly come from the European market.

Gamechanger

It was the bold resolution of the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that has had the most far-reaching consequences for the region and relations with Russia. While Moscow in general had comprehended the unfeasibility of the pre-war status quo, it failed to offer a new framework that would keep its influence in the South Caucasus. The previous strategy of "divide and rule" ceased to work. Baku's definitive rejection of Putin's offer to "leave the status problem for the future" during the Sochi meeting in October 2022, marked a turning point. After Sochi, the Azerbaijani operation in September 2023, the dissolution of the self-proclaimed "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic", and the eventual withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers in the following April all became just a matter of time.

This succession of events triggered the Armenian government to accept the new realities and take a firm course towards reconciliation. The announcement of a bilateral consensus on a peace treaty text in March 2025, which eased tensions and paved the way for the Washington memorandum, signalled the end to the

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era of conflict-centred manipulation of the South Caucasus for Moscow. As the path towards an agreement was growing clear, Russian officials started to make statements castigating "western attempts to impose a premature peace without thoroughly considering regional realities and national interests of Azerbaijan and Armenia", sending a very clear message that Moscow wants to keep its monopoly as the ultimate arbiter of peace in the region.

The Kremlin's repeated attempts to prolong the standoff pushed Baku and Yerevan to distance themselves from it, concentrating on bilateral negotiations. Their unexpected visit to Washington in August this year, to initial the peace agreement at the White House, was a further blow to Russia's plans to gain new leverage in the region. Of key importance was Yerevan's agreement to allow the "Zangezur corridor" – the road connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave and renamed the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP) – to run under the management of a US company. This was chosen rather than the Russian FSB, which had sought control. This arrangement, naturally approved by Baku, made it difficult for Moscow to continue promoting its narrative of an "inevitable Azerbaijani attack", a theme it had long used to pressure Armenia.

There are discussions that the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project may soon finally take off.

Peace with Armenia is only part of the story, though. Baku's recent geopolitical endeavours, most importantly its rapidly growing cooperation with the Central Asian countries, which aims to bolster energy transit and connectivity as part of the projects linking the western and eastern parts of Eurasia, raises its international weight. Most importantly, however, it serves to strengthen the sovereignty of the whole region which until recently has been lacking global exposure.

Recently, Azerbaijan has been expanding its ties with Turkmenistan, and there are discussions the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project may soon finally take off. Given that Kazakhstan, mostly dependent on Russia for transporting its hydrocarbon resources to the global market, has been viewing increasing exports via Azerbaijan, Baku definitely aims to assume the role of a regional energy hub. Moscow views this process as a direct encroachment on its hegemonic privileges. Alarmism about "the establishment of Great Turan", "cultivation of Russophobia, etc." reflect this major concern. The balance of power around the Caspian is shifting more quickly than Russia is ready to admit. Hence, we can expect that the standoff with Azerbaijan is not a one-off event but rather a reflection of the current state of affairs and Moscow's perception of it. In the near future, similar confrontations between Moscow and some other post-Soviet countries, most probably Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are quite likely.

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New normal

The crisis between Azerbaijan and Russia may have been precipitated by a tragic combination of events. However, it is a logical consequence of the complex processes that have been unfolding in recent years. Moscow, fixed on the idea of "turning back the clock" and restoring its superpower status, feels frustrated with the rapidly reshaping global chessboard. Its traditionally haughty attitude towards post-Soviet states has prompted a mishandling of the airplane tragedy, while the lack of flexibility makes Moscow resort to the obsolete tools of influence that only draws its former Soviet republics closer to each other.

Yet, it is too soon to claim the establishment of "new normality". "The spirit of Dushanbe" will prevail only if the remaining detainees are released, systematic attacks on the Azerbaijani diaspora are stopped, and most importantly, Moscow accepts its status as "one among a few" geopolitical actors in the region, building horizontal relations with Baku without expecting special treatment.

Azerbaijan has consistently maintained that it is interested in expanding economic cooperation and even suggested that the TRIPP could become part of the North-South network. The ball is now in Russia's court. A return to normal is hardly possible unless the Kremlin re-evaluates its strategy in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. EE

Murad Muradov is the deputy director of the Topchubashov Center, a Baku-based think tank. His areas of expertise cover European politics, the politics of identity and nationality, and international political economy.

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Putin's goal has always been a greater Russia

An interview with Ann Linde, a Swedish politician of the Social Democratic Party and former minister for foreign affairs. Interviewer: Adam Reichardt

ADAM REICHARDT: We are seeing a rise in Russian provocations in Europe. There were drone incursions into Poland, jets over Estonia, drones in Romania, and even incidents near Denmark – as the assault on Ukraine continues. Do you think Russia is testing NATO and the EU with these actions? And how do you assess the response so far?

ANN LINDE: I think Russia is testing both NATO's solidarity and its response, particularly to see whether it can exhaust member states economically. Drones can cost even a few thousand euros, while some of those intercepted over Poland were brought down by interceptors worth significantly more, in the millions. If cheap drones force such expensive reactions, that's a clear way to weaken our defence potential. At the same time, the incident in Poland showed NATO's unity and readiness: German, Dutch, Italian, and other allies quickly came to Poland's aid, and of roughly 20 drones, nearly half were shot down. It was a rapid and coordinated response. The second point is that drone defence needs to be accelerated. Sweden already has such a system in place to protect Gotland, an island of strategic importance east of the mainland, where just last week we held a military exercise. There is also a proposal to create a "drone wall", particularly for countries bordering Russia. In this sense, the recent incursion was a wake-up call, since most NATO members have not prioritized the drone threat.

Ukraine, meanwhile, has developed expertise that many European countries still lack.

Definitely and it can deliver this know-how to Europe. It's an interde-

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Photo: Alexandros Michailidis / Shutterstock

pendence between Ukraine and the rest of Europe.

Here at the Sarajevo Security Conference we keep hearing that war is at Europe's doorstep and that we must be clear-eyed about it. Do you think Europe is prepared for further escalation and is Russia willing to push even further?

Right now Russia has its hands full with Ukraine, but it wants to project the opposite. Moscow has repeatedly claimed it is at war with NATO, even though there is no fighting on NATO territory. This image is carefully crafted: the Kremlin wants to appear strong enough to take on the Alliance. It also serves a domestic purpose – boosting morale and convincing its own people that Russia could fight NATO, if it chose to. At the same time, NATO's decision to raise defence spending to five per cent of GDP was very significant. Whatever one thinks of Donald Trump, his pressure on Europeans to spend more has clearly had an effect. I think that's a good thing, and that today Sweden, the Baltic states, and Poland are all heavily rearming.

Would you then say that with US engagement declining, security guarantees for Europe are in question?

In my opinion, the United States will remain in NATO and will honour Article Five. But it's important to remember that Article Five does not automatically mean a military response – that's a common misunderstanding. In Sweden we debated this extensively during our NATO accession, because ultimately

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each member decides how to act in a given situation. We are fully committed to solidarity within NATO, but the form that support takes is up to us – and the same applies to the United States. It took two days for President Trump to react to the drone incursion in Poland – and when he did, he even questioned whether it might have been a mistake. By contrast, other NATO countries moved quickly to support Poland, which also sends a signal. At the same time, Trump's recent statements on Ukraine – that it might win and even reclaim its territory – mark a significant shift in rhetoric. Whether this translates into action is unclear, but the change in tone is notable.

Do you think Trump has come to realize that working with Putin is not the way to end this war?

Trump believes that personal relationships are crucial and that he could end the war because, as he once told President Emmanuel Macron, Putin "wants to help him". But that is not how Putin – or Russia – has ever acted. Moscow's strategy has never been built on personal ties, but on long-term goals. As early as 2007, Putin made clear that his objective was to restore a "greater Russia". And in the Russian political tradition, a leader cannot be called "the Great" without expanding territory. Thus, for Putin, achieving that title also means conquest.

As a result of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Finland and Sweden entered NATO very quickly. Were you surprised at how fast your country made this decision and completed the process?

I can't say I was too surprised. After all, I was one of the key players in making it happen.

Can you then walk us through a little bit about how the process took place?

Well, the first thing that happened was, of course, that when the full-scale invasion started, we rather quickly saw that now, for the first time since the Second World War, there is a country that is violating international law in Europe by invading a totally peaceful country which poses no threat. Russia's moves were by no means an act of self-defence, in any way. The second thing was that we saw rather quickly how Russia broke every law of war by targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, as well as raping women and committing torture in a terrible, terrible way. Then the question needed to be asked – are we safe with our policy of military non-alignment? For two centuries, Sweden pursued a remarkably successful policy of neutrality, first introduced in the 19th century by our French-born king. Before that, Sweden had been an imperialistic power, but then deliberately shifted to a strategy of staying out of conflicts. Today, however, we must ask ourselves whether this is enough, given how far Russia has already shown it is willing to go. Finland, of course, reached this conclusion more quickly, and history helps explain why. In 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Finland; a second war followed in 1941, which ul-

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timately cost the country 12 per cent of its territory – that's a lot!

At that time 70,000 Finnish children were sent to Sweden as war children, including the father of the current Finnish president, Alexander Stubb. There is a collective memory as to what happened and since Finland has a 1,340-kilometre direct border with Russia, they are experts. The change in public mood was the fastest that has ever happened. We also knew what was at stake with Russia, and we understood that if Finland is going to join NATO, then Sweden would be the only country around the Baltic Sea that would not be in NATO – apart from Russia.

By that time, we already had a very close military relationship with Finland, including joint defence planning. Yet, if Finland were to join NATO, our relationship would inevitably change – Sweden would be left entirely on its own. This would not only make Sweden less secure, but also very costly to defend. Thus, I led a parliamentary inquiry commission that included representatives from all eight parties in the Riksdag. We concluded that the bilateral defence agreements that we have signed since 2014 was not enough. They provided for joint exercises and close cooperation, but lacked the decisive element — the Article Five-type mutual defence guarantee.

In the end, my party – which was in government at the time, and where I served as foreign minister – changed its position. The government and the parliament followed suit. Ultimately, six of the eight political parties supported NATO membership. Yet, remarkably, all eight agreed on one key point: Russia would not change its behaviour or intentions. Every party, including the Greens and the Left, recognized that Russia posed a long-term threat. Even a change in leadership in Moscow, they concluded, would not alter that reality. This consensus also translated into broad political backing for a massive rearmament programme – supported, again, even by the Greens and the Left. And for Sweden, such unanimity was truly exceptional. EE

This interview took place during the Sarajevo Security Conference, which was held between September 26th and 28th 2025.

Ann Linde is the former minister for foreign affairs of Sweden. She held that office from September 2019 until October 2022. Prior to that, she served as minister for European Union affairs and trade, and from 2014 to 2016, she was state secretary at the ministry for home affairs.

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

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Our duty is to safeguard the memory of Auschwitz

A conversation with Piotr Cywiński,
director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.
Interviewer: Aureliusz Marek Pędziwol

AURELIUSZ MAREK PĘDZIWOL: On the 50th anniversary of Austria's annexation by Nazi Germany, the Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl famously said that every nation is capable of a Holocaust. Was he right?

PIOTR CYWIŃSKI: I don't know. These words were quite provocative, which is probably why it has remained a famous quote. Frankl said them in Austria. I wonder if he would have had the strength to make the same statement in other places around the world? Perhaps every nation is capable of genocide, but not every nation has committed it. Looking at the horrifying examples of the 20th century and of recent years, one could compile a far longer list of countries or regions that have not experienced genocide than those that have. For instance, there was no genocide in Britain's Falklands War. Thus, even a dramatic military conflict can still be conducted in accordance with international conventions and without systematic violations of civilian rights.

The Holocaust, however, was a particular and unprecedented form of genocide. Nothing comparable has occurred since the Second World War. Therefore, if Frankl's statement had used the word "genocide", I would probably agree with it. In principle, it can happen anywhere, because every human being is capable of killing. None of us truly knows where the boundary lies beyond which we may cease to restrain ourselves from the worst acts.

Given this, how should the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum understand and communicate its mission today?

Memory has a huge role to play here, as it is a living experience that warns us against mistakes and falling into hateful

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extremes. It was crucial that after the Second World War, places commemorating genocide and genocide education centres were established, and above all, that the very concept of genocide was defined. With all the horrors we have seen, this has probably saved us in many places from an escalation that could have ended so gruesomely.

I first heard Frankl's words from Simon Wiesenthal (the Holocaust survivor who became one of the world's most prominent Nazi hunters – editor's note). He told me that the centre he established in Vienna pursued not only Nazi perpetrators, but also members of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, because, as he also put it, "every nation is capable of a Holocaust." "Even Jews?" I asked. "Even Jews," he replied. Today, Israel faces accusations of committing genocide in Gaza. The scale of civilian casualties is undeniably immense. Yet the core question remains: do Israel's actions meet the legal and historical criteria of genocide?

It is not for me to judge. That responsibility lies with the International Criminal Court in The Hague and other competent legal authorities. Historians do not adjudicate legal definitions. Genocide is neither a journalistic label nor an epithet to be thrown at someone. This legal category of crime was formulated by the Polish-Jewish lawyer Rafał Lemkin during the Second World War. Since then, several definitions of genocide have emerged, and they do not fully coincide. There is Lemkin's original formulation, the United Nations definition, and a number of later variants developed in legal and academic contexts. The conflict in Gaza is a completely horrific conflict, there is no doubt about that.

In June, your museum received the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański Award, established jointly by the City of Wrocław, the Ossoliński National Institute, and the College of Eastern Europe. The last institution is particularly devoted to fostering good relations between Poles and their neighbours to the East. Do you think this award was granted to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in recognition of the role you play in Eastern Europe?

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum is responsible for preserving and interpreting the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp, which is one of the central places in the history of the Second World War. Our mandate does not encompass the Holocaust in its entirety, nor the whole system of German concentration and extermination camps, nor the broader machinery of German terror. Our duty is to safeguard the memory of Auschwitz – a site that has become a symbol, and which is at times misused by various actors to inflame political conflict. Even so, it is difficult to overlook certain analogies between the policies of the Third Reich and the Kremlin's behaviour towards Ukraine.

That includes genocide?

Apart from genocide, the Third Reich also pursued a broader project of territorial conquest and the creation of an

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Photo: Praszkiewicz / Shutterstock

empire meant to endure for a thousand years – the so-called "Thousand-Year Reich". Putin's ambitions are strikingly similar. This invasion has two fundamental objectives: territorial expansion and the Russification of the Ukrainian nation. There is, however, a crucial difference. This time, the world has said "no" and has begun to respond – perhaps not always quickly enough, and not always in the way we would have wished, but the scale of support for Ukraine is unprecedented since the Second World War. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, I have been to both Kyiv and Lviv. I have seen how brave the Ukrainians are and how extremely tired they are. But above all, they are desperate because they know that this is a fight for everything, for their very existence.

This war is a failure of the international security system. The United Nations is already dead. It was not created for something like this to happen without any reaction on its part. This war also represents a profound failure of diplomacy. The so-called peace talks – currently led by the United States – are, in truth, entirely utopian. Everyone understands that no genuine peace is possible under present conditions and that Russia's primary interest is to buy time, which means there is a high chance that the war will resume. At the

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same time, virtually every Ukrainian has already lost someone close: a family member, a friend, or a comrade on the front. For them, continuing the fight is a moral obligation; to give up would be to render those deaths meaningless. We therefore find ourselves in a situation in which diplomatic negotiations have little real traction, because they are being conducted by people who are, in effect, hostages to a life-and-death struggle imposed by Russia.

On June 25th 2025, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Council of Europe's Secretary General Alain Berset signed an agreement in Strasbourg to establish a tribunal to judge Russia's crime of aggression against Ukraine. Do you see any role for the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in supporting such activities?

I am not convinced that the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum should engage in political activities, even if they are justified. It should serve to preserve the memory of what happened in the past. Around 70,000 SS personnel – men with wives, parents and siblings – served in the German camp and extermination centre system across Europe. The chances of identifying them after the war were considerable. Yet of those 70,000 individuals, only about 1,650 were ever brought to trial. With the exception of figures such as Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz and one of the principal architects of the camp's killing operations, the vast majority received prison sentences of merely three to five years, often suspended. This demonstrates how superficial justice was after the Second World War. Some members of the Third Reich's leadership were executed, but beyond that, accountability was extremely limited. So when violent conflicts erupted in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing could say: "What can they do to us? They did nothing to those people." These were the consequences of failing to apply justice fully – or of allowing it to be weakened for the sake of political convenience.

