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# TALES FROM THE BALTICS

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DEAR READER,

As we are witnesses to history in the making, the stories of previous generations endure – not only to provide lessons for tomorrow, but inspiration for today. The fall of communism and the fight for freedom in Central and Eastern Europe continues to be one of those stories. This year is particularly important as we are commemorating the fall of the Soviet Union, which came to an end officially in December 1991. One of the first critical steps which led to the end of the USSR was the move by the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to declare independence and a restoration of their pre-war statehood. The path that the Baltic states then took, together and with determination, represents the only cases of post-Soviet states, for the moment, being integrated into NATO and the European Union.

With that in mind, this issue takes us to the Baltics in search of stories from today. In many ways the processes now taking place there largely reflect those of Western European societies, which shows how integrated the Baltics are with the EU and Euro-Atlantic structures. Like elsewhere across Europe, pockets of populist politics have found a place. Meanwhile, the pandemic has forced Baltic policymakers to find ways at keeping the coronavirus at bay and the political cost of inaction. Socially and economically, issues like inequality and minority rights remain high on the agenda of civil society.

At the same time there are specifics that play a role in these countries – including history, the Soviet legacy and the threat of the Kremlin's approach to the post-Soviet space. The former foreign minister of Lithuania, Linas Linkevičius, in an exclusive interview with NEE, expresses these quite clearly, and argues how the Baltic states can and should play a key role in supporting Ukraine's Europeanisation or the Belarusians' fight for freedom. Beyond the Baltics, we look at the situation in Russia after the arrest of Alexei Navalny earlier this year. Our authors also take us through new developments in Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia and Georgia.

With limited opportunities to experience the wider world due to the pandemic, we hope that through these stories, *New Eastern Europe* can play a small role in bringing together different cultures, people and ideas. We are grateful for your purchase and support of the magazine. And we invite you to visit us and share your thoughts with us online via our website or on social media.

*The Editors*

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# We are still searching for our strategy with Russia

An interview with Linas Linkevičius, a Lithuanian politician and diplomat and former foreign minister (2012–2020). Interviewers: Adam Reichardt and Maciej Makulski.

NEW EASTERN EUROPE: Serving as a foreign minister for eight years means that you were directly involved in different international affairs that shaped the European political landscape. From the perspective of the region of Central and Eastern Europe, one such event was undoubtedly the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine. Would you say that Russian aggression on Ukraine was something that defined your two terms as Lithuania's foreign minister?

LINAS LINKEVIČIUS: Unfortunately, during these eight years, we experienced a worsening of relations with Russia. It was not that Europe was at fault, or that the European Union was doing something wrong. This was simply Russia's choice, to proceed with an aggressive foreign policy, and even use its military in foreign policy – since its military is used in its foreign policy. This did not start yesterday. We can recall the war in the South Caucasus in 2008. I believe there was a good reaction by some western countries, there were statements made by the European Union, NATO, and there were clear demands, hopes and expectations as to what Russia must do in order to get back to normal business. But literally, nothing was done. And, yet, we went back to "business as usual" within a couple months. There were voices calling for pragmatism, discussing the importance of economic relations and that a lot of challenges should be solved together. Many arguments were used, and we basically retreated – despite some voices, including my own, which were the minority at that time.

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In 2008 we also had the NATO summit in Bucharest, with discussions on whether to give Ukraine and Georgia a membership action plan (to put these countries on a path for NATO membership – editor's note). There were voices then that said that we cannot do it because it would be provocative and create a huge crisis. We responded that it would be provocative *not* to give the MAP, as it would open the floodgates for further intervention. And then in August of that year, the war started. At that time, I remember saying that there would be more conflict; I even mentioned Crimea – which was not on the agenda at that time. And then in 2014 Crimea happened and the aggression against Donbas – and there were, again, surprises that it was taking place. We heard that Russia could potentially be quite helpful and rational in solving crises around the globe, by influence and other means, but unfortunately Russia, being a permanent member of the UN Security Council, was creating problems. And it is not just in Europe. The policy of Russia is one of testing: testing of resilience; of principled positions; of tolerance; and the testing of patience of its own people, which we have seen recently with the poisoning of Alexei Navalny.

I could go on, but let me mention one more point, which is also very important from the last eight years. I remember during our Presidency of the Council of the European Union, in the second half of 2013, we had discussions on the Eastern Partnership, due to the summit which was approaching at that time. We were discussing strategic communications, and I remember there were some difficulties in understanding of each other, among the Europeans. The question came: what type of "strategic communications" are we talking about? Are we going to introduce European censorship? Or European propaganda? I said, no, we are talking about the need to fight fake news – which is becoming a weapon. We tried to convince our colleagues that freedom of speech has nothing to do with the freedom to lie. If you are lying deliberately, it means you are brainwashing people and demotivating them. That was seven years ago! It was a very difficult topic to discuss. But later, we established a special unit in the European External Action Service and we are now doing something about it. It is still not enough. It takes time to understand and realise that something qualitatively different is taking place. We are lagging behind.

And now, to mention this visit by Josep Borell to Moscow – that was another reality check. Recently Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, stated that Russia is ready to cut relations with the EU. I immediately reacted and said that Russia is not ready to have normal relations. To cut is not a big deal, because there really is not much in terms of relations. My point is, we are still searching for our strategy with Russia. We do not have one. We cannot dream of what we would like to have in the future. Do we really believe it is possible to have

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partnership or co-operation? Or is it just geopolitical competition? This is also not understood among many of us. The Eastern Partnership, in the end, is a geopolitical process, not just a technical one. And with the three associated states – it is not just technical co-operation with the EU. We have to understand this. So, really, in the last eight years, I have only seen decline in these relations. And, unfortunately, I do not see any light, any hope. There has been no change in the thinking or the rhetoric. This means we are doing something wrong or not enough.