Another example is Rwanda. In a simplified form, yet with all the essential elements of judicial procedure intact – a defence, a prosecutor, and an independent judge – the country tried and imprisoned around 40,000 perpetrators of the genocide. I believe roughly half of them remain in prison today. And Rwanda achieved this on its own, without any international assistance. So it is possible. Will it work with Russia? We must recognize that the future depends on it. Failure to prosecute genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity only encourages others. But will it be feasible to conduct such trials in practice, rather than in absentia? I have my doubts. At most, the principal perpetrators may find their ability to travel severely restricted. They are certainly not going to fly to The Hague to stand trial voluntarily. Perhaps proceedings will have to be held in absentia, so that at least there is a clear moral statement that crime leads to judgment.

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A few months ago, when I visited Ravensbrück, I spoke with Andrea Genest. At one point I referred to the former concentration camp as the institution she directs. She gently corrected me: "It was a concentration camp. Now it is a memorial site." Preparing for our conversation, I noticed something else: in Germany and Austria, the institutions responsible for former Nazi concentration and extermination camps are almost always called *Gedenkstätten* – memorial sites. In Poland, by contrast, they are usually described as museums, most of them state-run. Does this divergence in naming reflect fundamentally different ways of approaching the past?

Names are one thing; the legal realities across Europe are far more complex. In France, sites of former camps are administered by the Office for Veterans and War Victims, a body subordinate to the ministry of defence. This is striking, given that the victims were overwhelmingly civilians rather than soldiers – after all, these were not prisoner-of-war camps. In Germany, former camps are typically managed by public foundations created by regional authorities, universities, and survivors' associations. Austria presents yet another model: as recently as a decade ago, Mauthausen functioned as a department within the interior ministry, and it has had its own legal personality only for a few years. These institutions may be called by different names.

Yet in Germany and Austria, their names always include *KZ-Gedenkstätte* – a designation that explicitly marks them as places of remembrance for a former concentration camp.

Gedenkstätte, memorial, *lieu de la mémoire*, are nice-sounding names, but they were invented quite late, not immediately after the Second World War. Eighty per cent of these institutions were organized in the second half of the 1960s, when a new language of remembrance was already beginning to emerge. Secondly, they were created in a state of panic. The second half of the 1960s was a time when the post-war generation was coming of age, and there was panic about what these young people would know about the world if they had not lived through the war. That is why these memorial sites were created everywhere at that time.

And how was it in Poland?

It was completely different, because Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau began to serve this function on the ruins, immediately after liberation – Majdanek as early as in 1944. The survivors of Auschwitz also arrived here immediately after liberation from Ebensee and Flossenbürg to save what they could and convince the authorities to preserve this place. They wondered what should be done with it and came to the conclusion that a museum was the formula closest to eternity. All institutions can be changed, reorganized, merged or divided. However, a museum's mission is to preserve something forever. I think that this is why former prisoners resorted to this concept and not, for example, a monument, an educational centre or a school.

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Various countries have passed laws requiring hooliganism and deliberate destruction in places of remembrance to be treated differently, because it insults the victims. But the problem with German *Gedenkstätten*, for example, is that they are not deeply rooted in law.

In Poland, former camps are organized as museums, and a museum is a fundamentally different kind of institution. It took me some time to realize what this means in practice: inter-museum loans of our objects – such as victims' shoes, suitcases, and other personal belongings – operate under entirely different rules and are protected by international conventions. This matters enormously, because we are the sole repository in the world for these materials. In this sense, the intuition of the survivors – mainly Polish political prisoners in the years 1945–47 – proved remarkably farsighted: by establishing the former camps as museums, they ensured a level of legal protection that has benefited these collections ever since.

In Germany, a *Gedenkstätte* may be codified one way in one federal state and quite differently in another. When such an institution lends its exhibits to Australia, for example, there is no guarantee that an equivalent legal category exists there, or that international regulations can be invoked to protect the objects. It is worth noting that the leading American institution in this field, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, deliberately includes both terms – museum and memorial – in its official name. They recognized early on that this distinction carries significant international consequences, including legal ones.

Is that why on your website we can read "Memorial and Museum – Auschwitz-Birkenau"?

Yes. This is because a memorial site refers to a certain space, while a museum is an institution that takes care of that space.

Not that long ago the Polish writer Jacek Dehnel drew attention, in a Facebook post, to photographs of Auschwitz prisoners that had been altered by artificial intelligence after being downloaded from the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum's website. Beneath his post, the Museum added a powerless comment: "Unfortunately, according to Meta, publishing artificially generated photos of victims – and, increasingly, fabricated biographies – does not violate the platform's regulations." Problems of this kind will only become more frequent. What can be done in response?

I hope that one day Meta and other platforms will be held accountable for this. Their explanations that "everything is OK" are childish – and virtually impossible to challenge. In most cases there is simply no one to argue with, because when a problem is reported, one encounters a robot rather than a human being. So yes, there will be more and more of this. But moments of cultural or civilizational acceleration tend to provoke a reaction; the pendulum eventually swings

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back. I have the sense that the artificiality of these messages will, at some point, reach an absurd extreme, prompting a natural return to real people – to individual faces and to words spoken by human beings. For the moment, it is just annoying. Soon, it may become dangerous, because it involves the creation of a history that has never taken place. We are no longer dealing only with the falsification of facts, but also with the falsification of memory and the lessons that flow from that memory. And that is the most dangerous thing. If we treat memory as a source of moral reflection, self-understanding, self-control, generally as something that is supposed to improve and strengthen people in the face of today's threats, then any attempt to weaken or distort this memory distances us from our goal and destroys more than it might seem at first glance.

Perhaps institutions such as the European Parliament or the European Commission should take up this issue?

If they are able to understand the consequences, then yes, they should. Undoubtedly, there will be fanatics who will claim that this is an attack on freedom of expression. However, in my opinion, when it comes to moral issues, we need to act a little more wisely than such extreme libertarians. EE

Piotr Cywiński is the director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim.

Aureliusz M. Pędziwol is a journalist with the Polish section of Deutsche Welle.

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A stop off at the gambling hall on the way to school

RALUCA CRISTEA

In rural Romania, gambling rooms stand just steps away from schools, drawing in students long before lessons start. Despite legislation banning betting halls near educational institutions, lax enforcement and local habits mean minors still find easy access – a reflection of how gambling regulation often fails to reach beyond the country's big cities.

At 6:40am in Domnești, a small village in Central Romania, the smell of coffee and cigarettes and the sound of crumpled sports betting tickets start the day off for multiple high schoolers. Only a few hundred metres away from the high school, two gambling rooms have become a hangout spot for commuting students, arriving before the school opens at 7:10. Even though the owner of the establishment claims he does not allow underage patrons to play the slot machines, the students spend their mornings there smoking, drinking soda and coffee and sometimes even gambling. The principal of the high school admits the phenomenon is known and worrisome.

A bill adopted by Romania's Senate on March 13th 2023 proposes banning bookmakers and gambling houses operating less than 300 metres walking distance from schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, cultural institutions or banks. However, the proposal has been blocked in the committees of the lower chamber of Romania's parliament for over two years.

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To understand the rules governing minors' access to gambling rooms, two female employees describe contrasting realities. In large cities, entry is strictly controlled through automatic ID checks. In smaller towns, however, where there is no security, employees admit that minors often manage to get in. The stories of two young people reveal that first contact with gambling frequently occurs during the teenage years – often introduced by adults or peers. Nationwide, the exact number of gambling rooms is not publicly disclosed by the national gambling authority.

Morning routine

It is past six in the morning. We're in Domnești de Argeș, a village with a population slightly over 3,000 according to the 2021 census. At the crossroads of Neagoe Basarab and Alexandru cel Bun streets, in an island of green surrounded by iron chains, lies a map of the village, Romanian and EU flags, a monument to heroes and two cannons facing east. Slowly, dawn breaks. At the end of March, a spring coat does not hold up to the cold. The ground glitters with frost.

The first clients are beginning to show up at Senator Bet – a gambling house at the intersection. The building is a two-storey house, with a tidy facade and a tiled roof. The porch – wooden and covered in see-through tarp, presumably for smokers – opens up directly to the pavement.

"One cappuccino, one raspberry Lipton and a pack of blue Dunhill," a young man in a military vest, there with his girlfriend, orders at the bar. A coffee is five lei, while a soda is seven. He drops ten more lei at the live betting machine and goes out on the porch for a smoke. The gambling room is a low-ceilinged space. When you come in through the porch, you see the bar where you can pick from a wide variety of sodas, energy drinks, cigarettes and coffee. On each side of the door there is a slot machine. Next to the machines, a sign reads gambling is illegal for those under 18.

A Senate bill bans gambling near schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, cultural institutions and banks.

Large Lavazza cardboard boxes are overflowing with lost and crumpled betting tickets. Not counting the porch, the space has five small tables surrounded by stools. Blue LED lights complete the mood set by the four screens set up on the wall, some broadcasting the sport network, others winning games. Even the porch is heated by an electric machine. Here, too, the clients have two screens to follow the games and a slot machine to bet on them. Two female employees are working the shift, taking turns to go out for a smoke on the porch. Round 79 is coming up. In 24 seconds they will announce the Jackpot.

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It is 6:40am, the crack of dawn. Two girls carrying backpacks on one shoulder walk into the gambling room. One stays on the porch to look out for their bags, and gives the other her money to get her a sparkling water and a cappuccino. They light up cigarettes. Eight other high schoolers walk in and spread out in the room, each doing their own thing. "I slept three hours," one of them complains. Another goes straight to the bar. The employee of the gambling room asks him to tell her his personal numerical code (CNP), which is similar to a social security number.

"Do you think I don't know it?" the high schooler asks in response.

"What if I asked for your ID right now, would you give it to me?" the employee retorts.

"I don't have it on me," the boy responds. He has three betting tickets on the table. A female classmate just sat down next to him. They seem close.

"Just a warm-up, because on Saturday I placed all the money I got."

"Which money?"

"The money I got from the slot machines."

He bet in the game "lucky six" – a game in which multiple numbered lottery balls are drawn from a board organized in rows and columns. He follows them on the screen on the wall, and, as they are being announced, he crosses off the numbers with his lighter off the ticket. It is 6:55.

Quiet arrangement

In the opposite corner of the room, another high school girl reads the drawn numbers to a bunch of boys: "12, 6, 4, 13, 23, 29, 48, 7".

"I don't like to hang out here, let's go outside," says a voice in the back of the room, from a group of three girls. And they head out on the porch, only after they check behind them not to forget anything. That is how every morning goes here.

On the way out of the betting house, I run into another student. "Honestly, I don't have any opinion, I don't really get involved in that," he says when I ask what he thinks of the gambling room as a hangout spot. He sends me over to the high school – "maybe you'll find kids there more eager to talk."

There is about 500 metres between the gambling room and the Technological High School. Classes start at 7:30. In front of the high school, cars and buses shuttle students, one by one. Many of the students are commuters. Daniel, 18, gets to school at 7:20am by his personal car. He says that amongst the students, Senator Bet is known as a casino. Up until April last year, the place had slot machines too. But then the law that prohibits slot machines in towns with a population below 15,000 was passed. Since then, they removed the slot machines, resulting in many

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"starting playing a lot more online". He says he was "never into it", but he has classmates who bet 50 to 100 lei (around ten to 20 euros) each time. The teachers, he says, know about the students' habits, but "it's like a quiet thing, this arrangement".

There were times when the police showed up to the gambling room. "It never went well," he recalls. The principal, he says, "said we desperately need to come up with a solution for this".

Because the town hall does not organize a school shuttle bus system that would adapt to the timetable of the high school, many students get to school half an hour early by private shuttles. George commutes from a nearby village and arrives in Domnești at 6:30am. Since the school only opens at 7:10, he spends his time at the gambling room.

"We go there early in the morning, since it's open 24-hours," he says. "I don't do much. I just drink coffee. Or I take a nap. But I have friends who gamble on lottery balls, on roulettes. We don't have any other place to go that's warm and comfortable," says the seventeen-year-old. He played too, but he says "he was unimpressed". He has friends that play regularly – some put in one lei, hoping they'll win back three, others put in "300, 400, even 1000 lei".

"It begins here, in school"

Ovidiu Nicuț has been the high school principal here since 2016. He claims he tried to reduce the phenomenon of students starting their mornings in the gambling room near the high school.

"It's true that a part of the students that are absent from the first lesson go there as well. It's not few. But we can't say 450 are missing out of 750," he explains. "It begins right here, in school," says the principal, referring to the fact that often times students encourage one another to play. In total, the institution has approximately 750 enrolled students, out of which almost 450 are in high school.

Officially, classes start at 7:30, after a decision made through the administration council, meant to allow students to catch the shuttles taking them back home. Otherwise, they would be stuck in the village until around 5pm. Buses or private shuttles, like the ones coming from nearby Pitesti, do not fit perfectly with the high school timetable. Thus, students who arrive early often head to nearby spots: a small grocery market, a kiosk in front of the school, and two gambling rooms.

"We notified the police station in Domnești. In a specific case, they communicated they found nine students in the bar at 7:30am. We informed their parents and marked their absences in the electronic attendance sheet. But we can't apply any direct sanctions, the rulebook only allows sanctioning acts that occur on

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school grounds," the principal says to me. He admits the impact is negative. The high school confirmed officially, in a written response, that students of the school have been found in the gambling rooms "Total Bet" and "Senator Bet" during class hours. The principal claims they sent notices to the city administrators in towns from which the students commute. Social workers visited some of the families to talk to parents. "We have students with 150 to 200 unexcused absences," he adds, "with around 25 severe cases. All of these were reported to local authorities".

The school says they asked for official support from the rural Domnești police and requested action to identify students frequenting bars or pubs during school hours. The high school requested that for every case, the police should communicate the name of the student, as well as the date and time they were found. Local police sent the school an official note in November last year, in which they mention identifying nine students in a pub. The school says the only thing that could be done in this case was taking points off the conduct grade of the students for unexcused absences.

Since 2023 gambling rooms are prohibited in towns with a population of fewer than 15,000 inhabitants.

Between September 2024 and May 2025, the school organized 18 informational and counselling sessions about gambling for students. Of those, 11 were organized in collaboration with the community police, and the rest were planned by teaching staff, during homeroom and extracurricular sessions where partnering institutions were present. "The school alone cannot compensate for the lack of support and supervision of the family," explained the principal.

Who is to blame?

According to Romanian law, which regulates the organization and operation of gambling in the country, only persons over 18 years old are allowed to participate in gambling. Minors are not even allowed to enter gambling rooms regardless of whether they play or not. Since October 2023, when Emergency Ordinance No. 82 was adopted, gambling rooms are prohibited in towns with a population of fewer than 15,000 inhabitants.

In Romania, gambling is divided into slot halls, betting agencies, lottery agencies, poker clubs, bingo halls, and casinos – both online and street-based. Gheorghe Gabriel Gheorghe, president of the national office for gambling, stated in an interview last year that Romania had 309 gambling organizers and 442 licenced second-class economic operators (intended for providers of related services in the

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gambling industry), a number that decreased compared to the previous year due to legislative regulations. The number of slot machines decreased from 86,000 at the beginning of 2024 to 52,000 by the end of the year. Last year, the total amount collected from taxes on gambling for the state budget was approximately 865 million euros, an increase of about five per cent when compared to previous years, according to Bursa.ro.

Constantin Ilie-Racoviță is the administrator of the two gambling rooms in Domnești. He claims that the establishments do not allow students to access the machines, in accordance with the law, but the two spaces are a few steps away from a high school and often attract teenagers.

"I'm not campaigning for them to gamble. But what should I do, not let them in? We're not letting them play, I don't need the two lei, five lei they have", Racoviță argues. He admits that, unlike the Total Bet location he owns where the gambling room is separated from the bar, in the rented space of Senator Bet there is no clear delimitation between the gambling machines and the area where students can have their coffee. He deflects blame, saying that the employees are often "lazy, careless", that "they don't really care," but says he sees a much larger danger in gambling games youth can access online.

The Romanian police claim they do not own or manage data regarding check-ups on minors' access to gambling halls. Meanwhile, representatives of the institution stated that according to the legislation in force, the responsibility for monitoring and sanctioning irregularities in this area lies exclusively with the national office for gambling.

The police claim they do not own or manage data regarding check-ups on minors' access to gambling halls.

The Argeș county police inspectorate admits to a lack of sanctions, explaining that, up to this point, it has not found "any criminal acts involving students from Domnești village, so no sanctions have been applied to either the students or the administrators of the respective locations", even though students, according to the legislation in force, are not allowed to enter the gaming halls. Moreover, "the police officers identified several students who were absent from classes, and the management of the school was informed in this regard. No sanctions were applied, and the situation was managed through preventive measures and institutional collaboration," the local police reported.

A few of the parents of the students asked the owner to prohibit minors from entering. "I would later receive calls from the parents asking me to let their children in, saying they're with a friend, a girlfriend, or a boyfriend, and just want to stay for a soda," explains Racoviță, the owner of the gambling establishments.