I think we will have a chance to talk about some specifics of the Eastern Partnership, especially Ukraine and Belarus, in a moment. But I wanted to ask you about the Baltic States – which we often see as one unit, as a whole. In fact they are three separate countries, with their own languages, culture and history. At the same time, they face similar issues, similar threats, which you already touched upon. And there are shared experiences as well – this year, of course, we will commemorate the 30 years of the fall of the Soviet Union. I am curious as to what your thinking is when we look at the three countries. Is it fair to lump the Baltic states together as countries that have similar interests and similar goals? Or would you prefer we look at them individually – when we are discussing politics and geopolitics?

I would say both. It is natural, because at the very beginning of our independence – we were all close together. I was the defence minister at the time. We did not have bilateral relations, we had trilateral relations. We met trilaterally, to define our priorities, to try to understand what we had to do, and to find partners and funders. Then we launched famous projects like the Baltic Battalion, the Baltic Defence College – which is still in Tartu and now a part of NATO education – and air policing coordination, etc. Of course, as you noted, we are three different countries, but I would say we have more in common than there are differences between us. After we joined the EU and NATO, the trilateral approach became less important, as we became members of a bigger family. But despite that fact, we still have different formats of co-operation which enriches our joint activities. Here we can mention Nordic-Baltic co-operation. At the beginning it was very interesting – it was called 5 + 3 (five Nordic, three Baltic states) and now it is called "Nordic-Baltic 8", which emphasises the integration. And I am very proud and happy that it is not only limited to the strategic level, like economy or health care, but also on the grassroots level and local level.

One more aspect that is important to note is that the Baltics were a part of the Soviet Union – forcibly included, but nevertheless de facto a part of the USSR. I still can better understand Moldovans, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Georgians than others in the West, to be honest. We can speak Russian with them – of course the new generation speaks English very well – but there is some com-

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mon understanding of mentality, culture, etc. I believe that this gives us a chance and opportunity to be more effective in explaining what we did, how we went through this process – which is still relatively fresh in our memory. The Baltic states can be more instrumental than others, therefore we need to coordinate more amongst ourselves. And we are proud and happy to have on board other likeminded people, like countries who launched the Eastern Partnership – Sweden and Poland to be precise.

And that leads me to my next question which looks at how the Baltic states play a strong leadership role on Eastern policy within the European Union, especially in the years since Crimea and Ukraine and the war in Donbas, but also now with Belarus. We see Vilnius being a host to many of those fleeing Lukashenka's repressions. You have mentioned this already, but I am curious why you think countries like Lithuania and the other Baltic states, as well as Poland, are leaders in supporting those who are fighting for freedom in the post-Soviet space? Does it have to do with geography? Shared history? Or is it a feeling that you have gone through and now it is an opportunity to help those who are fighting for their freedom?

One of the main reasons is shared history. These memories are still fresh. And I would add from my own experience one point which I am always mentioning to Georgians and Ukrainians about ambitions of integration. I remember when I was ambassador to NATO in 2000, I was told by future allies many times: "Your country is small and beautiful, but you will never be a member of NATO". It really was said many times, and this is in 2000, which is really recent! They would say, "just look at the map, at the interests". And that was a motivation for us. We remember what it means to be deserted and alone. Maybe that also explains why our people are not indifferent when something happens in the neighbourhood. You remember the "Freedom Way" organised from Vilnius to the border with Belarus? I was standing there – not as a minister, but as a citizen. The action was organised by NGOs and people came with the white and red colours, and flowers and children. And the question was: why wasn't anything like this organised in other capitals? I think that, emotionally, people here feel a connection. It is not just empathy or support. It is also a sense of duty that take a stand and we have to help. That is also the reason why they are coming here and feeling comfortable as they flee the repressions. Yet, on the other hand, almost all of them believe that they will return – that they are not leaving their country forever. Vilnius is not that far from Minsk. They are not far from home, but far from the danger, which is not diminishing. I am disappointed that our reaction is insufficient. Of course, we cannot be blamed for what is happening because we are not carrying out the repressions, but we really can be more effective in keeping the pressure and being more consistent. Not only on Bela-

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rus and the outgoing leader, who hesitates to go, but also to the sponsors in the Kremlin, the only supporters who are also responsible for these developments. All in all, we have a situation where the EU, with a population of almost half a billion people, cannot be a key player in managing conflicts – even on our own continent. We are not talking about places far away – which could also be a question for the EU. This is Europe. This is our continent. Who will talk about it, if not us?

You have said a few times already that not enough is being done in relation with

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Russia or regarding the situation in Belarus. I would like to ask about that. You were critical of the EU's response to the situation in Belarus during the protest. What you think more could be done right now? What should the EU do six months after the outbreak of protests in Belarus?

From the outset, I have to say that we all understand that we cannot intervene, that is not our job. Only the Belarusians can define the future for themselves. Our task is to take sides sometimes – and not be an impartial observer. We need to meaningfully support civil society. What we are doing in Lithuania and Poland, others should do as well: supporting civil society, giving refuge to those who need protection, and finding ways to support the victims of repressions. I believe we really should take a lead in international judicial process, which was advised by the European Parliament. In the EP, there were good resolutions recently passed, but we should also start an international investigation on the crimes being committed in Belarus. Somebody should take the lead here. Sanctions are the least we can do and sometimes even sanctions are not sufficient. After 2010, there was a list of sanctions – 133 people on the list, including Lukashenka, from the very beginning. But now, the list is much shorter. Yet, the brutality is worse. It took time to put Lukashenka's name on the list. If current sanctions are not working, we should add more sanctions. In Russia, the list is also 150 people, not a significant number.