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Stricter ID checks in bigger cities

To understand how employees are trained regarding minor access to gambling rooms, we spoke with an employee at a room in Ploiești, a larger room, and a former employee of a small town location. In the Ploiești casino, identity verification is performed formally through an internal app which automatically flags whether a client is underage or has registered for self-exclusion – a voluntary ban on gambling.

"No one enters without verification. Minors have no place in our gambling room," shares the employee, who has two years of experience in the field. Upon hiring, staff receive clear instructions regarding the prohibition of minor access. "You receive all the necessary information and there are strict rules you cannot bypass."

In smaller towns and rural areas, without security at the entrance, the reality is often different. One employee who worked three years in a gaming hall in a small urban area states that she initially followed the rule strictly, but found it difficult to maintain. "My colleague on the other shift frequently let in minors or drunk individuals. It was hard to control the situation when they showed up in groups, they had an attitude and ignored warnings. Since I was alone during my shift, I avoided conflict and tried to handle things peacefully."

We spoke with two young men, aged 24 and 25, who played for the first time when they were teenagers. Mihai recalls that he used to go with his father to sport betting establishments during primary school. In the first year of middle school, he placed his first bet on football games with his childhood friends, and at 16, he played slot machines for the first time. He started with two to five lei per day, with neighbours from his block. Eventually, he started putting in 200 to 250 lei in a single evening.

"Some nights you could really feel out of control. When you're gambling on your phone, putting your card details in, everyone can lose themselves. And yes, a few times I felt like I was heading in a bad direction, but I didn't fall into the same trap as some of my friends," the 24-year-old shares. His friends lost money but "did not end up on the streets". He remembers a case of a friend who "lost control completely". "He asks for 50 lei to gamble, then bets 100,000 and loses everything in the same night."

Addiction

The obsession sometimes starts with the first big win. That was also the case with Răzvan, now 25. He was 17 when he first won. He placed a ten-lei bet and won "around 3,500". "That's when the obsession with this sport started," he says.

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Around the age of 17, he also started playing slot machines. His ID was not always required. Some people knew him, and it often depended on which employee was on shift. When he was in high school, he lost up to 1,000 lei in one evening.

"Especially after winning, I went almost every day. I was there for at least two to three hours after school. Sometimes I would leave at 11pm, even though school ended at 1pm." He sought advice from family and friends, but all he got was "don't go anymore," or "don't bet anymore."

"It's hard when you get caught up winning, and you want more and more and more," he admits. "But you end up with nothing. Losing control means losing money. A lot of money. When you want more, you bet more, and you don't win anything. Then you start thinking you won't go back for a while, but after two or three days, you find yourself right back there," Răzvan says. Now he tries to limit himself to "a maximum of ten lei every two or three days" because "he almost always ends up losing". Since reducing his spending, he has noticed that "it's actually a good thing," but he still has friends around him who "sometimes, less often, win; sometimes, more often, they lose". EE

Translated by Simina Popescu

To protect the identity of the interviewed minors their names were changed. This article was first published in Romanian in Școala9 and produced within the Ratiu Forum Journalism Mentorship Programme, under the guidance of Adam Reichardt, editor in chief of New Eastern Europe.

Raluca Cristea is a Romanian journalist writing for *Școala9*, where she combines storytelling with analysis concerning topics such as artificial intelligence, refugees, and the education system in disadvantaged areas. She is also a copywriter for a national radio station.

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The fight to preserve Kyiv's past and Ukraine's future

THEODORE GRIFFIN

Beneath one of Kyiv's most iconic squares lies an archaeological site that reveals the story of Ukraine's past and its deep Orthodox Christian roots. Despite its importance to Ukrainian identity, activists are fighting daily to protect it from corrupt developers. Their struggle takes on even greater meaning amidst the ongoing war, as Ukrainians continue to defend not only their land but also their heritage.

Kyiv's iconic Poshtova Square sits next to the broad waters of the Dnipro and looks out onto the wooded parks beyond. Old as the city itself, the square connects the ancient centre's various districts, yet it has seen numerous facelifts over the centuries. The latest has sparked a row that strikes at the heart of Ukraine's national destiny.

With a little imagination, Poshtova Square serves as a microcosmic study of Ukraine's past and present. Its small yellow church was destroyed by the Soviets in the 1930s but rebuilt earlier this century. The square's eponymous post office was commissioned by Tsar Nicholas I in 1846 and is soon to become an art gallery. What was once a Soviet-era riverboat terminal is now home to the American University of Kyiv. There is even a McDonalds.

But few queuing for a Big Mac above realize that beneath them lies one of Kyiv's most important archaeological discoveries. Excavated ten years ago, the site – a monument connected to the Baptism of Kyiv and the medieval city port – currently

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hosts an improvised museum run by activists: lawyers, architects and historians, who are trying to prevent what would be its fatal replacement by a shopping centre.

Baptism

Accessing the museum means taking a perilous walk along a slip road that winds around the square before knocking at a corrugated iron gate. Behind the gate lies a tent where there is always someone on site to keep away city officials. An office space is used by the activists who manage the site. The wooden remnants of Kyiv's medieval port are scattered around large columns supporting the square above. Pools of stagnant water collect around the gangways built by the activists and archaeologists who founded the museum.

"The water is actually a good thing, as it keeps the air damp, which is good for preserving the historical wood," said Olga Rutkovska, an art historian who co-founded the museum with the architect and lawyer Vitaly Biletsky in 2018. The large wooden elements once constituted old quays and tax collection buildings. "In manuscripts, this port was described in the first half of the tenth century. It was crucial for Ukraine because Kyiv was the capital," Rutkovska told us.

Chief among the findings is the miraculously well-preserved wooden road which once led from the river to Queen Olga's castle. It is a moving portal into Kyiv's tenth-century past. "This road is very important … it led Kyivans to the river, where they dragged an idol of the pagan god Perun during the Baptism of Kyiv," Rutkovska said.

All Slavic Orthodox churches can trace their existence to the tenth-century baptism of Kyiv's people.

The Baptism of Kyiv is one of the most important events in the region's history. This amounted to Kyivan Rus's conversion from paganism to Christianity. All Slavic Orthodox churches can therefore trace their existence back to the tenth-century baptism of Kyiv's people in an icy tributary of the Dnipro. Though the exact year is disputed, most scholars hold it to be 988 AD.

This mass conversion occurred after Kyivan Prince Volodymyr the Great married Princess Anna Porphyrogenita, sister of the Byzantine emperors. He had led a successful campaign to besiege the Greek – and therefore Orthodox – city of Chersonesus in Crimea. Upon his return to Kyiv, Volodymyr called all residents to come to the river, where they were baptised by priests from the conquered Chersonesus.

"Since there are direct descriptions that the Baptism occurred here, it couldn't have been anywhere else… there aren't really any existing sites relating to the Bap-

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tism, so that means the historical site at Poshtova is crucial and must be studied," Rutkovska added.

"This ancient port, as the site of the Christianization of Kyivan Rus', is of upmost importance for Ukraine. And not just for us, but ironically also for Russians, Belarusians, and Greeks – it disproves Moscow's myths."

This myth is an allusion to Vladimir Putin's use of the Baptism of Kyiv as propaganda to legitimize his full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For him, it demonstrates that Ukraine belongs to the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world). Rutkovska told us that it is erroneous to state that this history is shared between Moscow and Kyiv.

Kyivan Rus began around the ninth century. Moscow's first monastery was founded in 1282.

"Kyivan Rus began around the ninth century. Moscow's first monastery was founded in 1282. The Muscovites have far more in common with the Golden Horde than the Rus'," Rutkovska retorted. This history belongs to Ukraine. Acknowledging this, in 2008, then President Viktor Yushchenko declared the Baptism of Kyiv as the birth of the Ukrainian nation. The designated date, July 28th, is duly celebrated by Ukrainians as Statehood Day.

Murky developer

Excavations of the site began in 2013, during the construction of an underground shopping centre beneath Poshtova Square. After the remains were discovered, a team of archaeologists then petitioned for the area to be transformed into a museum and for the construction plans to be stopped. This attracted the attention of Ukrainian lawmakers. In 2015, they insisted on adding the site to the State Register of Monuments. It was finally designated as such in 2016. At the beginning of 2017, however, the developer attempted to destroy the site by pouring concrete over it. This act of vandalism compelled 20 civic organizations to come together in 2018 to defend it.

"Poshtova Square is one of Kyiv's most significant historical sites. It illustrates the city's multi-layered culture and the formation of Ukraine's identity," said the architect and urban planning expert Denys Tokarev, who has been involved in efforts to protect the site since 2018.

Since then, public stewardship of the site has continued, with aims to develop it into a world-class archaeological museum. After years of reaching out in vain to both the ministry of culture and Kyiv city authorities, activists decided to register the museum independently. In 2022, through a civic initiative, the Museum

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of One Nation at Poshtova Square was established. But this has not ensured its long-term safety.

The developer, Hensford-Ukraine LLC, has reported links to associates of Viktor Yanukovych, the pro-Russian president ousted in the Maidan Revolution in 2014. Synonymous with corruption and malevolent intrigue, Yanukovych now lives in exile in Russia. The connection is unsurprising, given that the project was originally approved before the Maidan by Dmytro Isaienko, then the deputy minister of regional development under Yanukovych.

Yet, according to reporting by Radio Free Europe's Maksym Savchuk, Hensford-Ukraine LLC never received legal rights to the plot for the construction of the retail space. The ongoing influence of such companies indicates that the Maidan Revolution provided no clear break from the unwanted malpractice associated with the pro-Russian forces. Over ten years later, Yanukovych-era developers still clearly hold a strong grip on the nation's construction industry.

Over ten years later, Yanukovych-era developers still clearly hold a strong grip on the nation's construction industry.

However, they have been met by legal resistance. In 2022 the Supreme Court duly rejected Hensford-Ukraine's claim that the development was legal. All construction permits and planning conditions were therefore cancelled, in what appeared to be a happy ending. Yet, the fight was not over. "The city authorities did not take any steps to protect the museum. Law enforcement wasn't contacted, nor did they cancel the order for the construction of the mall at the city administration level," said Olga Rutkovska.

Symbolic significance

Kyiv's administration, headed by Mayor Vitali Klitschko, had effectively refused to acknowledge the Supreme Court ruling. "We spent a year speaking with the authorities in the city administration, trying to turn the site into a city museum," Rutkovska said. "Klitschko accepted this roadmap but has done nothing. At a hearing in June, they said that the finances weren't available and cited the plans to build a mall." This is unusual, since the Kyiv mayor's office was made aware of the Supreme Court ruling in 2022. Then, what previously looked like indifference or ignorance from the mayor's office quickly became apparent hostility towards the museum.

"On May 21st this year, representatives of the Kyiv city administration, Klitschko's team, tried to block our access to the site. Since then, the museum's team and

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Olga Rutkovska poses in front of the exhibit. She is an art historian who co-founded the museum with the architect and lawyer Vitaly Biletsky in 2018.

Photo: Denys Klymenko

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Accessing the museum means taking a perilous walk along a slip road that winds around the square before knocking at a corrugated iron gate.

Photo: Denys Klymenko

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The wooden remnants of Kyiv's medieval port are scattered around large columns supporting the square above.

Photo: Denys Klymenko

Excavations of the site began in 2013, during the construction of an underground shopping centre beneath Poshtova Square. After the remains were discovered, a team of archaeologists then petitioned for the area to be transformed into a museum.

Photo: Denys Klymenko

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It is not clear why the Kyiv city administration appears to continue its support of a construction project that was declared illegal by Ukraine's Supreme Court.

Photo: Denys Klymenko

concerned Kyiv residents have been on duty around the clock to protect it," said Rutkovska.

It is not clear why the Kyiv city administration appears to continue its support of a construction project that was declared illegal by Ukraine's Supreme Court. What their actions do suggest is that the capital's officials perceive a proximity of interests between them and the developer, Hensford Ukraine LLC.

"Corruption is the dark side of major projects … it is important to openly acknowledge and address issues, rather than ignore them," said the architect and activist Tokarev. "The lack of state funding [for the museum] is a consequence of corruption, presenting obstacles and political will," he claimed. *New Eastern Europe* contacted the Kyiv mayor's office for comment, but received no response.

The Kyiv city administration supports a construction project that was declared illegal by the Supreme Court.

The full-scale invasion brought more attention to Ukraine's heritage. Russian President Vladimir Putin's *casus belli* consisted of a series of inaccurate descriptions of the region's history. This forced Ukrainians to contemplate their homeland's past.

"After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this museum acquired symbolic significance," said Olga Rutkovska.

Given Poshtova's importance, it attracted attention from the national government. In 2024, Ukraine's then acting culture minister, Rostyslav Karandeyev, visited the site and described it as a "remarkable national treasure". He suggested that it should become a national museum. Sadly, governing under the strains of martial law has complicated the government's abilities.

Source of national pride

For the museum's long-suffering activists, the war further vindicated their cause in the eyes of the public. It also grew their ranks. The designer Iryna Kostiuk felt the need to join efforts to volunteer for the museum in the wake of the full-scale invasion.

"Now, when Russia is trying to destroy the cultural heritage of Ukraine by distorting history, any evidence of our existence is worth its weight in gold. We risk disappearing as a nation," she said. For her, the authorities' actions reveal that "they are not interested in the existence of Ukraine as a separate cultural country and, therefore passively support Russia's efforts."

In 2024, the museum at Poshtova Square appeared on the popular Ukrainian history channel *Realna Istoriia* (Real History). In a YouTube video that received

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over two million views, the museum site is spoken of as a precious source of national pride.

"A sincere thank you to the Ukrainians who are finding and preserving our Ukrainian roots," one comment read. "The attitude of our authorities, especially those of Kyiv, towards the country's historical monuments is lamentable," the second most liked comment stated.

This video encouraged the activist Varvara Korol, a data engineer, to get in contact with the museum's founders. "I'd lived abroad for many years, and the thought of losing my home country, its culture and history, drove me to fight to protect it," she told us. "Ukrainian society has transformed [since 2014]. People have grown stronger, more engaged, and aware of their identity and values." That a group of private citizens is preventing an act of historical vandalism on Poshtova Square reflects how Ukraine's values have been brought to the surface by war and revolution.

The museum at Poshtova Square is spoken of as a precious source of national pride.

"Historical memory, compassion, fairness, creativity, curiosity … these are our national values," mused Korol. For those engaged with protecting the treasures under the square, ensuring the survival of historically important sites is yet another front against imperialism. The elite's apathy towards them is, according to the activists, akin to the threatening stance of the Kremlin.

"This war is partly the result of previous Ukrainian governments not doing enough to protect and promote our own cultural identity," Korol reflected. "Ukraine is already on the right path, trying to solve it ourselves. It's hard enough to deal with war and this situation," said Vitaly Biletsky, the architect and co-founder of the museum.

Quiet constitutional crisis

The refusal of the Kyiv city authorities to enforce the Supreme Court's decision also highlights a troubling constitutional gap. In theory, the Supreme Court is the highest legal authority in Ukraine. Yet in practice, as the case of Poshtova Square shows, city authorities can simply ignore its rulings without consequence.

"This is essentially a quiet constitutional crisis," said a legal expert advising the Museum of One Nation.

Biletsky expressed frustration that Ukraine's administration still requires large improvements, ten years after the Maidan. "Only two years after the Maidan, the old ways returned; citizens didn't participate in city administrative matters. But

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it wasn't properly democratized, either. Participative elections and hearings were greatly reduced. A lot of law remained that was written under the Soviet Union or right after 1991. Many things remain blurry."

This, Biletsky claimed, is what allowed the Kyiv mayor's office to ignore the 2022 Supreme Court ruling that the construction bid was illegal. "Klitschko, elected mayor of Kyiv in 2014, has had a lot of freedom and power here." Biletsky lamented the fact that the full-scale invasion, and the imposition of martial law, has greatly hampered progress in turning the site into a state-backed museum.

"We had a meeting with the ministry of culture. This is the first time that private people have created a museum. The authorities pretend that we are some random people without much to do, but we have been very proactive, working with the support of Swedish and American museums. Many officials don't realize the importance of the site," Biletsky pointed out. Yet, he added: "during a meeting, some deputies were laughing at the protestors due to the haphazard nature of the camp."

The events at Poshtova Square reflect that the political class is out of touch with how indispensable stories of Ukraine's history have become in maintaining the nation's morale. The full-scale invasion unboxed a frenzy of curiosity in the country's past. Books and videos like that of *Realna Istoriia* have surged in popularity. For Olga Rutkovska, who has devoted a lifetime to the preservation and restoration of Ukraine's precious historical sites, saving the Poshtova museum is not a distraction from the war effort. Securing Ukraine's future also means preserving evidence of the history that ties them to this land.