Do you think it is a matter of time for Lukashenka? That he will eventually go?

Lukashenka has already been in power for 26 years. And we should remember that for the last 20 years, there has been the implementation of the agreement of the so-called Union State with Russia. An interesting question to pose here is: why so long? When I was in Minsk last year, I also asked: "why is it taking so long?" The response was, "there was a beginning point of integration, but there is not an end". So it is like a never-ending process. Nevertheless, there is a process where Russia wants to digest Belarus, by all means. I am afraid that after what Lukashenka has done to his country – namely, to stay in power – he has created such damage to the remaining sovereignty and independence that Russia will do whatever it takes to accomplish as much as possible. I would predict that de jure, Belarus will remain independent. It will have a foreign ministry, a seat at the UN General Assembly – like during Soviet times. But de facto, Belarus will be totally dependent on Russia, even more than it was before. The main sponsor is the Kremlin. The main supporters are in Moscow. For them it probably means that Lukashenka will not be needed for much longer. He is becoming too toxic. I do not believe that he will stay too long. To remove him today would show a weakness; but they will do it later.

Again, what will we do? What measures will we take? If we just sit passively, I am afraid we will lose another geo-

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political game, and lose influence in the parts of Europe which could really be developed differently. This is the question, and this question remains unanswered.

We have been talking a lot about Russia, which is understandable of course. But I would like to ask about another big challenge which is now becoming more visible also in Europe. This is China and its growing ambition to play a greater role in different parts of the world, including Central and Eastern Europe. Recently, the 17+1 Summit took place with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia not represented by their highest representatives, while China was represented by President Xi Jinping. This might suggest that the Baltic states are keeping a distance in their relations with Beijing. How does Lithuania build its relations with China? And what approach should the EU take to be effective?

We are always looking for ways to get dialogue with huge players, like China, but for a small country it is difficult. This explains why this format 17+1 emerged. On the other hand, our policies and experiences are national and specific. In short, I would say that when we talk about China, we understand that China is a challenge not only for the European Union but also for the United States and Russia. China is a really big player with growing ambitions and is focused on economic security. This is becoming an issue. In regards to the economy, we can do a lot based on certain rules. We have a law in Lithuania regarding the supervising and controlling of investments in strategic sectors – and there are "red lines" which limit outside investments in such sectors as transport and infrastructure. So the short answer is: set rules and stick to them. This country is ambitious, but also sensitive regarding relations.

And the Three Seas Initiative? Is this something that could be seen as an alternative to Chinese projects?

At first, we were observing the process. But now we are on board. We believe it is very valuable and the United States and Germany are a part of the initiative. It will have a very practical application for our infrastructure. If these projects are supplementary and an addition to what we have in the framework of the European Union, then this is a very good approach.

What is your take on the new Biden administration in Washington? We all know that this administration will be emphasising a rebuilding of alliances, especially the transatlantic alliance. What does this mean from the regional perspective?

First, it would be nice to preserve what was previously achieved in a positive way. It is difficult to deny that the engagement of the US in the Baltic region, including Poland, was really substantial and visible, and we would like to preserve that. This shouldn't be done at the expense of European engagement. I believe the Biden administration will improve these relations, and getting them back on track is important. The

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European Union is not an enemy to the US and we have to come back. This includes working together on climate issues, which will not be easy, but also improving our trade co-operation. We will not come back to TTIP, but nevertheless there will be greater transatlantic co-operation – not only on security but in other sectors as well. Coming back to China, there will be better opportunities to coordinate our strategies and also on Russia. This will be our strength.

*This interview is also available to listen via the Talk Eastern Europe podcast. Listen to this and more at: www.neweasterneurope.eu/talkeasterneurope*

Linas Linkevicius is a Lithuanian politician and diplomat. He served as defence minister in 1993–1996 and again in 2000–2004. He was Lithuanian's ambassador to NATO and Belarus (1997–2000), and most recently the minister of foreign affairs between 2012 and 2020.

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# The Baltic states

## Three peas in a pod?

ANDRES KASEKAMP

The three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are often together associated as a bloc, with a similar history, culture and politics. While there are some commonalities among the three countries, there are also some key characteristics that make them quite different from each other.

From the outside, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are usually viewed as one – "the Baltics". However, their fates have only been intertwined during the last century. Prior to the end of the First World War, Lithuania had been closely connected with Poland, while Estonians and Latvians had been under Baltic German domination for seven centuries, no matter whether the ruling power was Sweden, Poland or Russia. Lithuanian and Latvian are the two surviving Baltic languages, whereas Estonian belongs to a completely different language family, together with Finnish and Hungarian. Lithuanians are Catholic, while Estonians and Latvians are mostly Lutheran, though the latter are among the world's least religious societies. Of the Baltic states, Latvia is the most "Baltic", with two Baltic neighbours, while Estonia usually looks northwards towards Finland, and Lithuania westwards towards Poland. The Latvians, understandably, have always been the greatest proponents of Baltic solidarity.

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## Baltic Entente

In 1920 negotiations were held to form a regional alliance among five nations that had freed themselves from the Russian Empire: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. However, the Polish takeover of Vilnius and Finland's decision to pursue a Scandinavian orientation resulted in a defence treaty being concluded narrowly between Estonia and Latvia in 1923. In 1934 this was extended to include Lithuania, creating a Baltic Entente, but without any military commitment. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania declared neutrality, but this did not save them from Nazi and Soviet occupations. The failure of co-operation in the interwar period and a lack of allies were painful lessons, which has shaped contemporary foreign and security policy. The Baltic states are determined to never be alone again or to silently submit to aggression.