"If we lose Poshtova Square, its remains, we are simply losing ground to Russia," she said. EE

Theodore Griffin is a freelance journalist working in Ukraine. His work has appeared in the *New Voice of Ukraine* and the *Daily Mail*.

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How Poland stole UK universities' lunch in Africa

RAY MWAREYA

In recent years, Poland has quietly emerged as an unlikely magnet for African students, drawing thousands away from traditional destinations like the United Kingdom. Attracted by low tuition fees, accessible visas, and good educational standards, young Africans are finding in Central and Eastern Europe what Britain can no longer easily offer: affordability and opportunity.

Dramatic claims by Zimbabwe's foreign minister in March that 10,000 students from her country are studying for degrees in Poland alone show a picture of how Central and Eastern European nations are gradually creaming away Africa's academic talent from traditional tertiary schools in the United Kingdom and Western Europe.

"The UK is damn expensive; the Tories' [Conservatives'] "hostile" immigration policy is intact in Labour's time. I could be made to leave after graduation," says Tanaka Garwe, a science student from Zimbabwe studying at the University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, Poland.

The Zimbabwe minister's figures might have been over the top as the respected Polish education magazine, *Perspektywy*, noted a record number of international students, surpassing 100,000 in 2023. Zimbabwe, a top sending country, had 3,600 students. Still, that is a sizeable number, Garwe says.

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A no brainer

When Garwe was applying to study outside of Zimbabwe in 2020, he checked the universities in England first, as any middle-class student from Zimbabwe often does. The cheapest he could find was Queen's University Belfast for around 28,000 euros per year. With mandatory accommodation and living expenses that UK visa officers demand to see, the bill would double to nearly 46,000 euros.

"For that amount I can build a mini university, or better a clinic in Zimbabwe," he laughs. He cross referenced with Polish universities and was able to find out that it was "just" 5,000 euros on average. "Deciding was a no brainer," he says.

Most of the Zimbabwean students studying in Poland made private arrangements to finance their education and were not on any government scholarships, said Sheila Chikomo, the Zimbabwean deputy foreign affairs minister, to *New Eastern Europe*. Until the last decade, Zimbabwe and wider Africa's English-speaking students wishing to study in Europe usually made the UK their first choice, adds Fiona Magaya, the education secretary of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. It was a choice laced with a deep post-colonial psyche, she says.

The UK was the dominant colonial power in the history of African nations. Most of the elite prime ministers, civil servants and captains of industry governing from Zimbabwe to South Africa, and from Kenya to Nigeria, have some UK-earned bachelors, masters or PhD degree, she adds.

"A UK master's degree earned via distance education was always seen as more prestigious than a full time, on campus degree obtained, say in Hungary or Poland," Magaya says.

As of early 2022, the latest date for which data is available from the Universities UK portal, there were still 58,000 African international students studying at UK universities. Nigeria was said to be the biggest sender of students to the UK. The pull of London, a city of global finance and an aviation hub, the once-booming UK graduate economy, and the liberal post-graduate work visa introduced by successive Labour governments, made the UK a priority, while Central and Eastern Europe was more of an afterthought for Africa's academic talent, Magaya adds.

But the cart has been upturning gradually – with figures showing that the number of Nigerian students going to the UK has dramatically fallen by half in 2024. Not only the bitter taste of the immigration "hostile policy" lingered, but aggressive tuition fee hikes among the UK's universities have taken a toll even for local families, says Joylean Sithole, a British trained nurse from Zimbabwe who is sending her eldest child east to Poland to study law.

All of it has been to Poland's benefit, adds Doug Siziba, a part-time truck driver from Zimbabwe who is studying for a masters in Warsaw. "Poland has become very

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attractive lately," he says. "I work part time as a local truck driver and can afford an apartment for the equivalent of 600 euros. In London I would need two years of monthly savings just to afford half the tuition fee," he says.

Siziba has brought his wife along with him to Poland, and she now has a baby who was born in Poland. He sees himself establishing roots in Poland beyond his studies – and raising a family there because "the Polish economy is hiring so many African workers from truck drivers to Polish-educated African nurses. As soon as the baby is a year old, my wife is starting her senior care work diploma here in Poland because we want to live here and grow old here," he says.

Quality education at a bargain price

Siziba also describes how he often receives calls from his friends studying in the UK who are worried of being pushed to leave after paying so much money as a student and graduating. As Nigel Farage's Reform Party soars in the polls, the UK government recently announced plans to double the number of years needed for foreign workers and students to earn the status of Indefinite Leave to Remain (permanent residence) from the current five years to ten years.

"My friends in the UK with no permanent residence are enquiring about the prospects of building their careers here in Poland," he says.

Though Poland is enacting tough laws for asylum seekers – the government has proactively introduced measures to retain the foreign talent that graduates from Polish universities. Graduates in Poland can apply for a nine-month permit to start a business or find a job. When economic opportunities are found, graduates can apply to stay longer and eventually get an EU "blue card".

"It's easy to get jobs here in hospitality, manufacturing, transport logistics – and stay forever in Poland," says Siziba. Other Eastern European countries like Estonia, have even moved further – recently introducing 90-day tourism visa free agreements with African countries like South Africa.

Ultimately, the biggest pull factor drawing African students to Central and Eastern Europe, especially destinations like Poland, is the comparably "high" quality education, a "fairly easy" visa regime, and bargain tuition fees as low as 3,500 US dollars per year, says Sithole. She looks around her community in England and sees the impact of "high quality" Polish education. Polish skilled workers are highly respected across major European economies like Germany and the UK in dentistry, electrical engineering, midwifery, or construction. "Whenever I go to British hospitals, I am in awe of the professionalism and skill set of Polish trained doctors and nurses," she says.

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Garwe, the biomedical sciences student from Zimbabwe, agrees and says, as a sweetener, Zimbabwean and African students going to study in Poland and other East European nations do not really need scholarships because they can pay the reasonable fees from their family savings. This is unlike "the UK where scholarship applications are fiercely coveted because paying out of pocket is really expensive".

Win-win

Back home in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, Everet Doda has been an education consultant for 15 years. Until the last ten years, students would throng booths at education fairs organized by the UK, Germany, or Irish universities. Her consultancy alone would place 100 students to the UK and Irish universities annually until 2015. Now, "something has changed big time," she says talking of the pull of Central and Eastern Europe.

The booming education business in Zimbabwe is full of consultancies, registered and unregistered, sending students to Eastern Europe. "Poland, Czechia, and Estonia are in demand and we get about 20 inquiries about those destinations daily, from parents and students. Only ten parents per week ask me about British universities," she says.

Poland and Eastern Europe are the new money-makers for educational consultancies shipping students from countries like Zimbabwe. For every Zimbabwean student that passes through Doda's hands and is placed at a Polish university, the entire package and visa processing comes to around 500 US dollars. It is good business but also a win for poorer African countries because "high quality Polish-trained nurses, dentists and engineers who choose to return home are giving us innovative skills that our African universities can't produce."

Poland is a new money-maker for educational consultancies shipping students from countries like Zimbabwe.

African students are a vital component of the Polish job market, says Krystyna Grabowska, Poland's general consul in charge of Zimbabwe. Poland is among the fastest growing countries in the EU, with a projection of 3.4 per cent GDP growth in the second quarter of this year. This provides African students studying in Poland a chance to enjoy the benefits of one of Europe's "most dynamic economies at a very affordable cost", she adds.

Ishmael Zulu, 65, is a father whose 35-year-old son is studying for a master's degree in IT at Kraków's AGH University of Science and Technology and working part time as a database programmer for a Polish supermarket chain. For him,

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Poland's education "is the gift that keeps giving". "We are old, jobless and have no pensions here in Zimbabwe – our son in Poland takes care of our medical bills and food budget – he sends 350 US dollars a month," he adds.

Remittances to families in Zimbabwe from students studying and working in Europe are a key cog of the country's economy, with the Zimbabwe central bank revealing that over one billion US dollars, a substantial increase from the same period in the previous year, flowed to Zimbabwe from its diaspora.

Backdoor

Still, other African students studying in Poland admit that for them Eastern Europe is a backdoor – a gradual path towards Germany, the UK or Western Europe, which is still viewed as wealthier and more desirable. Anele Mujumo, a social work student from Zimbabwe studying at the University of Silesia in Katowice says racist bigotry in Poland and Eastern Europe towards black people is "still slightly higher" because historically, much of Eastern Europe has not had significant populations of Africans staying in their countries.

"In the UK and France, I feel at home because they were our colonizers and the African diaspora is huge there," she says. She doesn't mince her words. She only chose Poland as a "cheaper bridge" because of two fiercely held goals, she says.

"First, I can graduate, work for a while here, get the coveted EU blue card – then settle for wealthier jobs easily in Germany, Sweden or Ireland. Second, I can graduate with a highly reputable, European social work degree in Poland, work here for just two years and then try the UK, where social workers are in demand. Poland makes Western Europe easier," she says.

For Siziba, the truck driver-cum-student who has made up his mind to settle long term in Poland, the quickly expanding African population makes life easier. In his Polish city, there are now dozens of online kitchens doing African (Nigerian, Tanzanian, Somali, Congolese) dishes – and "there's a big sense of Africa shaping up in Poland. I am proud to be a part of it." EE

Ray Mwareya is a freelance journalist covering immigration issues. His pieces have been featured in the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, and *Newsweek*.

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Why Belarus still matters

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We are pleased to present another collection of texts which have been written for *New Eastern Europe* by experts from the Analytical Group "BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION" working within the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw. The group, established in 2020, has produced 14 analytical reports examining key developments across the Eastern European region.

Unfortunately, we have noticed that interest in Belarusian affairs has somewhat diminished in recent years and is too often reduced to the topic of the manipulated migration at the Polish-Belarusian and Lithuanian-Belarusian border. It has also been understandably overshadowed by the ongoing Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Yet the Analytical Group's analyses remind us that Belarus is no less central a target of Russian imperial policy than Ukraine.

The process of its absorption by the Russian state, while far advanced, is not yet complete. And although there is little ground for optimism, it is still possible that this process may remain unfinished for the foreseeable future. As of autumn 2025, debates on Belarusian politics inevitably started to raise an unsettling question: how likely is a renewed – perhaps even a relapse into – policy of dialogue with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime?

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Since the post-election crackdown back in 2010, it seemed evident that such engagement lacks a sound foundation. Nevertheless, in 2014 the West resumed dialogue with the regime during the negotiations over the Minsk agreements, which was the term used for the diplomatic framework initiated by Lukashenka and aimed at aimed at solving the conflict over Donbas.

The protests and subsequent repressions in 2020 removed any lingering illusions about the nature of the regime – though perhaps not definitively. Today, renewed uncertainty over what comes next leaves ample room for speculation. There can be no illusions about Lukashenka's intentions or preferences. At the same time, it is essential to remember that the Belarusian civil society – although silenced, repressed, and scattered – has not ceased to exist. Identifying the conditions under which it might regain the ability to act openly is difficult, yet its potential remains an important factor in any assessment of Belarus's future.

For these reasons, Belarus merits continued and close attention. The analyses gathered here offer precisely such insight, examining the Belarusian economy, the regime's domestic and foreign policy, the nature of its dictatorship, propaganda and historical narratives, migration-related issues, and the evolving relationship with Ukraine.

That is why, we encourage you to read and reflect on these texts.

Jan Malicki, Director, Centre for East European Studies, University of Warsaw
Henryk Litwin, Coordinator, the Analytical Group "BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION"

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Belarus between a spin dictatorship and a dictatorship of fear

MAXIM RUST

Five years after the 2020 protests, Belarus has entered a phase of authoritarian consolidation, further entrenching its overtly dictatorial character and deepening its dependence on Russia. Real power remains concentrated in the hands of the entrenched ruling elite, which has redoubled its efforts in the realms of propaganda, historical policy, and state ideology.

This year marks five years since the 2020 protests in Belarus, once seen as a potential turning point in the country's history. Instead, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime not only survived but consolidated its control, learning key lessons from the mass unrest. Its endurance has rested on escalating repression, the loyalty of the security apparatus, and crucial Russian support – decisive in stabilizing the regime after 2020. Cohesion within the elite has also sustained this stability, though fractures could emerge amid economic crisis or Belarus's direct involvement in the war in Ukraine. The regime's resilience has further relied on the economy's adaptability and renewed propaganda that reshapes historical narratives.

From a realist perspective, the years 2020–25 form a distinct electoral cycle: from the contested 2020 presidential vote to the "presidential elections in name only" which took place in January 2025. Viewing this period as a closed cycle reveals the evolutionary, not revolutionary, character of the regime's transformation. The 2025 campaign was intended to complete this process – to finalize Lu-

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kashenka's political consolidation. Its aim was to dot the i's and cross the t's of Lukashenka's political consolidation.

Referendum

Yet, contrary to the expectations of many commentators and analysts in 2020, particularly those who were optimistic about the inevitability of democratic change, Belarus did not experience a breakthrough. Several factors explain this outcome. Whatever one's analytical stance on contemporary Belarus is, it is now more accurate to describe the state as "suspended" in a transition from a spin dictatorship (which is more akin to soft authoritarianism) to a dictatorship of fear – a condition that, arguably, represents the most "natural" configuration of the Belarusian system in recent political history.

One of the key instruments of the consolidation was the constitutional change introduced after the "referendum" in early 2022, just before Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine. Officially presented as an effort to unburden the president and modernize the system, these amendments in fact aimed to guarantee Lukashenka the possibility of resetting his previous presidential terms. A two-term limit was introduced, but it applies only after a newly elected president assumes office. In addition, eligibility criteria for presidential candidates were tightened by excluding persons with dual citizenship or foreign residence permits, and lifetime immunity was guaranteed after leaving office. At the same time, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly was formally established as the highest representative body with broad competences, including approving policy, initiating legislation, and the right to remove the president.

The 2022 constitutional amendments also introduced a distinctly conservative ideological layer, elevating historical memory to the level of state policy, defining patriotism as a civic duty, and codifying marriage exclusively as a union between a woman and a man. The removal of the neutrality clause from the constitution has been widely interpreted as a concession to Moscow, further deepening Belarus's strategic dependence on Russia. The intensification of the repressions and the orchestrated propaganda campaign surrounding the referendum were designed not only to secure the desired result but also to symbolically close the chapter on the 2020 "elections".

The removal of the neutrality clause from the Belarusian constitution is a concession to Moscow.

Equally significant was the reshaping of the formal political landscape, which in practice amounted to a sweeping political purge. Following amendments to electoral

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legislation, only four political parties remain legally registered in Belarus. All of them are unwaveringly loyal to the authorities. In a telling display of the regime's self-assurance, even the semblance of a token opposition was deemed unnecessary.

Historical policy matters as much as economic resilience

The Belarusian economy has shown a remarkable capacity to adapt, defying early predictions that it would collapse under the combined weight of the pandemic and successive western sanctions. Over the past few years, it has become deeply dependent on Russia, which – despite facing its own sanctions and diplomatic isolation – has paradoxically become Belarus's economic lifeline. Minsk has redirected much of its trade towards the Russian market, offsetting sanction-related losses through preferential payments and access to Russian infrastructure, which has resulted in record trade surpluses. While sanctions have undoubtedly hit key sectors and reduced GDP, their overall impact has not translated into political change. The Belarusian state, after all, possesses long-standing experience in circumventing restrictions.

The regime has skilfully exploited the social costs of western sanctions, using them in propaganda to promote a narrative of resilience, portraying the measures as either ineffective or even beneficial to Belarus. Following the introduction of sanctions against Russia, Belarusian companies began operating in what officials described as "greenhouse" conditions on the Russian market, benefiting from reduced competition. At the same time, Minsk has intensified efforts to diversify its external economic relations along the so-called "southern arc," which encompasses China as well as partners in Asia and Africa. Beyond its dependence on Russia, closer economic engagement with China is meant to offset potential losses resulting from the breakdown of ties with the West.

Since 2020, questions of history and collective memory have assumed new significance in Minsk.

Another important, though often underestimated, factor has been the Belarusian state's reconceptualization of modern propaganda. Since 2020, questions of history and collective memory have assumed new significance in Minsk, becoming central to the regime's ideological toolkit. This approach rests on a reinterpreted Russo-Soviet narrative of statehood, infused with a distinctly anti-western – and particularly anti-Polish – tone. The authorities have also mastered the use of digital platforms and information control to craft narratives and suppress dissent, conducting propaganda on a qualitatively more sophisticated level than

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before 2020, notably through YouTube and Telegram channels. Indoctrination has deepened within the education system, with revised textbooks and new courses promoting the regime's vision of history and state ideology.

While some space nominally remains for highlighting Belarusian distinctiveness and sovereignty, these themes never contradict Russian narratives. Regime propagandists now speak openly about Belarus as a dictatorship – and portray this not as a flaw, but as the "right" model of governance amid regional geopolitical turbulence.