The failure of co-operation in the interwar period and a lack of allies were painful lessons, which has shaped contemporary foreign and security policy.

Ironically, it was after the three countries were incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940 that they became lumped together. A major legacy of nearly half-a-century of Soviet rule was the massive influx of Russian-speakers into Estonia and Latvia. This radical demographic change was a trigger for the "Singing Revolution" in 1988. In a struggle against the common foe, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians displayed remarkable co-operation, epitomised by the Baltic Way, the human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius, formed in 1989 by close to two million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians.

When the Baltic states recovered their independence in 1991, they wanted to distance themselves from the Soviet legacy as quickly as possible and "return to Europe". A Baltic Assembly and Baltic Council of Ministers, patterned after Nordic models, were established to institutionalise co-operation. Coming from the same place and going in the same direction, they generally followed a similar path to democracy and free market economies, but individually they chose different paces of transition; for example, in privatisation. Estonia made the sharpest rupture with the past, while in Lithuania the successor to the communist party returned to power.

Unlike its northern neighbours, Lithuania did not have the burden of integrating substantial numbers of Russian-speakers, a challenge which attracted much international scrutiny. This was a factor why Lithuania was already able to secure the withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory in 1993, a year earlier than Estonia and Latvia. Had Russian troops remained, the Baltic states might have ended up

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in a similar situation to Moldova or Georgia, and they would not have been able to successfully integrate with the West.

## Friendly competition

Though the three had a shared goal of joining Euro-Atlantic structures as quickly as possible, there was keen competition to be the first. Estonia was invited to begin negotiations for EU accession before the others in 1997, due to its more rapid reforms. Lithuania believed it had a better chance to be taken into NATO before the others. Neither country wanted to be held back by being placed in the same basket as the other two, less successful, Balts. Thus, they all strove to differentiate themselves. In the late 1990s, for instance, Estonia began to consciously construct a Nordic identity for itself, while Lithuania started emphasising its Central European identity. Nevertheless, EU and NATO enlargement happened in 2004 according to the "big bang" model. Though they were judged on their individual merits, the Baltic states were still treated as a package.

Friendly competition between the three states found a new expression in the accession to the Eurozone – Estonia leading the way in 2011, Latvia in 2014, and then Lithuania in 2015. Joining the single currency was part of the successful exit strategy from the 2009 global financial crisis which hit the Baltic states especially hard. They applied drastic austerity measures which allowed them to rapidly recover. Having joined almost every international fora available to them by the end of the second decade of this century, the last big challenge was to win a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Estonia is currently in the UNSC, but Lithuania was the first in 2014, and Latvia is currently campaigning for a seat. In these international efforts, they have all learnt from each other's experience.

Joining the single euro currency was part of the successful exit strategy from the 2009 global financial crisis which hit the Baltic states especially hard.

The biggest, most expensive Baltic co-operation project, mainly funded by the EU, is Rail Baltica – a high-speed rail link connecting the three countries with Central Europe. Getting the project agreed upon, and now implementing it, has been an ongoing test for the ability of the three countries to work together to prioritise long-term common interests. Energy security is a field where all three have emphasised ending dependence on Russia. However, when it comes to the actual costs of projects, disagreements often arise. The most recent example is the lukewarm support of Estonia and Latvia for Lithuania's un-

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compromising position on the Astravets nuclear power plant being constructed in Belarus close to Lithuania's border.

Security and defence has been the area where interests are the most closely aligned, though it has proven difficult to overcome national preferences in areas where synergies would obviously be beneficial, such as joint procurement. During the past four years, a common challenge had been surviving the presidency of Donald Trump, who recklessly undermined NATO. Despite Trump's admiration of Putin, his administration actually increased US defence investments in the Baltic region. Baltic governments delicately tried to ignore his tweets and focus on opportunities for practical co-operation. They also boosted their defence expenditure to two per cent of their GDP – not in response to Trump, but to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. There is great relief in the region with hopes that the new Joe Biden administration will bring the US back to normalcy and restore respect for transatlantic relations, but faith in the US as a reliable partner has been shaken.

## Overcoming populist challenges

In domestic politics there have been some similar trends, including a resurgence of populism. Populist parties, as elsewhere in recent years, have made big electoral gains and even obtained office. In the 2016 Lithuanian elections the established parties were swept by the Farmers and Greens Union, which went on to lead the government for four years. In Latvia, Who Owns the State? (KPV) emerged out of nowhere to the second place in the 2018 elections and was included in the broad governing coalition. In Estonia, the far-right Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) made the biggest gains in the 2019 elections and was surprisingly brought into government by Prime Minister Jüri Ratas of the Centre Party. EKRE soon began to act as the agenda-setter, and outrageous statements made by its leaders damaged Estonia's international reputation.

Populist parties, as elsewhere in recent years, have made big electoral gains and even obtained office.

However, the populist tide has ebbed. The first signs came in Latvia where the popularity of KPV rapidly collapsed, and in 2019 two highly-educated, accomplished figures with broad horizons – prime minister Krišjānis Kariņš and president Egils Levits – came to office. The October 2020 election in Lithuania led to the formation of a new female-led coalition government, headed by prime minister Ingrida Šimonytė. In January this year, EKRE finally overreached: they pushed a referendum on the banning of same-sex marriage. A new coalition excluding

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EKRE was formed by the liberal Reform Party, led by Kaja Kallas. Estonia caught up with its neighbours by appointing its first female head of government; Estonia is now the only country in the world to simultaneously have both a female prime minister and president, Kersti Kaljulaid. As of this writing, all three Baltic states appear to have rebounded from their bout of populism and their political systems have proven resilient (for now, at least).