Historical policy has been fully subordinated to regime goals, suppressing or outright banning alternative interpretations. There is a growing legal basis for the return to a dictatorship of fear through legal instruments that foresee harsh penalties in domains such as historical narrative. This is illustrated by classifying scholarly books as "extremist" or by the 2022 "law on the genocide of the Belarusian people", which criminalizes alternative interpretations of the Second World War. As a result, communication in the Belarusian language is often perceived as political disloyalty, reinforcing the dominance of Russian in education. Amendments to the criminal code have also enabled criminal cases in absentia not only against opposition politicians but against researchers and experts working abroad.

Communication in the Belarusian language is often perceived as political disloyalty.

Fortress under siege

The configuration of political actors in Belarus has changed markedly since 2020. Most notably, no fractures emerged within the ruling elite that could have threatened the regime from within. The unprecedented scale of repression – targeting not only ordinary citizens but also officials and state representatives – was justified in stark terms: this was an existential struggle for the entire political class, where retaining power was a zero-sum game. The ruling apparatus ultimately closed ranks around Lukashenka and the security services, erasing what little remained of democratic space. This dynamic unfolded amidst a "fortress under siege" mentality, aimed above all at preserving Belarusian statehood as defined by those in power.

Subsequent steps, such as the re-registration of political parties, only reinforced this consolidation. The tightly managed electoral system ensures total regime control over the parliament, as demonstrated by the "elections" in February 2025. Whatever one's interpretation of the current situation, real authority remains concentrated in the hands of the entrenched ruling elite, with only superficial reshuffling at the top.

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In recent years, western media, analysts and policymakers have largely concentrated on the new Belarusian democratic forces. Their performance can be evaluated from different perspectives, but one crucial fact remains: these actors operate entirely from abroad and remain constantly exposed to the regime's repressive reach. Despite this constraint, the pro-democratic opposition in exile has succeeded in establishing a relatively durable political infrastructure that resembles the framework of an alternative state. Institutions such as the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the United Transitional Cabinet, and the Coordination Council now form the backbone of this political ecosystem – one that, for the time being, exists solely in the diaspora.

The pro-democratic opposition in exile has established a relatively durable political infrastructure.

The domestic influence of these exiled structures remains limited, constrained both by repression and by their inherent "extraterritoriality". Disagreement persists over their political relevance: the opposition's impact on Belarusian society appears to be waning, while its priorities increasingly reflect the outlook and interests of the diaspora. The connection between exiled leaders and those living inside the country is tenuous, as many residents do not fully endorse the opposition's stated objectives, such as the withdrawal of Belarus from all Russian-led alliances or eventual accession to the European Union. Although the opposition remains active on the international stage, much of this engagement is symbolic, with only minimal bearing on the policy realities within Belarus itself.

Values or pragmatism?

Five years after the 2020 protests, Belarus has entered a phase of authoritarian consolidation, further entrenching its overtly dictatorial character and deepening its dependence on Russia. Real power remains concentrated in the hands of the entrenched ruling elite, which has redoubled its efforts in the realms of propaganda, historical policy, and state ideology – areas that were once largely secondary. Today, the Belarusian establishment and the emerging democratic opposition function within increasingly separate and self-contained paradigms that rarely intersect. As I have previously argued in *New Eastern Europe*, contemporary Belarusian politics is defined by the dichotomy between these two divergent agendas – and this divide shows every sign of growing wider in the years to come.

From today's perspective, Belarus remains a system suspended between two forms of authoritarianism: a spin dictatorship, reliant on propaganda and con-

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trolled narratives, and a dictatorship of fear, defined by pervasive repression and coercion. This shows that many of the forecasts made since 2020 have failed to materialize. Neither the collapse of Lukashenka's regime nor its rapid absorption by Russia have taken place.

Instead, Belarus continues to send mixed and often contradictory signals. One striking example was Donald Trump's recent conversation with Lukashenka – followed by a friendly, even laudatory, letter from the US president – occurring just as Poland closed its border with Belarus and Russian drones entered EU airspace from Belarusian territory. Another was the release and forced expulsion of several political prisoners, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski. This move raises questions about how such gestures might influence the activities of the Belarusian democratic forces in exile.

For the West, these developments revive an enduring dilemma: should policy towards Minsk remain grounded in values – sustaining sanctions and political isolation – or move to pragmatic engagement, particularly if Washington's approach turns more transactional? Both paths remain plausible. Yet, as Belarus's recent political history reminds us, predictability is rarely part of the equation. EE

Maxim Rust is a researcher and assistant professor at the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw (SEW UW) and a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe*. He has a PhD in political science and is an analyst and managing editor of the Analytical Group "BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION".

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An alliance of creepy uncles

KACPER WAŃCZYK

In a letter to the Belarusian dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Donald Trump wrote that he and his wife were "praying for your health and well-being, as well as for further progress in pursuing our common goals on behalf of the people of the United States and Belarus". Equally charming towards Trump, on the day of the release of political prisoners Lukashenka said: "our main task is to stand by Trump and help him in his mission to establish peace. He stopped seven wars and conflicts, or six".

One recurring theme in the discussions around Alyaksandr Lukashenka's policies is the question of rationality. Too often, rationality is assumed to mean acting like a western politician: avoiding extremes, showing restraint, and maintaining dignity – much like one would at a family wedding. This assumption, however, rests on a false dichotomy between the rationality of the West and the irrationality of the East.

The election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States exposed the weakness of this framing. Suddenly, the self-proclaimed "beacon of democracy" appeared to have abandoned rational politics. Within months, western commentators sought refuge in a convenient phrase – "transactional policy" – to rationalize the irrational. Yet even this explanation leaves certain decisions obscure. Among them is the recent rapprochement between Minsk and Washington DC: an unexpected gesture, like a card slipped under the door.

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A Trumpian shift

Relations between Minsk and Washington have long been fraught. For years, the US did not have an ambassador to Belarus and maintained only a chargé d'affaires in Minsk, which was a telling sign of the relations between the two capitals. The last US ambassador, Karen B. Stewart, was forced to leave Belarus in 2008 after the George W. Bush administration had imposed sanctions on the Lukashenka regime.

In the following years, American diplomats appeared on Belarusian state television mainly in the context of alleged spy scandals. When Lukashenka spoke of Washington, it was usually as the architect of a hostile plot against Minsk or, at times, against both Minsk and Moscow. The US, meanwhile, routinely backed new rounds of sanctions and joined European partners in issuing statements condemning Belarus for its violations of democracy and human rights.

Then came Donald Trump. His first term as the US president saw a noticeable warming of relations between Minsk and Washington. To understand this shift, it is worth recalling the broader context. At the end of 2018, Moscow once again announced it would raise the price of gas and oil deliveries to Belarus. This move was partly an attempt to push Lukashenka into deeper integration within Russia-led structures, and partly a reflection of Vladimir Putin's desire to scale back economic subsidies to Minsk.

In such moments, Lukashenka's traditional tactic was to flirt with Europe – signalling readiness for cooperation with capitals in the European Union in order to gain leverage over Moscow. This time, however, Europe was distracted by its own challenges, from Brexit to political turbulence in Germany and France. Moreover, after years of playing the same game, Lukashenka had worn out the EU's patience; his overtures no longer carried much credibility.

American officials described Belarus as a "bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism".

In that situation, Lukashenka turned to Washington, initially signalling a desire to improve relations with NATO. This was a bold step, considering Belarus's formal membership in a military alliance with Russia, which had already engaged in a war against Ukraine since 2014. Minsk also lifted the restrictions placed on US diplomats in 2008 – including travel limits – and even hired a Washington-based lobbyist to press for the removal of sanctions.

Washington responded positively. In August 2019, Donald Trump's then National Security Adviser John Bolton travelled to Minsk. US officials described Belarus, alongside Ukraine and Georgia, as a "bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism", implicitly portraying Lukashenka as a guarantor of Belarusian sovereignty.

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Yet Bolton's agenda went beyond Russia: he also raised the issue of China, reflecting Washington's broader strategy to limit Beijing's influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

A few months later, in February 2020, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Minsk. It was the first such visit in 26 years. His deputy, David Hale, had already been there the year before. Notably, Pompeo chose not to meet with the representatives of the democratic opposition, a decision that carried weight in the context of the then upcoming presidential elections. In doing so, he effectively granted Lukashenka a measure of legitimacy on the international stage. The visit also had an economic dimension. Referring to the disruption of Russian oil deliveries to Belarus earlier that year, Pompeo declared that American suppliers could step in to support the country's petrochemical sector. At first, he delivered. In June 2020, the Belarusian foreign minister, Uladzimir Makey, announced that the first shipment of US oil had arrived at the port of Klaipėda.

Yet this diversification effort proved short-lived. Once Minsk and Moscow reached a new energy agreement, oil imports from the United States quickly came to an end. This marked the end of the first stage. Both Trump and Lukashenka faced elections in 2020, and both emerged weakened during and after the campaign. Trump lost and left office, while Lukashenka, isolated from the West, had no choice

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but to turn back to Russia. By 2022, he had gone further, facilitating the Kremlin's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. In response, the Joe Biden administration shut down the US embassy in Minsk.

Prisoners for sanctions

With Trump's return to the White House in 2025, relations between Belarus and the US grew even more accommodating. After Lukashenka declared himself president once again in January 2025, the Trump administration chose not to issue any statement – critical or otherwise. Minsk soon responded by releasing a US citizen, Anastasia Nuhfer, who had been detained in Belarus the previous December.

From that point on, trading detainees for political concessions has become a defining feature of Belarus–US relations. On a side note, the Kremlin employed a similar tactic with Washington. As a result, the release of prisoners and their handing over to American officials provided Trump with headlines to boast about, although, at the same time, they kept him indebted to the authoritarian rulers. Thus, in February 2025 three more prisoners, including another US citizen, were released from Belarusian prisons. They were collected in Minsk by Christopher W. Smith, the deputy assistant secretary, who reportedly discussed the "prisoners for sanctions" formula with Lukashenka. Coincidentally, Washington declined to sign a joint declaration issued by western capitals condemning Belarus's 2025 presidential elections.

The Minsk authorities hosted a visit from the US special envoy to Ukraine, General Keith Kellogg.

In this improved atmosphere, the Minsk authorities hosted a visit from the US special envoy to Ukraine, General Keith Kellogg. It took place in June 2025 and was the first high-level American visit since Pompeo's trip five years earlier. The meeting marked a clear break in the western isolation of Lukashenka that had followed the crackdowns in 2020 and Belarus's role in Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Discussions reportedly focused on Belarus's ties with Moscow and Beijing, the war in Ukraine, and sanctions. In return, Lukashenka released 14 political prisoners, among them Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the husband of the opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and candidate for president in 2020.

Two months later, in August 2025, Trump himself spoke with Lukashenka, later describing this experience on social media as "a wonderful talk with the highly respected President of Belarus". According to reports, the two men discussed the possible release of 1,300 additional prisoners. Trump also allegedly sought Lu-

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kashenka's advice ahead of his planned meeting with Vladimir Putin in Alaska the following day.

In September 2025, Belarusian authorities released 52 more political prisoners. The timing was striking: the release coincided with the US envoy Christopher Coale and Deputy Assistant Secretary Christopher W. Smith's arrival in Vilnius. There they collected the freed detainees, just one day before the start of the Belarusian-Russian military exercise "Zapad 2025". By staging this gesture of goodwill on the eve of the military manoeuvres that Moscow organized to raise regional tensions, Lukashenka sought to present himself as a peacemaker, one that is distinct from the Kremlin.

The White House reciprocated Lukashenka's act of "generosity" by lifting sanctions on the national air carrier Belavia and pledging to restore a full ambassadorial presence in Minsk. Trump also sent more personal gestures through his envoys. Lukashenka received cufflinks engraved with a picture of the White House, but more significant was a personal letter from the US president himself.

Lukashenka said that Trump needs help in his mission to establish peace as he stopped seven wars.

According to the Special Envoy Christopher Coale, the letter was signed simply "Donald" and was described as "a rare act of personal friendship". In it, Trump wrote that he and his wife were "praying for your health and well-being, as well as for further progress in pursuing our common goals on behalf of the people of the United States and Belarus". The letter also congratulated the Belarusian tennis star Aryna Sabalenka on her US Open victory in New York, noting that she "represents the best of your country" and that Lukashenka must be proud of her achievements.

Lukashenka was equally charming towards Trump. On the day of the prisoners' release he said: "Our main task is to stand by Trump and help him in his mission to establish peace. He stopped seven wars and conflicts, or six."

All about power

Politics is not a family reunion where all relatives get along (or not). The stakes are much higher here and politicians wield real power. Just as in Oscar Wilde's famous words which are often, though perhaps apocryphally, quoted: "Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power." Driven by this conviction, Lukashenka has too long been surrounded by young and attractive women whom he likes to present at official events. He is known to have had a series of mistresses

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and is notorious for chauvinistic quips such as "Women are our most effective diplomatic weapon" and "Belarus is one of the few countries in the world that can be proud of its large number of beautiful women. They are the wealth of the entire nation." He is also known most strikingly for his retorts to critics: "Whoever he is – lesbian or gay, the one who recently shouted about dictatorship … When I heard that, I thought: better to be a dictator than gay."

Trump's record in this regard also hardly requires elaboration. He has bragged that fame allowed him to do whatever he wants with women. "When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy" are his famous words that shocked many, but also possibly pleased some of his voters. He is equally known for a long list of extramarital affairs and for his habit of dismissing women over the age of 35 as unsuitable partners.

There are many "rational" reasons that could justify the reset in US-Belarusian relations now unfolding before our eyes. Global politics of course matter. Ending the Russian aggression in Ukraine also matters. Building a counterbalance to Moscow matters as well. And economic ties matter too. Yet, it is difficult to imagine this reboot taking place without the unsettling "creepy uncle" dynamic – a blend of power and sex – that seems to bind these two leaders together. EE

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A dictator's attempt to enforce timelessness

TATSIANA ASTROUSKAYA

Alyaksandr Lukashenka's obsession with time suggests that it has become one of the regime's main enemies. To counter it, the regime has been mobilizing considerable resources in an effort even if not so much to win the battle, but at least to delay the inevitable.

Time is the main enemy of a dictator.
Time and one of its dimensions – the future.

Alhierd Bacharevič, The Paper Golem, 2024

In *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*El otoño del patriarca*, 1975), the author Gabriel García Márquez masterfully portrays the distorted temporality of dictatorship. Under absolute rule, time does not flow forward. Instead, it stretches, loops, and circles back on itself. Everything appears to change, yet everything remains the same. Dictators seem suspended outside history, capable of aging endlessly. And yet, as Márquez shows with such force, time ultimately asserts its authority – even over tyrants.

In Belarus, the events which took place both in 2020 and 2022 – and which were closely linked and best seen as part of a single sequence – struck a heavy blow to Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime. They exposed, with rare clarity, the inherent finitude of his rule. Paradoxically, however, these same shocks intensified the regime's determination to prolong its existence, perhaps more than at any moment before.

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Perception of time

Authoritarian regimes have always aspired to exercise unlimited and perpetual power. A common feature of autocratic rule is the manipulation of time itself – bending historical narratives, seeking to reverse the course of events, or suspending the present in order to legitimize their authority. This pattern is also evident in Belarus. Yet within this familiar continuity, important changes can be observed. Over the past five years, a unique combination of factors – the pandemic, the 2020 revolution, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, and rapid technological transformations – has deeply altered how time is both perceived and represented.

On the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Belarusian service of RFE/RL (*Radye Svaboda*) asked its readers a simple yet profound question: "how have Belarus and the world changed since the outbreak of the war?" Yet, for Belarusians, the shock of 2022 was preceded by another turning point in the country's history. In 2020, Belarus was shaken by a mass democratic uprising and its brutal suppression. The aftermath left the country isolated, the society deeply fractured, and the regime complicit both in Moscow's war and widespread human rights violations.

How has our perception of time shifted? After all, notions of time and change are inseparable – each defines and gives meaning to the other. Unlike the commentators gathered by *Radye Svaboda*, however, my focus here is not on how Belarusian society has transformed, but rather on how the passage of time appears from the perspective of those who sustain the authoritarian regime. The idea of examining time grew out of my daily engagement with pro-government Telegram channels over the past four years. Gradually, I came to realize that something remarkable was taking place in the way time itself was narrated and perceived within these digital spaces.

For this essay, entries from Belarusian pro-government Telegram channels and other online media serve as the primary sources. Telegram, in particular, offers unique advantages: it allows for systematic scrolling, keyword searches, and even statistical analysis. These features make it especially valuable in a context where access to other sources – especially archival materials – remains restricted or subject to censorship.