Yet, the resilience of their societies was severely challenged by COVID-19. The Baltic states were among the most successful countries in coping with the first wave of the pandemic. While practically all of Europe was in lockdown, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were the first states to open a travel bubble in spring 2020. Unfortunately, when the second wave of the pandemic hit, this exemplary coordination crumbled. However, in the most recent development in March 2021, when the number of cases in Estonia skyrocketed, Latvia and Lithuania both offered assistance, showing once again that true friends are revealed in a time of crisis.

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# The Baltic phoenix

GRZEGORZ SZYMBORSKI

The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in defragmenting of the world map into fifteen pieces – most of which were new entities. However, three of them somehow seemed particularly familiar – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, jointly known as the Baltic states. Their re-emergence in Europe created many legal questions as they all began to claim renewal of their previous statehoods existing in 1918–1940.

Anti-Soviet tendencies on the Baltic coast exploded at the time of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. The desire for independence and the struggle for historical truth in the Baltic republics spawned social movements which emphasised the statehoods of the Baltic states, deprived as the result of the USSR's invasion in 1940. With Soviet military bases already present in the suppressed countries since the autumn of 1939, any resistance against an impending conquest was pointless. The states were obliged to make concessions to the overwhelming protector, leading to their forced inclusion into the Soviet Union. Some states, such as Germany and Sweden, accepted that incorporation. The subjugation was nonetheless disregarded by many countries, including the United States which strongly opposed the invasion, claiming they accept this new situation de facto but not de jure.

On March 11th 1990 Lithuania declared independence through a newly elected Supreme Council of Soviet Lithuania; it was the first Soviet republic to do so. On March 30th the Supreme Council of Estonia passed a decree which called for the restoration of an independent Estonian republic. On May 4th the Supreme Council of Latvia did the same. The Baltic states had entered a transition period. After a series of manifestos, Soviet threats and sanctions, the peoples of the Baltic states

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took advantage of the unsuccessful August 1991 coup, led by Gennady Yanayev in Moscow. On August 20th and 21st Estonia and Latvia declared full independence from the Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin's Russia recognised them in September. Although the sovereignty of the Baltic states was secured, their struggle for identity and status within the international community was more complex.

## The world's reaction

Throughout 1991 the majority of countries recognised the Baltic states. Iceland was the first to recognise Lithuania in February. In order to honour their pre-war continuity and meet the expectations of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, gold reserves stored in France and the United Kingdom during the Second World War were transferred back to the respective countries in 1992 and 1993. Many countries restored their pre-war embassies' abroad.

The European Community recognised the Baltic states' continuity as early as in 1991. On August 27th the ministers of foreign affairs of the European Community declared its support for the Baltic states. The European Parliament released them from Soviet debts as they were not recognised as Soviet successors. According to Peter Van Elsuwege, current professor of EU law at Ghent University, the European Union decided to accept the historic continuity to differentiate the Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with the other post-Soviet countries in order to pave their smooth path towards European integration. In autumn 1991 they entered the United Nations and the OECD, and later NATO and the EU. The position of the Baltic states was really exceptional and their recognition was not conditional at all. The International Labour Organisation seems to be the one exception – attempts to reactive membership failed. They had to reapply.

The legal case of the Baltic states re-emerging after a period of time is a topic that can be found in ancient Roman law, adopted in modern and international law. Professor Karol Karski, current Quaestor of the European Parliament, refers to *jus postliminium*. This rule concerns the civil death of a Roman citizen captured by the enemy, who could possibly reclaim his rights and liberties after termination of captivity. Yet, this ancient concept was reinterpreted for the purpose of the law of nations in the 16th century. Lawyer Balthazar Ayala claimed that a restored state may consider itself the same entity as formerly. It suggests that regaining lost status used to be taken seriously by lawyers through the ages, so the Baltic attempt was something more than just a whim.

With respect to the dispute between the Baltic states and Russia, Van Elsuwege refers to another Roman rule: *ex injuria non oritur jus* – no legal benefit can be de-

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rived from an illegal act. According to him the Soviet Union had no sovereign power over the territories of the Baltic states. He argues that there was an occupation of the three states throughout the communist period and as such they were subjects of international law. Karski agrees with this assumption, arguing that there were just two possible outcomes of the Soviet invasion of 1940 – a fall of the states, or their occupation. As for him, the fall through incorporation was not possible due to the so-called Stimson doctrine, originally introduced in 1932 by the American Secretary of State Henry Lewis Stimson and subsequently adopted by the League of Nations. Stimson advocated for non-recognition of any attempts leading to the overrun of the Briand-Kellogg treaty banning aggression in interstate relations. Karski claims incorporation did not comply with the principles of international law.

It must be noted that from a legal point of view, the time gap is not so relevant – international law lacks the notion of a statute of limitation. The claim ceases to exist once all parties to the cause agree that it does not exist anymore. Nonetheless international lawyers are aware that sometimes it is inevitable to legalise originally invalid actions, otherwise international law would have become the system of idealistic norms. Professor Van Elsuwege supports the point of view of a Polish lawyer Krystyna Marek, that violation of international law remains legal only in cases of its permanence without the possibility of *restitutio ad integrum* (literally: restoration to original condition). More importantly, already in 1954, Marek claimed that the Baltic states still have a chance, sometime in the future, to reclaim their pre-war identities.

## Resuming relations

The Supreme Council of the Estonian Soviet Republic announced that the authority of the USSR over Estonia was null and void *ex tunc* (from the very beginning); therefore the body restored the Republic of Estonia. All the states proclaimed *restitutio ad integrum*, but it was not truly possible to unconditionally fulfil such a wish. While negotiating the restoration of interstate relations, Tallinn and Helsinki agreed on the temporary use of the Soviet-Finnish treaties in relation to Estonia. It was an exception while all the Baltic states tried to avoid Moscow-made law and declare its non-applicability. But still, the provisional usage of the Finnish-Soviet agreements was settled voluntarily and was not based on Estonian succession of the USSR. At the same time, some of the Soviet treaties were too important to be ignored in relation to the new states, so they also remained in force.

In fact, the majority of pre-war agreements were not easily resumed. In 1991 Estonia and Finland agreed that the only former treaty that could prevail is one on

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cultural exchange. The remaining bilateral settlements had to be rewritten in order to adjust to the new reality. In the case of its relations with the United Kingdom, Estonia managed to resume a deal, adopted before 1940, on visa-free travel. In 1994 Poland and Latvia agreed that all pre-war treaties were still in force, but simultaneously decided to review the contents of a number of agreements excluded from "continuity". In 1997, 14 pre-war treaties expired.

Claiming the continuity of previous statehoods resulted in the question of constitutional order. In March 1990, Lithuania partially reinstated its former authoritarian one. The fundamental principles of the sovereignty of Lithuania remained in force. Shortly afterwards the constitution was suspended until a new one was drafted. Estonia, on the other hand, avoided explicit reference to its authoritarian legacy. On May 8th 1990 the Supreme Council adopted a law on national symbols. The most basic principles of the Estonian constitution of 1937 were reinstated, including the official state language. One may say the adoption of constitutional heritage was conducted indirectly. The legislative body drafted a completely new act in 1992. Its preamble resembled the first provision of the 1937 constitution.

On the contrary to Lithuania and Estonia, the Latvian constitution was suspended and not amended nor changed, so that, despite the authoritarian episode, its democratic core remained untouched. Yet, in 1990 the idea of readopting the act met many obstacles – society was not familiar with its content, and moreover no legal research of it was undertaken during the Soviet period. Yet, there was reason in favour of such a solution – according to Egils Levits, the current president of Latvia, the 1922 constitution was "free of Soviet legal and political thinking". That was truly valuable. The Supreme Council left four provisions in force – including the one concerning parliamentary elections. Although the Latvian declaration called for the drafting of a new constitution, it never happened. On August 21st 1991 the laws and regulations of the USSR, on Latvian territory, were announced as null and void. Once a new parliament was established in 1993, it proclaimed that the pre-war constitution remains in force. According to the legal scholar Jānis Pleps: "No other country has conducted a similar constitutional experiment."

One element of state continuity that has been pestering the Baltic states is the question of citizenship.

Another element of state continuity that has been pestering the Baltic states was the question of citizenship. In 1992 Estonia restored its 1938 citizenship law. As a result, only the children of an Estonian father could be considered an Estonian citizen in 1992. The questions that arose afterwards, also in regards to human rights, caused the Estonian Supreme Council not to decide on resuming any other laws prior to 1940. Yet, according to Van Elsuwege, Latvia and Estonia in 1991 were

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not obliged to automatically grant citizenship to whoever was present on their territories. He introduced the Alsace-Lorraine case. The territory was exchanged twice between France and Germany in 1871 and 1919, respectively. After the First World War, France did not decide to grant French citizenship to German settlers who arrived on the land under German rule. According to Van Elsuwege, "even after 50 years an application of the principle of legal continuity does not imply a right of citizenship for the immigrant population".

## What else is at stake?

State continuity and the narrative of occupation allowed the Baltic states to maintain their claims concerning potential compensation for 50 years of illegal occupation and of the atrocities committed during the Soviet era. Thanks to state continuity Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia did not become the successors of the USSR, therefore they are not responsible for international obligations and cannot claim any Soviet assets and belongings. State continuity foredooms the applicability of the treaties signed by Bolshevik Russia and Estonia and Latvia in 1920. Moscow rejected this argument. Estonia strongly insists upon the letter of the Treaty of Tartu and its statehood continuity.

Joint actions and statements were a necessity for the Baltic states, but their decisions in some cases still differed from one another. Latvia and Estonia called for the restoration of their pre-war territories, pockets of which were transferred to the Soviet Union after 1940. Meanwhile Lithuania did not advocate for the restoration of its pre-war boundaries as it excluded Vilnius and Klaipeda. Lithuanian territory under Soviet rule extended and till now remains secured by reference to the 1975 Helsinki Act that acknowledged territorial integrity at the time of the Cold War. In return, in order to trigger its neighbour, Russia raised the question of Lithuanian sovereignty over Klaipeda.

Lithuania did not advocate for the restoration of its pre-war boundaries as it excluded Vilnius and Klaipeda.

In 2007 Latvia gave up its claims on the city of Abrene, while Estonia and Russia still have not officially reconciled border disputes. Although we can see different approaches, territorial claims are clear under the Viennese Convention on State Succession (signed only by Estonia) that the boundaries inherited resemble an objective reality, no matter if the border treaty in force claims differently. For Rein Müllerson, a professor of international law at King's College in London, it provides "a definitive question of the boundaries of the Baltic states".

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In some cases, the three Baltic states' actions did not really follow their own narrative. For instance, all of them acknowledged the twelve-mile-long territorial sea, even if they did not possess this much before 1940. According to Van Elsuwege, the Baltic states sometimes tried to benefit from Soviet agreements with third parties, contradicting their statement on the non-applicability of the treaties signed by USSR. Finally, in 1990, the Baltic states constituted a new intergovernmental co-operation, known as the Baltic Assembly, instead of the pre-war Baltic

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Entente. Nevertheless, all of those questions were not able to undermine the general direction and understanding of the Baltic states' continuity as republics before the Soviet occupation.