A happy future

An attention to history, one of the cornerstones of the regime in Belarus, has only intensified over the past four years. The regime continues to draw on his-

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torical narratives, seeking solutions to contemporary problems – both domestic and international. Before 2020, the regime's use of history could be described, rephrasing the historian Aliaksandar Huzhaloŭski (2024), as a return – "back to the happy future". It was embodied in the efforts to recreate the era of late socialism, a period that, quite evidently, represented a time of stability and contentment for Lukashenka and those in close contact with him.

This historical framing was rooted in a specific and emotionally charged past. After 2020, this framing began to move beyond concrete historical references, embracing a kind of timelessness or even an appeal to eternity in which the authenticity of the past no longer holds significance. Instead of invoking particular moments in history, the narrative now floats in an ahistorical, fictitious register, where the past is not recalled for its facts but for its utility in sustaining power.

Lukashenka, as well as the Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin, like to cast themselves as historians. And even if they are not historians in any professional or scholarly sense, their understanding of the usability of the past – its function as a political and ideological tool – connects them, in a paradoxical way, with many contemporary historians and commentators of history. This instrumental approach to history is, in fact, not so different from how many of us see our role: as interpreters of the past whose narratives shape the present.

To a certain extent, both autocratic leaders can be seen as by-products of what the French historian Pierre Nora once described as the "age of commemoration". Nora famously warned against the politicization of history, and it is precisely this tendency that has allowed figures such as Lukashenka and Putin to present themselves as historians. Their self-styling draws legitimacy from a political climate in which history is less a matter of scholarly inquiry than a tool mobilized in the service of present-day agendas.

Nora also linked the politicization of history to democratization, noting that processes such as decolonization expanded access to historical narratives, opening space for voices long excluded. Yet democratization does not necessarily entail democratic intent. The widening of the historical arena means that history becomes available to all groups – including those whose purposes are fundamentally anti-democratic.

Substituting time

In her recent book *Verkehrungen ins Gegenteil* (*Reversals into the Opposite*, 2023), the literary scholar Sylvia Sasse examines how ideas foundational to liberal democracy can be weaponized against democracy itself. The treatment of historical

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time in Belarus offers many such examples. One of the most striking appeared in Lukashenka's electoral rhetoric – his infamous claim that the recent presidential elections (held on January 26th 2025) were conducted with the highest degree of democracy and transparency.

The day after those elections, on January 27th 2025, in a conversation with Sergei Lebedev, the secretary general of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Lukashenka declared: "In this election, we tried to do everything so democratically … that not even the most bitter enemy could find anything to latch onto!" A week later, speaking with the Belarusian prosecutor general, Andrei Shved, Lukashenka developed this narrative further: "Pseudo-democratic elections – that is usually what happens in the West."

By presenting themselves as historians, Lukashenka and Putin challenge the doctrine of European historicism.

By presenting themselves as historians, Lukashenka and Putin seek, among other things, to challenge the doctrine of European historicism. As the historian and leading theorist of post-colonialism Dipesh Chakrabarty explains in his book *Provincializing Europe* (2007), this doctrine asserted the primacy of European time – a linear, progressive framework centred on Europe and Europeans. Decentralizing such a framework is both necessary and long overdue. Yet in the case of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, the goal is not decentralization but substitution: the assertion of the primacy of their own time. They aim to position their temporal logic as dominant and self-sufficient.

This is one of the reasons why the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War, was and remains so central. In this sense, this war functions as the "zero moment" in European history: a point at which Eastern Europe finally achieved simultaneity with the rest of Europe and with the West as a whole. It marked a moment of temporal alignment – a triumph of simultaneity – as I would like to call it, to which dictators and populists alike continue to return, again and again. In this context, war serves not only as the realization of political goals such as territorial expansion, symbolic dominance, and the accumulation of resources, but also as the ambition to master time itself, to turn the clock backward or forward at will. War becomes an opportunity – a formative force. As historian Margaret MacMillan writes (2021), "the war has shaped us."

War is peace

Once fiercely promoting the image of Belarus as a peaceful nation, the regime now clings to war as an opportunity: a means of redefining the present and asserting

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control over both history and the future. After the collapse of the Minsk I and Minsk II Agreements, Lukashenka's "peace-making" rhetoric grew increasingly absurd in light of Belarus's actual complicity in Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. In response, official representations of war began to shift. Once it became clear that the Belarusian regime had no real influence over the course or outcome of the conflict, it adopted a new strategy. It downplays the war's scale and significance while continually invoking and restaging the familiar imagery of the Second World War.

"Unfortunately, a misfortune has happened in the neighbourhood. I am absolutely convinced that through our prayers, we will return to the times when our peoples were united. We truly hope that this bright month of May will bring peace to our brotherly nation. And once again, on the banks of the Dnieper, as it used to be, we will celebrate all holidays together," Lukashenka said ahead of the 2024 Victory Day anniversary.

After the collapse of the Minsk I and Minsk II Agreements, Lukashenka's "peace-making" rhetoric grew increasingly absurd.

In this rhetoric the war is portrayed as a misfortune, allegedly caused by vague natural or supernatural forces rather than by a concrete violation of international law committed by Belarus's eastern neighbour. Its cure, accordingly, is framed in terms of prayers and hope. Such fatalism signals a shifting perception of time. Simultaneously, the regime invokes Victory Day, drawing on the experience of the two wars together. This rhetoric exploits the dialectic of war and peace while persistently stoking the fear of war. In doing so, it seeks not only to shape perceptions but also to claim control over time itself.

As an ultimate and radical experience, war inevitably stirs profound emotions, confronting both individuals and societies with the finitude of time – both personal and collective. In Belarus, where past wars have left enduring scars on the population and the landscape, fear and anxiety take root with ease, finding fertile ground in soil already saturated by traumas spanning generations.

Time called upon us?

"Digital time is an indefinite present," the historian Marcello Ravveduto has observed recently (2023). Authoritarian regimes like that in Belarus appear to understand this better than most. Rapid digital transformation offers such "small" dictatorships distinct advantages, making them among the greatest beneficiaries of the new technological order.

By embracing digital tools, the Belarusian regime has dissolved the memory of past wars into the experience of the current one, fusing history and the present

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into a seamless narrative. The instruments of the rapid creation, editing and dissemination of media content have dramatically expanded authoritarian capacities to generate and circulate propaganda. During the most recent electoral campaign, these tools were fully deployed. Their purpose was not only to shape opinion, but above all to manipulate time itself.

Paradoxically, techniques of time-stretching and reversal – once characteristic of the digital sphere – have also been transposed into political reality. One of the most controversial yet emblematic examples was the February 2021 referendum, which elevated the All-Belarusian People's Assembly to the status of a constitutional body. Until then, it functioned only as an advisory forum. With its new mandate, the assembly was expected to oversee and legitimize a future transfer of power – an event which, as we know, has not yet taken place.

The 2025 presidential election once again ended in Lukashenka's "re-election". The result was, however, rejected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and most democratic states. Remarkably, the first session of the newly empowered Belarusian assembly in April 2021 convened under the slogan "time called upon us" (*Vremia vybralo nas*) – a phrase Lukashenka would later recycle as the central slogan of his 2025 electoral campaign.

Lukashenka's obsession with time suggests that it has become one of the regime's main enemies. To counter it, the regime has been mobilizing considerable resources in an effort even if not so much to win the battle, but at least to delay the inevitable. What is striking is the way in which an old dictator's toolkit has been fused with new instruments in this struggle. Three elements stand out: war, the personality cult, and digital technologies.

Lukashenka's obsession with time suggests that it has become one of the regime's main enemies.

First, war has been elevated as the central axis of historical imagination. Historical narratives are used to "rewind" time, repeatedly returning to the experience of the Second World War as a kind of European zero moment. The spectre of future wars, in turn, is instrumentalized as a constant reminder of fragility – both personal and national. Second, elements of a personality cult have become increasingly visible. These should be read less as signs of strength than as an attempt to secure a form of political immortality. Finally, the regime's rapid embrace of digital tools has made it possible to bend time to its will – quickly, flexibly and with far greater reach than ever before.

What I have tried to demonstrate here is that we may now be witnessing the emergence of what could be called a "distortion-of-time regime". At first glance, this may seem abstract, even trivial. Yet the manipulation of time – its deliberate

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bending and distortion – marks a regression to something resembling a pre-modern condition.

Why does this matter? A definitive answer remains elusive. What is clear, however, is that Belarus, and Belarusians more broadly, have been drawn into a state of enforced timelessness: a condition in which they are denied the right to determine their own temporal trajectory. They have been de-synchronized from the wider world, pulled into an ahistorical, even quasi-prehistoric space, where the ruler claims dominion over time itself. This, I believe, represents a worrying and potentially dangerous trend. EE

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In search of a new "Global East"

JUSTYNA OLĘDZKA

Belarus has long been preparing for the arrival of a new world order. It has been working on it politically, economically, diplomatically and culturally, but above all, through sustained propaganda efforts. The question is: what exactly does Minsk mean by referring to the Global East?

A summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) took place from August 31st to September 1st 2025, marking one year since Belarus became a full member of the organisation. The event received extensive coverage in the Belarusian state media, which focused heavily on Alyaksandr Lukashenka's diplomatic activity. During the summit, Lukashenka not only attended the military parade in Beijing commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, but also held a series of bilateral meetings with leaders from China, North Korea, Turkey, Azerbaijan, India, Indonesia, the Republic of the Congo, and Slovakia.

Overall, in the propaganda messages distributed by Minsk, Belarus's choice of an "eastern" vector has been presented as a civilizationally fundamental decision. The turn to the East is intended to demonstrate that Lukashenka understands the *Zeitgeist* and possesses a vision for a new, multipolar world order. He also hopes to show he understands Belarus's role in it, which is that of a guarantor of stability, not only in the region but also, when needed, on the global stage. To advance this image, the country promotes the so-called "Minsk Platform", which it uses as a vehicle for dialogue and conflict resolution. From now on, one of the main routes in this eastward journey, as Belarusian officials suggest, goes through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

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Imagined alternative

Belarus has long demonstrated its commitment to the SCO framework – first as a dialogue partner and, since 2015, as an observer. The authorities in Minsk have consistently promoted the organisation not only as a shared space for security and trade, but above all as a forum for cultural dialogue and the exchange of socio-political development strategies. In other words, in the official Belarusian vision of the emerging international order, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is portrayed as a cornerstone of a new, inclusive multipolar system, rather than an oppositional alternative to western alliances and institutions.

In September 2025, Belarus's First Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Snopkov attended the 76th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, where he emphatically declared Minsk's support for the new initiative announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the SCO summit in Tianjin. The project in question is Beijing's proposal to "optimize global governance", which indicates the vision of a new and "just order" that is grounded in "the principles of sovereign equality of states, the rule of international law, genuine multilateralism, the primacy of humanity, and a focus on practical action".

According to this vision, the world is set to experience the "spirit of Shanghai", while China's global role is legitimized primarily through its achievements. As Snopkov emphasized, "In less than eight decades, under the wise leadership of the Communist Party, the Chinese nation has achieved truly epoch-making successes," adding that "in a historically short period of time, China has become a major industrial, scientific and technological power – a pillar of the world economy and a key centre of international politics."

For the Minsk authorities the western world is in decline and will be replaced by the "Global East".

Clearly, for Minsk the Cold War perspective seems both outdated and unrealistic, as it rests on the assumption that the collective West will remain a central actor in international relations. On the contrary, the official line of the Belarusian authorities is that the western world is in decline, and will soon be replaced by the so-called "Global East".

Belarus has long been preparing for the arrival of this new world order. It has been working on it politically, economically, diplomatically and culturally, but above all, through sustained propaganda efforts. The question is: what exactly does Minsk mean by referring to the Global East? It is not a geographical entity, but rather an ideological and civilizational construct. One that is an imagined alternative to the West, which, in turn, it accuses of colonialism, moral decay, value collapse and economic exclusivity.

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The Global East is presented as the foundation of a multipolar world. It is pluralistic in values, systems and economies. Above all, it is more than just the current international system. In this narrative, major powers such as China, Russia, Iran and India set the tone, while smaller, yet ambitious actors such as Belarus are also assigned a meaningful role.

A post-West order

This new foreign policy vision is not only meant to serve as a way to escape western sanctions, but also as a long-term strategy that will allow Belarus to reposition itself within what it calls a post-West world order. To secure its place in this emerging global configuration, Minsk believes it needs to deepen integration with Russia through the Union State, while simultaneously expanding ties with partners across the MENA region, ASEAN and the BRICS bloc.

Thus the "Eastern turn" is framed as a civilizational opportunity, rather than a geopolitical necessity for a state that for long has been suspended between East and West, between South and North. As the scholar Martin Müller has observed, following 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet empire, the former Soviet republics slipped out of established categories – they were neither poor nor rich, neither peripheral nor central. Thus, to these states the vision of the Global East offers a chance to redefine their identity and claim relevance within a newly emerging balance of power.

Minsk's reorientation towards the East is an important element of the state's information policy, in which the key narratives and motives revolve around China as an exceptional friend of Belarus. The two states are said to be bound by an "all-weather iron partnership". According to the already mentioned Snopkov, Belarus and China are a unique example of cooperation between countries whose dialogue is "free of pitfalls" as there are "no long-lasting historical grudges, geopolitical rivalries, competition for influence or trade wars" between them.

The year 2025 is no doubt a year of deepening Sino-Belarusian cooperation, which is facilitated by a plethora of symbolic anniversaries that serve as occasions for joint celebration. They include the 80th anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War; the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese people over Japanese militarism; the 80th anniversary of the founding of the UN, of which the Belarusian SSR was a founding member; the 30th anniversary of the first official visit of the Belarusian leader, Lukashenka, to the People's Republic of China; and finally, the 15th anniversary of Xi Jinping's first visit to Belarus (while he was still vice president).

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Minsk's reorientation towards the East is an important element of Belarus's information policy, in which the key narratives and motives revolve around China as an exceptional friend of Belarus.

The time has come for Asia

In every opportunity available, Lukashenka reiterates that "the time has come for Asia," describing cooperation with China as "a big deal" and pledging to "strengthen the friendship between the Belarusian and Chinese peoples". Beijing, for its part, reciprocates with rhetoric that flatters the authorities in Minsk's sense of their state's global relevance, declaring its readiness to "firmly uphold the outcomes of the Second World War and international justice together with the Belarusian side, and to build a community of shared destiny for humankind".

This Asian diplomatic and propaganda offensive obviously strengthens the Belarusian leader internationally, which was especially important for him after the 2020 presidential elections, when the European Union and the US froze almost all relations with the Lukashenka regime. At that time, President Xi Jinping was the first to send a congratulatory message to Minsk, while Beijing officially condemned "external interference" in Belarus's internal politics. At the same time, however, China clearly signalled that it is Moscow that remains Minsk's main patron and it does not intend to violate this arrangement of dependency.

Since the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, relations within the Beijing–Moscow–Minsk triangle have grown increasingly complex. Belarus has become ever more dependent on Russia, while ties between Moscow

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and Beijing have deepened, albeit in an asymmetrical manner. Beijing appears to view Moscow as a kind of strategic hinterland –a partner capable of providing educational, training, and technological support to the Chinese military. Such assistance could prove significant for the future implementation of China's ambitions towards Taiwan.

Chinese political and investment influence in Belarus is, of course, tolerated by Moscow – understandably so, especially in wartime. Yet this tolerance likely extends only so far as such activities do not encroach upon Russia's strategic sphere of interest. Beijing, however, shows no urgency to cross that line. Even without doing so, China can keep Belarus – at relatively low cost – within its orbit of influence. Minsk remains a predictable partner in a stable coalition of states that contest the values and principles of western liberal democracy. What unites Minsk and Beijing is a shared rejection of western hegemonism, an aversion to democratic interference in domestic affairs, and the promotion of a sovereign right to pursue their own anti-liberal models of development.

A balancing act

Chinese support for Lukashenka stems from pragmatism and is carefully calibrated so as not to jeopardize relations with Moscow. There are no spectacular declarations, no risky investments, and no attempts to break the informal rules established by the region's key players. There indeed is cooperation, but strictly on Beijing's terms, and within boundaries acceptable to Moscow.

For Minsk, its relationship with China functions primarily as a convenient propaganda topic rather than a genuine pathway to independence from Russia. This dependency was clearly illustrated on September 26th, when Lukashenka and Putin held more than five hours of talks in the Kremlin. Their discussions focused on security matters, plans to construct another nuclear power plant in Belarus, and future cooperation in the oil and gas sectors over the next five years. After the meeting, Putin highlighted the "very good" state of bilateral economic relations and noted the steadily increasing trade turnover, which now exceeds 50 billion US dollars.