## Another point of view

Today, the continuity of the Baltic states is broadly accepted. Russia, for obvious reasons promotes a different view, namely the so-called "1939–1940 myth". While not accepting the Baltic statements and interpretation of international law, Moscow often refers to an argument based on the time gap. V.N. Trofimov, a Russian lawyer, has claimed that a time lapse leads to doubts whether the states of the 1990s are legal successors of their pre-war entities. Russian sociologists Renald Simonian and Tamara Kochegarova maintain the Baltic narrative is based on a "myth of the occupation". They claim that the occupation, as regulated by the Fourth Hague Convention of 1907, refers to an occupation under a war regime. The Russians argue that there were no hostilities between the Baltic states and the USSR at that time, and that the Soviet ultimatum for inclusion was accepted. For those reasons, they accuse Latvian scholar Ineta Ziemele of reinterpreting pre-war international law. She maintains the 1907 provisions apply to the Baltic case, noting that the distinction between military actions and the threat of such actions proves a narrow and inaccurate perception of international law. Simonian and Kochegarova, in contrast, perceive the wide interpretation of military actions as exceeding legal boundaries. For them, the Baltic states were incorporated. They also refer to many non-legal reasons – arguing, for instance, that the Baltic states could have defended themselves in the same way Finland did.

It must be noted that even if some scholars are against the term "occupation," they still acknowledge Soviet responsibility for the massive scale of executions, deportations and deprivation of property that occurred. In fact, some international lawyers have doubts about whether the Baltics were really occupied. Legal scholar Bart Driessen says the Stimson Doctrine was based upon the Kellogg–Briand Pact and could not have been considered as customary law in the 1930s, not only because "it is difficult to maintain that state practice in the period up to the Second World War conformed to the Stimson doctrine", but the wording of the doctrine specifically referred to the status of belligerents if both were parties to the pact.

Austria's Anschluss and Abyssinia's conquest, approved by the international community, suggest that the Stimson Doctrine was invalid until the signing of the UN Charter. Driessen acknowledges the fact that the US and many other countries did not recognise the Baltic's incorporation. Nevertheless, he gives some credit

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to the Helsinki Act of 1975, in which principle four provides the recognition and granting of territorial integrity of other participating states. This act, according to Driessen, resembles recognition of the Soviet western borders. In that case, 1975 marked the Baltic states' loss of their international personality. Henceforth they had become a constituent part of the USSR.

## A predictable conclusion

It is somehow intriguing that international law may let us interpret the same principle or a treaty in a completely different way. The Helsinki Act of 1975 may be invoked by Lithuania trying to justify its territorial gains, while declaring state continuity, by Russia, in order to challenge the Baltic narrative, finally and by the independent scholar who raises the question about the moment when the Baltic states potentially became Soviet republics. The same doubts appear in regards to the Stimson doctrine.

Whenever a topic concerns international law and the politics overlapping one another, the general conclusion appears to be quite obvious as politically determined. It is the specific elements and opinions to the main story that make it more peculiar. All the authors mentioned above agree that *restitutio ad integrum* claimed by the Baltic states was wishful thinking, impossible to be forced without serious adjustments and exceptions from their own narrative. According to Professor Van Elsuwege: "The principle of state continuity served as a basis for negotiations in order to clarify the situation with regard to international law." Contradicting deeds could not have stopped the international community from granting support once given to them. It appears that in order to overcome the 50-year heritage, it was – and still is – necessary to stay united and support one's own narrative at all cost. NEE

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# Russians in Estonia

## We are not "them", we are "us"

KRISTINA KALLAS

Access to good education, healthcare, social welfare and general public services have all contributed to the often difficult process of better integrating mostly older generations of Russian-speakers into Estonian society. The relative ease of conducting everyday life, the security of state support and the prospect of a European future for their children have bound Russians with Estonia over the last three decades.

Estonia's Russian-speaking community became irritated by a recent speech of the Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, on Estonia's Independence Day on February 24th, where she emphatically called on fellow citizens "with a different cultural and linguistic background" to understand "(us), Estonians". The way she chose to address Russian-speakers and other non-ethnic Estonians living in the country – paraphrased as "you, who are different, need to understand us, Estonians" – signifies the lack of understanding in the president's office of the sensitivities of "the Russian question" from the perspective of Russian-speakers. However, even more significant is that the mishap of the president's address revealed a shift in self-understanding of Estonian Russians which has happened since Kaljulaid took office in 2016. What has changed with the self-perceptions of Russians in Estonia over the past five years?

To put it simply, they no longer appreciate it if they are addressed as "them". As journalist Ilya Sundelevich commented on the Russian-speaking national broadcasting programme, it is offensive to be treated as an outsider who is not capable of understanding the cultural and linguistic concerns of ethnic Estonians. The re-

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action of the Russian-speaking audience strongly indicated that they prefer to be not addressed separately from "us, Estonians". This is a significant change. It is a change from three decades ago when Russian-speakers were barely addressed in Independence Day speeches and their existence in the country was silently tolerated. Then, about a decade ago, a special reference was started to be made to "Russian-speaking compatriots" which generated applauses of long-awaited attention.

## More like us

When Kersti Kaljulaid became president and chose to reside for a couple of weeks in the Russian-speaking border city Narva, the special attention she gave to the uniqueness of the place and its residents was appreciated by the local community. However, it is fair to note that her attention was translated as "she is here because we are all the same Estonia" rather than "she is here, because we are different". Being singled out as somebody different, with a dissimilar cultural and linguistic background, has not become appreciated by the Russian-speakers and it is significant.