The narrative created for propaganda purposes about Belarus shifting to the Global East is, in the current geopolitical setting, rather a means of promoting the illusion of being able to choose foreign policy vectors independently. Similarly, in matters of economic cooperation – China has become the second most important trade partner for Belarus, but in practice this is a very asymmetrical relationship. China exports more goods to Belarus than it imports, and the loans it grants must be repaid through, for example, the purchase of Chinese equipment. Minsk is

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therefore trying to build an alternative to the West and Russia under conditions of sanctions and war, but has realistically been falling into a new form of dependency.

The narrative of a Global East fits neatly with the needs of authoritarian regimes such as Belarus to project foreign policy success. Since the West has turned its back, Minsk seeks to present this not as a failure, but as a new opportunity. Within this framework, Belarus portrays itself as an active player on the international stage – part of a consolidating civilizational bloc that rejects "western decadence" and aspires to shape a new world order.

In this context, the concept of the Global East is no longer merely a foreign policy choice. It has actually become one of the cornerstones of a new state ideology. This ideology promotes an alternative value system: traditionalism over liberalism, sovereignty over globalism, collectivism over individualism. It also positions Belarus as an integral part of a broader civilizational project – one in which Russia, as the self-proclaimed "Eurasian civilization", assumes the role of natural leader.

In the end, it is difficult to speak of a genuine "Asian turn" in Belarusian foreign policy. The partnership with China remains limited – more symbolic than strategic, more rhetorical than real. Beijing's pragmatism prevents it from challenging Moscow's position, while Minsk's dependence on the Kremlin leaves little room for manoeuvre. What appears as a new direction is, in fact, an attempt to find breathing space within the boundaries set by Russia – a balancing act that only reinforces Belarus's subordination. EE

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Hybrid relations in times of war

YEVHEN MAHDA

The deterioration of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations after February 2022 did not mean the absence of Belarusians on the Ukrainian side. On the contrary, while Lukashenka aligned himself with Moscow and allowed Russian forces to use Belarusian territory for the assault on Kyiv, many of his opponents chose a different path.

Between 2020 and 2025, relations between Belarus and Ukraine underwent a significant transformation, sliding into a deep crisis despite the formal maintenance of diplomatic ties. Political dialogue between Minsk and Kyiv has largely disappeared, trade has almost entirely collapsed, while the inter-state border now functions as a fortified barrier.

At present, Belarus-Ukraine relations can best be described as hybrid. Over these years, a fundamental shift has taken place: Belarus moved from being a mixed partner of Ukraine, at times providing strategically important materials, to serving as Russia's principal collaborator in Europe. The 2020 protests were a decisive turning point for Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Since then, his legitimacy has not been restored, yet his geopolitical alignment has changed dramatically. Today, the Belarusian leader closely follows the Kremlin's policy line, while his room for independent manoeuvre has been reduced to a minimum.

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Illusionary hopes

The circumstances that forced Lukashenka to shift his position are evident. He is effectively repaying Russia for its willingness to support him during his crashing of the 2020 protests. Paradoxically, the term "special military operation" could just as easily have described a hypothetical deployment of Russian units to Belarus during the protests of August-September 2020. Such an intervention, however, has never taken place. The hopes that Belarus might strengthen its political agency and break free from the Kremlin's influence quickly proved illusionary. Instead, the country remains trapped in ideological narratives about the "triune Slavic people", that is the idea that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians belong to a single, united family of East Slavic people; the alleged destabilizing role of the West; and a deliberate exclusion of any anti-Russian elements from the official rhetoric. Lukashenka's contacts with Vladimir Putin have only deepened since that moment, and his public statements now include references to Russia's "new regions", meaning the occupied territories of Ukraine.

> The 2020 protests marked the starting point of a fundamental change in Belarus-Ukraine relations.

The anti-Lukashenka protests in 2020 marked the starting point of a fundamental change in Belarus-Ukraine relations. Interpreted by the authorities as an attempt to overthrow the regime in Minsk, they not only entrenched domestic repressions but also triggered mass emigration. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians fled their homeland to escape persecution. The existing visa-free regime made Ukraine the most accessible destination, and as a result a large Belarusian community settled there. Yet the Ukrainian leadership was slow to articulate a clear position on the dramatic events in Belarus. It also failed to channel the human potential of Belarusian migrants in ways that could have served Ukraine's national interest.

A falsely pragmatic approach

The subsequent course of events unfolded in a paradoxical manner. In 2021, after the EU introduced sanctions against Belarus, Ukraine aligned itself with these measures, including by suspending air traffic with Minsk. The immediate trigger for sanctions was the forced landing of a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius in May 2021 and the detention of Roman Protasevich, one of the leaders of the NEXTA media project, together with his partner. At the same time, however, the Ukrainian leadership pursued what could be described as a falsely pragmatic approach

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towards Lukashenka's regime. While refraining from political recognition of Lukashenka, Zelenskyy's government continued to import bitumen, fuel, lubricants, and electricity from Belarus. In 2021 alone, these trade operations brought Minsk around 2.9 billion US dollars, a figure that understandably provoked strong criticism from the Belarusian democratic forces.

It is worth stressing that Lukashenka's opponents – largely drawn from NGOs and civil society – deliberately avoided calling themselves an "opposition". The term they prefer to use is that of "Belarusian democratic forces". This semantic choice gained little traction in Ukraine and significantly complicated dialogue between Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team and Ukrainian politicians. Compounding matters, many of Lukashenka's most visible opponents, including Ales Bialiatski, Viktar Babaryka, and Maria Kalesnikava, were imprisoned, while Tsikhanouskaya and her entourage lacked the political weight and experience to break the ice with Kyiv. Although Tsikhanouskaya enjoyed a political "honeymoon" in relations with Lithuania and Poland, her team was in no hurry to build a comparable level of engagement with Ukraine.

Lukashenka's opponents avoid the term "opposition" and prefer to be called "Belarusian democratic forces".

Contrary to a common assumption, the final stage of preparations for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine from Belarusian territory was not the Zapad 2021 exercises held in autumn of that year. Instead, it was the joint Russian-Belarusian Allied Resolve drills which were conducted in early 2022. These manoeuvres were preceded by the migration crisis on Belarus's borders with Lithuania and Poland, which effectively served as a distraction. Under the cover of exercises, the Kremlin deployed a strike group in Belarus, whose real mission was to advance on Kyiv. There are grounds to believe that Lukashenka was generally aware of Moscow's strategic intentions – something suggested by his February 2022 interview with Russian propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov – although he likely did not know the exact date of the invasion.

Under the white-red-white flag

The invasion on February 24th 2022 permanently reshaped Ukrainian attitudes towards Lukashenka. Although his rating among Ukrainians rose somewhat after Russia's hybrid aggression in 2014 and the end of the term of Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaitė, this was only a temporary phenomenon. Since 2022, the Belarusian self-proclaimed president lost this ground and cannot expect to recover it. His own words – "Putin and I are co-aggressors" – combined with Russia's use

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of Belarusian territory to launch missile strikes against Ukraine, brought about a serious deterioration in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations. What is more, Lukashenka's opponents, particularly those ready to take up arms, have moved into the spotlight and gained new significance.

The deterioration of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations after February 24th 2022 did not mean the absence of Belarusians on the Ukrainian side. On the contrary, while Lukashenka aligned himself with Moscow and allowed Russian forces to use Belarusian territory for the assault on Kyiv, many of his opponents chose a different path. Belarusian volunteers had already been present in Ukraine's defence forces since 2014, when the tactical group "Belarus" was created. The first Belarusian casualties date back to the Anti-Terrorist Operation and later the Joint Forces Operation.

After the outbreak of the full-scale war, Belarusians fighting under the white-red-white flag managed to stand out amid the wave of Ukrainian citizens who rushed to defend their homeland. A turning point came on Freedom Day, March 25th 2022, with the formation of the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Battalion, which later expanded into the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment. Today this is the largest foreign contingent within Ukraine's defence forces. All in all, over the past three and a half years, several hundred Belarusians have served in these volunteer ranks, more than 60 have been killed, and at least two – known by their call signs "Klishch" and "Trombli" – remain in Russian captivity. Among those who gave their lives in combat against Russia were such respected figures as Miroslav Lazovsky ("Mysh") and Ivan Marchuk ("Brest").

Since autumn 2022, various representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces have visited Ukraine.

In autumn 2022, missile strikes from Belarusian territory against Ukraine ceased, most likely after Lukashenka had received a discreet warning from Kyiv about possible retaliatory strikes. Belarusian oil refineries, after all, lie within the reach of Ukrainian missile and artillery systems. Notably, in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion, Russian and Ukrainian delegations met in Belarus for ceasefire talks. These talks failed, and Lukashenka's potential as a mediator has now proven exhausted. However, in December 2022, the first Ostroh Forum took place in Lviv, bringing together Ukrainian and Belarusian experts and politicians to discuss the future of bilateral relations.

Since autumn 2022, various representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces have visited Ukraine. Pavel Latushka and Zianon Pazniak, Franak Viačorka and Anatoly Lebedko, Vadim Kabanchuk and Anzhalika Melnikova, Valery Kovalevsky and Zmicier Shchygelski – all held meetings in Kyiv, often with Mykhailo Podol-

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yak, advisor to the head of the Presidential Office and informal curator of relations with the Belarusian democratic forces. Yet, at the official level, expectations were modest. Occasional encounters between Zelenskyy and Tsikhanouskaya at international events were limited to greetings and handshakes. A full-fledged visit by Tsikhanouskaya to Kyiv still remains unlikely.

A paradoxical role

Although Belarusian diplomats withdrew from Ukraine on March 19th 2022, diplomatic relations between the two states did not collapse altogether. In April 2023, however, after Lukashenka hosted Denis Pushilin – the head of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Russia's collaborator – in Minsk, Kyiv recalled its ambassador, Ihor Kyzym. By the end of the year, Kyzym was formally dismissed, and his Belarusian counterpart in Kyiv, Ihor Sokol, also lost his post. Even so, a handful of Ukrainian diplomats remain in Minsk.

At the same time, Belarusian territory has assumed a paradoxical role in the war. In 2022 and 2023, Ukrainians who had been illegally deported by the Russian occupying forces were able to return home via Belarus. The country has also served as a transit point for occasional prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine.

At the beginning of 2023, an unidentified drone strike damaged a Russian A-50 early warning and control aircraft stationed at the Machulishchy airbase in Belarus, forcing its relocation to Russia. This episode marked a turning point in military cooperation between Moscow and Minsk, and its various dimensions call for a closer examination.

On March 25th 2023, Vladimir Putin declared his readiness to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory "at the request of Alyaksandr Lukashenka". This move was not only an act of nuclear blackmail – a central instrument in the Kremlin's strategy – but also an asymmetric response to the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant issued for Putin. The subsequent developments – Lukashenka's interviews with Russian propagandists, training exercises for nuclear-capable delivery systems, and the orchestrated hysteria surrounding the so-called "Oreshnik" system – only underscored the extent to which Minsk's actions remain directed by the Kremlin.

Russia also maximized its use of Belarusian army stockpiles of military equipment and ammunition to replenish its own reserves. The next logical step was the cooperation of Belarusian enterprises with Russian companies, as well as the independent fulfilment of orders for the Russian military-industrial complex. The scale of this interaction continues to grow. Such cooperation reflects Lukashenka's

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strategy of avoiding direct participation in combat operations while maintaining loyalty to Putin.

A striking demonstration of this loyalty came with the transfer of Wagner Group units to Belarus after Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed mutiny in the summer of 2023. Seemingly, the Wagnerites vanished into Belarusian forests; some became instructors for the Belarusian Interior Ministry's Internal Troops, while others left the country. Lukashenka effectively performed uncomfortable tasks on Putin's behalf.

In recent months, Lukashenka has renewed his attempts to present himself as a mediator in efforts to end the Russia-Ukraine war. Several factors appear to have encouraged this initiative: the smooth reaffirmation of his presidency in January 2025; a series of successful operations by Belarusian and Russian security services against political opponents; and a tentative warming of relations with the United States. Yet, Kyiv continues to view Lukashenka with deep mistrust, and there is little prospect that such trust could be restored. At the same time, the internal situation within the Belarusian democratic forces – marked by the concentration of influence in the hands of Tsikhanouskaya and the organizational weakness of its structures – has likewise hindered the intensification of dialogue.

Current Belarus-Ukraine relations are thus summed up by the following developments. Kyiv is not prepared either to restore full diplomatic relations with Minsk or to deepen its engagement with the Belarusian democratic movement. The role of Belarusian volunteers in Ukraine's defence forces is gradually diminishing for both objective and subjective reasons, though their presence remains visible. Ukrainian representatives continue to maintain political contacts with the democratic forces, while communication with Minsk takes place primarily through intelligence channels. Economic ties are negligible, despite Lukashenka's repeated signals of interest in participating in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction.

Looking ahead, a logical step would be the articulation of a joint position on Belarus within the framework of the Lublin Triangle. This could also provide an opportunity to transfer and promote Ukraine's experience given the many shared features of Minsk and Kyiv's post-Soviet trajectories. EE

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Losing people, losing growth

ANASTASIYA LUZGINA

Over the past five years, Belarus has faced a shrinking labour market, which is a serious problem for its economic future. While demographic factors have played a role in this regard, it is the large-scale emigration of Belarusians that has had the most damaging effects.

No economy can escape the pressure of a shrinking workforce. Even as automation, digitalization and artificial intelligence transform industries, human labour remains essential for economic activity. In fact, rather than reducing the need for people, technological progress has raised the bar: today's economies rely more than ever on a pool of highly-skilled specialists. Belarus is no exception to this global trend. Yet, in recent years, the country has faced an additional difficulty: a sharp intensification of outward migration. Specifically, over the past five years, a growing number of Belarusians have left the country, which has further aggravated the already strained labour market.

Labour shortage

With a population of nine million people, some 4.33 million people were employed in Belarus in 2019. By 2024, that figure dropped to 4.12 million, which was a loss of more than 200,000 workers in just five years. One might think that such a decline is not very large and thus manageable. Yet data from the national employment service point to a much deeper problem.

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The numbers tell their own story. In September 2025, nearly 193,000 jobs in Belarus stood vacant. To grasp the scale of this gap, one only needs to look back a bit further. In May 2020, there were about 72,000 vacancies nationwide. In other words, the number of unfilled jobs has almost tripled over a period of five years.

The scale of the shortage is reflected in unemployment statistics. There is no economy that can function with zero unemployment: some level of turnover – people changing jobs or searching for the right fit – is both natural and healthy. Economists usually place that level at around five per cent. Anything lower signals an overheated labour market, where demand for workers outstrips supply. In Belarus, unemployment measured according to the standards of the International Labour Organization has been falling steadily for several years now. By the second quarter of 2025, it had reached a record low – 2.6 per cent, underscoring the acute imbalance now facing the country's economy.

Faced with a shrinking workforce, employers in Belarus have had little choice but to raise wages. Adjusted for inflation, salaries grew by 11.6 per cent in 2023, 13 per cent in 2024, and another 11 per cent in just the first half of 2025. The surge in 2023 was partly statistical – a rebound from the income slump of 2022. But the subsequent jumps in 2024 and especially in 2025 reflect something more structural: a labour market where demand for workers is strong and the supply is increasingly scarce.

Faced with a shrinking workforce, employers in Belarus have had little choice but to raise wages.

While rising wages may look like a win for employees, it can become problematic for companies when it is not matched by productivity gains. In Belarus, that gap is widening. In the first half of 2025, productivity increased by just two per cent year-on-year, while real wages rose by 11 per cent. This mismatch has driven up business costs, fuelling pressure for higher prices or, under tight price controls, eroding efficiency and profitability. At the same time, the labour shortage is capping the country's growth potential. Firms face difficulties recruiting new staff, making it harder to expand production or follow through on investment plans.

Mixed picture

In response to growing imbalances in the labour market, the Belarusian authorities have introduced a number of measures aimed at stabilizing employment and alleviating labour shortages. To ease the mounting strains, restrictions on pension payments for employed pensioners have been lifted. Until the end of 2024, those

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who remained in work could receive both a salary and a pension (although the pension amount was calculated using the earning base coefficient equaled 1.3). Even if they had earned the right to a higher pension, they could only claim it after leaving the labour force. Starting in 2025, these restrictions were lifted. Retirees are now allowed to receive their full pension while continuing to work.

According to the ministry of labour, the reform is expected to raise labour force participation. Demographic patterns reinforce this potential. In Belarus, men retire at the age of 63 and live on average for only six years beyond that age. Women, on the other hand, retire at the age of 58 and live for another 22 years. As a result, female pensioners in particular represent an important but underused reserve of the labour supply.

In Belarus, men retire at the age of 63 and live on average for only six years beyond that age.

The overall picture, however, remains mixed. In 2025, around 450,000 pensioners – roughly 28 per cent of the total population of retirees – continued to work. Yet the majority do not combine employment with retirement. Several factors explain this. For many older citizens, poor health makes further employment impossible. Others find that even modest pension payments are sufficient to withdraw from the labour market. This pattern recalls dynamics in certain European states, where long-term unemployment benefits reduce incentives for some individuals to return to work.

Third, older people often face age discrimination and do not always have the right skills for today's job market. With digital technologies changing workplaces so quickly, learning new skills throughout life is becoming essential. The European Union has set itself the goal that by 2030 at least 60 per cent of workers will take part in training every year. In Belarus, however, there is no similar policy, which leaves many older workers at a disadvantage.

Higher charges on "social parasites"

Another government measure aimed at increasing labour market participation is the low level of unemployment benefits. In 2025, the monthly payment amounted to 40 Belarusian roubles (around 11 euros) and was generally available for no more than 13 weeks. Officials argue that this policy helps prevent dependency and encourages self-reliance. In international practice, however, unemployment benefits are considered a core element of social protection. In Belarus, the framework instead provides only limited support, leaving unemployed individuals with little meaningful security.

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In addition to the limited unemployment benefits – restricted to those with at least five years of formal work experience – the government has also introduced higher charges on the so-called "social parasites". Citizens deemed able to work but not contributing to the social security system face increased fees for public utilities, particularly heating, hot water and gas. The law is applied in a sweeping manner, extending not only to those without formal employment in Belarus but also to citizens working abroad who have not confirmed their status, as well as parents caring for children older than seven.

Third, in recent years the authorities have gone further by introducing explanatory and preventive campaigns aimed at the unemployed. Law enforcement bodies and local administrations hold mandatory meetings with jobless individuals, and failure to attend can result in administrative penalties. Rather than providing assistance to those who are unemployed and as such at higher risk of poverty, these measures function mainly as punitive tools to drive participation in the labour market and ensure contributions to the Social Protection Fund. Given that unemployment in Belarus is already at a historically low level, the impact of such initiatives is likely to remain minimal.

A fourth measure to address labour shortages is the system of compulsory job placement for graduates of vocational and higher education institutions who studied at the state's expense. The policy is designed to fill positions in regions that young professionals would be unlikely to choose on their own. These university graduates cannot be assigned to part-time or remote work and employers are not legally required to provide housing. Although this semi-feudal practice may temporarily ease local labour shortages, it fails to ensure the long-term retention of young professionals. As aforementioned, many graduates view compulsory placement as a form of labour duty rather than an opportunity. Moreover, regional wage gaps, weak infrastructure and limited prospects for career or personal development drive many young people to relocate to larger cities once their mandatory service is over.

The authorities have sought to stimulate regional development by expanding the construction of rental housing.

In recent years the authorities have sought to stimulate regional development by expanding the construction of rental housing. In 2023, the volume of newly commissioned rental units increased by 108.5 per cent compared to the previous year, followed by a further 35.1 per cent rise in 2024. Yet in the first half of 2025 the trend reversed, with negative growth recorded, which is a sign that this initiative is already slowing.

The negative growth in 2025 may also be linked to difficulties in attracting tenants for such rental housing. Thus, administrative measures compel young profes-

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A Belarusian worker at a metallurgical plant in Minsk. One of the most significant negative developments for the Belarusian economy over the past five years has been the contraction of the labour market.

sionals to relocate to the regions for a limited period of time. However, once their mandatory service ends, the incentives offered by the state are insufficient to encourage them to stay in the regions.

Foreign workers

Belarusian authorities have attempted to address labour shortages by recruiting foreign workers. For certain occupations experiencing the most acute deficits, regulations for hiring foreigners have been simplified over the past five years. These professions include seamstresses, locksmiths, doctors, orderlies, nurses, plasterers, carpenters, cooks, electronics engineers, technical engineers, and others.

The search for new workers involves state officials at the highest level. In April 2025, for example, Lukashenka met with the prime minister of Pakistan to discuss the possible arrival of 150,000 Pakistani workers in Belarus. Yet as of spring 2025, the number of foreign nationals employed in the country stood at only around 60,000 – roughly 1.5 per cent of the total workforce. Belarus remains an unattractive destination for foreign specialists. For workers from Pakistan, for example, countries such as the United States, member states of the European Union, or the

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UAE are far more appealing. They offer higher wages and the possibility to work in English.

Belarus's negative political image as a co-aggressor in the war against Ukraine, combined with broader economic risks, further undermines its appeal as an employment destination. Highly-skilled professionals, in particular, can find better-paid opportunities in more developed economies. Even for Russian citizens, Belarus is not especially attractive due to comparatively low salaries. As a result, the foreign workforce in Belarus is likely to consist mainly of lower-skilled workers. Limited qualifications and weak Russian-language proficiency will, in turn, restrict their ability to take on more complex roles.

Emigration to the European Union

While the Belarusian authorities have introduced measures to stabilize the labour market, many of the country's citizens continue to leave the country. At present, up to 280,000 Belarusians reside in the European Union, most of whom have relocated over the past five years. Migration accelerated for both political and economic reasons after the 2020 presidential elections, while Russia's war against Ukraine provided an additional push. Lithuania and Poland have been the main destinations.

At first glance, 280,000 may not seem like a large number. Yet the profile of those leaving makes this trend particularly significant. The majority are working-age individuals with good qualifications, alongside students and families with children. According to Polish data, by mid-September more than 98.5 per cent of Belarusians holding residence documents in Poland were below retirement age. By contrast, within Belarus itself around 24 per cent of the population is already beyond working age.

Belarusians have migrated not only to EU countries but also to destinations such as Russia and Georgia.

It should be noted that Belarusians have migrated not only to EU countries but also to destinations such as Russia and Georgia. One of the clearest negative consequences of this outflow has been the contraction of the IT sector. In 2021, information and communication accounted for more than seven per cent of the country's GDP, but by 2024 its share had fallen to just over four per cent. Although signs of recovery appeared in 2025, this growth is taking place after sector's decline in previous several years.

The broader economic impact of migration will be felt for years to come. The loss of qualified specialists and their children reduces Belarus's long-term growth

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potential and adds pressure to an already strained pension system. In contrast, EU countries, especially Poland, are already reaping the benefits of Belarusian professionals entering their labour markets.

All said, one of the most negative developments for the Belarusian economy over the past five years has been the contraction of the labour market. Demographic factors as well as the large-scale emigration of Belarusians have played the damaging effects. Given the unreformed nature of the economy, the heavy hand of state intervention in almost all spheres of life, and persistent political risks, it is unlikely that in the near future Belarus will attract foreign workers on a large scale, let alone encourage the return of those who have already left.

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From the classrooms to the farms

ALIAKSANDR PAPKO

In Belarus, the rise in tuition-free education is most unlikely to be the result of a renewed commitment to social justice on the part of the country's authoritarian leadership. More plausibly, it reflects an effort to forcibly fill vacant positions in the public sector, which has been increasingly caused by the large emigration of working-age people from Belarus.

Since 2023, state universities in Belarus have lowered admission thresholds for applicants to less popular faculties. At the same time, the authorities are seeking to expand the share of graduates obliged to spend several years in state-assigned jobs. This policy is intended to counter high rates of desertion from the public sector, where wages remain deeply uncompetitive. Yet the problem is only intensifying and now affects an ever-wider range of professions.

Admission guaranteed, at a price

"Everyone wins: employers get the specialists they need, universities receive support to modernize their programmes, and graduates are guaranteed employment." With such slogans, state media in Belarus promote the so-called targeted, or job-oriented, educational programmes (*tselevoye obucheniye*). For young people, these schemes offer an almost certain path to university admission, since competition with other applicants is removed. The arrangement, however, comes at a

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cost. In return, graduates are obliged to work for five years at the institution which financed their studies and agreed to employ them afterwards. These are most often schools, state farms and hospitals in rural areas struggling with severe staffing shortages. Other tuition-free students are also subject to compulsory placement, though their service period is limited to two years.

Until recently, only organizations in villages and small towns with populations of up to 20,000 could recruit employees through targeted educational programmes. In 2023, these restrictions were lifted. At the same time, applicants to such programmes were allowed to enter university by taking only internal exams, with the list of questions published in advance. This makes admission considerably easier compared to other students, who must pass national external exams at the end of secondary school.

The number of students enrolled in targeted educational programmes grew from 2,700 (four per cent) in 2022 to 5,700 (12 per cent) in 2025. Yet in most sectors covered by these schemes, the demand for young specialists still exceeds the number of applicants willing to take them. In 2025, the government aimed to enrol 6,600 students under the targeted system, including 2,300 in medicine; 1,200 in agriculture; and 1,000 in education. In practice, 2,600 entered medical faculties, while only around 600 chose to train as future schoolteachers.

Since 2020, the share of tuition-free students, including those admitted through targeted programmes, has risen from 46 to 66 per cent of the first-year enrolments. This marks a notable shift. Until recently, despite official rhetoric about social justice and the near absence of private universities, roughly 60 per cent of students had to pay for their education. Those paying students, however, enjoyed one clear advantage: freedom to choose their profession and exemption from the obligation to spend two years in low-paid, state-assigned jobs.

The rise in tuition-free education is most unlikely to be the result of a renewed commitment to social justice on the part of Belarus's authoritarian leadership. More plausibly, it reflects an effort to forcibly fill vacant positions in the public sector, which has been increasingly caused by the large emigration of working-age people from Belarus.

Staffing shortages

The growing number of students required to spend two to five years in state-assigned jobs is not the only sign of worsening staffing shortages. In 2023 and 2024, the ministry of education expanded the list of professions classified as "the most in demand in the economy". Applicants to these programmes may now enter uni-

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versity without entrance exams if they meet certain conditions, such as graduating from secondary school with distinction, winning regional academic competitions, or completing military service.

Introduced in 2017, the list initially covered 28 university specializations, most of them in agriculture and forestry. By February 2023 it had expanded to 53, with the addition of numerous pedagogical and technical disciplines, including some European languages, micro- and nano-electronics, technology and design of textile products, and technological machines and equipment. In 2024 the list grew further to 69 specializations, with new entries concentrated in education – such as Belarusian language and history – as well as in transportation, including railway track maintenance and the technical operation of aircrafts.

What explains the rapid expansion of the most in-demand professions list and the lowering of entry requirements for technical, education and military studies? One reason for the increased demand for engineers may be the government's effort to modernize domestic industry. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, international sanctions were imposed not only on Russia, but also on its ally, the Lukashenka regime. Western technology quickly disappeared from the Russian market, and Minsk sought to fill some of these gaps. Lukashenka also boosted the production of weapons and military equipment for the Russian army, further increasing the need for technically trained specialists.

The same explanation applies to the Belarusian army. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Lukashenka pledged to expand the country's armed forces and create new units along the Ukrainian border. As a result, admission quotas at military schools rose by 30 per cent –from 700 students in 2021 to more than 1,000 in 2024. Whether these quotas were actually met, however, remains unclear. What is clear is that a military career continues to be unpopular. Admission to most faculties of the military academy requires only about 200 out of 400 points – a threshold lower than that of regional universities in Brest or Vitebsk, let alone the most prestigious institutions in Minsk.

Lukashenka pledged to expand the country's armed forces and create new units along the Ukrainian border.

The rise in demand for engineers is unlikely to reflect genuine industrial expansion. Official statistics show that industrial employment increased by only 6,000 people – or 0.7 per cent – between 2023 and 2024. A more plausible explanation lies in the low wages offered by state-owned enterprises, which dominate the sector and fail to attract young professionals. At the same time, the older generation is now retiring, leaving many positions vacant – a trend observed in Belarus's rural areas for a long time now.

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Soviet-era practice

Young teachers, medical staff, agricultural specialists and veterinarians remain reluctant to work and live in remote areas that offer few economic opportunities. Institutions inherited from the Soviet planned economy such as state-owned farms, schools and hospitals are not able to provide competitive wages. Rather than allowing private land ownership, encouraging business development or attracting graduates with better salaries, the Belarusian authorities continue to fall back on a Soviet-era practice of compulsory job assignments.

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For decades, Belarusian universities have produced young professionals whose careers in their assigned fields often last no longer than the two-year mandatory placement. Once this period is over, many teachers, agricultural engineers and medical workers seek jobs in the cities. When positions matching their qualifications are unavailable – as frequently happens for teachers and agricultural specialists – they are more likely to change professions altogether than remain in villages or small towns.

The recent changes to university admission policies suggest that the problem has now spread from rural areas to industrial centres. The shortage of engineers and transport specialists points to the growing unsustainability of state-owned enterprises in these regions. Much like the state-owned collective farms, many SOEs remain competitive only by keeping wages low. Their prices and output are set by the state, which also decides how profits are distributed. In this environment, raising salaries does not stimulate motivation, productivity or innovation. It simply increases production costs.

State enterprises, for their part, use compulsory job assignments to fill unpopular, low-paid positions which are often unrelated to the graduates' qualifications. Even in the tightly controlled Belarusian press and on social media monitored by the security services, there are accounts of IT specialists earning just 250 US dollars a month or economists with university degrees assigned to work as sales clerks in state-owned shops for similar pay. The state-owned companies themselves have little incentive to revise these practices: since graduates cannot freely leave their placements, any vacancy is quickly filled by another young specialist assigned to the same underpaid job.

The more dynamic private sector – concentrated in IT, transport, retail, finance, catering and other services – offers far higher wages than the state-controlled industrial sector. It is likely absorbing young teachers leaving schools, engineers

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departing Soviet-era factories, and veterinarians or farmers seeking better opportunities beyond impoverished rural areas. Medical professionals also have more options: many find work in private clinics, shift to related fields such as cosmetology, or emigrate to Russia, Poland or Germany.

The labour shortage has been deepened by mass emigration, which has been occurring since the crackdown on the 2020 protests and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to some sociologists, between 2020 and 2024 more than 500,000 people left Belarus (out of a population of around nine million). As of July 2025, the state employment portal recorded 215,000 open vacancies. Most were in agriculture, construction, transport and industry, and the majority were posted by state-owned enterprises.

Towards market orientation

Rather than tackling the inefficiency of state-owned industrial enterprises, the Lukashenka regime relies on a mix of coercion and selective incentives to preserve the status quo. The economic and social institutions inherited from Soviet times remain central to sustaining his authoritarian rule. In the long run, labour shortages are likely to ease not through reform but through the gradual decline and bankruptcy of Soviet-era enterprises – a process already visible in Belarusian agriculture. The displaced workforce will eventually be absorbed by more efficient private-sector companies.

It is precisely the professional skills sought by private enterprises – both domestic and international – that attract the greatest interest from Belarusian university applicants. Over the past five years, the most competitive faculties, with entrance scores approaching the maximum of 400, have been IT, world economy, international relations and dentistry, which is the most market-oriented of all medical professions in Belarus. EE

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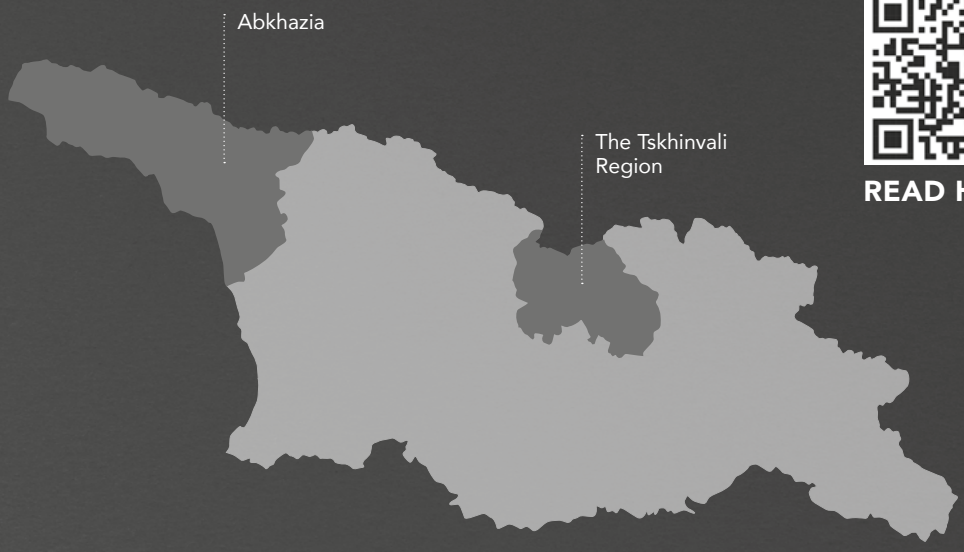
"FOREIGN POLICY" OF THE RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED REGIONS OF GEORGIA AFTER THE AUGUST 2008 WAR



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