The change came with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. At the time when events in Ukraine unfolded with extraordinary speed and caused unprecedented abruptions, the analysts looking at the events used the knowledge to extract the potential conflict spill-over to other post-Soviet territories with significant Russian-speaking resident populations. Back then the belief was that Russian-speaking populations in Estonia and Latvia have long-term, overdue grievances towards their governments and that the Russian Federation's regime has applied a rather aggressive compatriots' policy to utilise this grievance. Adding to this, the act of Narva residents demanding linguistic and political autonomy through a 1993 referendum was often treated as a sign of separatism, which could lead one to conclude that events in Crimea and Donbas could be replayed in Estonia and Latvia, if Russia so chooses.

The reaction of Narva Russians to the annexation of Crimea – or more accurately, the lack of reaction – surprised everybody.

Yet, the reaction of Narva Russians to the annexation of Crimea – or, more accurately, the lack of reaction – surprised everybody. International journalists who travelled to Narva found a community that did not like the idea of being associated with the Russians in Crimea, and did not like questions about their loyalties to Estonia or their relations towards Russia. They did not want to talk because it would mean drawing attention to a group in need of special attention. They wanted

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Photo: Zoja Hussainova / Shutterstock

Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid visiting the Keeltelutseum – Russian school in Narva on the first day of the school year in 2018.

to be left alone, to continue working and raising their families. The message they sent was clear: "Leave us alone. Estonia is not Ukraine, Narva is not Crimea and we are not like Russians in Russia".

## Thirty-year search of identity

The process of self-identification as Estonian Russians, different from Russians in Russia or Ukraine, has been a bumpy ride. The collapse of the Soviet Union plunged the Russian-speaking residents of Estonia into a profound identity crisis. One late summer day in 1991, the country they identified with the most – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a non-national centralised ideological empire spanning from the Baltic sea of Northern Europe to the Pacific coast of Asia – no longer existed. Instead, they woke up to the realities of an aspiring small nation-state, whose political, cultural and social outlook were foreign to them. Overnight

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they went from being the dominant class to unwanted migrants, a minority group with no social, political or cultural status.

The loss of rights and privileges caused a rebellion against the independent Estonian nation-state, especially among the technocratic and political elites of the Russian-speaking community. Narva and Sillamäe, the most Russian-concentrated and most industrial Moscow-connected cities, conducted referenda in 1993 to declare special status zones in cities where the Russian language would continue to hold primary status. This was the last attempt to hold on to the status quo. The political power shifted quickly from the hands of the old Soviet ruling class to the new Estonian elite, backed by the western powers and not heavily resisted by Boris Yeltsin. Russians in Estonia had to choose their adaptation strategies: to resign and leave; to stay and resist, but risk marginalisation; to stay and try to get by; or, perhaps, to stay and to integrate.

All four strategies were tried. An estimated 100,000 Russian-speakers left Estonia in the early 1990s, including Soviet army personnel and family members. At the same time, many tried to integrate – they passed language tests and acquired Estonian citizenship. Estonian language skills have been slowly but steadily improving among Russian-speakers and, together with this, a better understanding of Estonian history and culture.

## Demand for integration

Identity formation is a prolonged process influenced by a myriad of factors. The most significant factor in the adaptation of Russians in Estonia (and equally so in Latvia), has been economic growth and the delivery of public services. Access to good education, healthcare, social welfare and general public services have all contributed to the difficult process of integration and association with Estonia. The ease of conducting everyday life, social security, and the prospect of a European future for their children have bound Russians more with Estonia than Russia over the last three decades. This is the major difference between Estonia and Ukraine: the state delivers relatively good quality public services in return for the taxes that citizens pay.

Soviet-era generations, while not fully content with the situation they were thrown into, have nevertheless adapted fairly well. Even if there are still significant inequalities in terms of income, access to top jobs and opportunities in politics, the life which most Russians have built in Estonia and Latvia is stable. They have a lot to lose from sudden disruptions of the regime. There lies the reason behind the lack of response to events in Crimea – Russians have as much as Estonians to

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lose from rocking the boat. Their children, born in independent Estonia, identify themselves almost exclusively with Estonia – its social, political and civic realities and its everyday practices. There are still cultural and linguistic dividing lines – partly inherited from the essentialist approach to nationality from the Soviet era, and partly caused by the linguistically separate schooling. The plea not to be considered as outsiders is a view loudly represented by younger generations of Russian speakers and the reaction to the president's mishap reflects this clearly.

Pal Kolstoe, a researcher of post-Soviet Russia and surrounding states, forecasted back in 1996 that the development of a "new cultural self-understanding" of Russians in post-Soviet countries is the most probable trajectory. This trajectory is most evident in the democracies of Estonia and Latvia. While Kolstoe did not dare predict which form this cultural self-understanding would take, observations from Estonia and Latvia allow me to claim that the self-understanding of Estonian and Latvian Russians, rooted in their respective countries, integrated into the mainstream national cultures and societies is taking shape with younger generations. Having said all that, it is important to note that structural inequalities and citizenship issues remain unresolved. It is also important to note that Russia continues to have leverage on the identity formation of Russian-speakers via language and cultural projects, especially via informational operations using Russian-language social media and television. This leverage nevertheless weakens with each passing decade. NEE

Kristina Kallas is a political scientist and leader of the liberal political party Eesti 200.

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# Pandemic in the Baltics

PHOTOS BY PAUL PÄRN, SOLVEIGA KAĻVA AND JAKOB WÖLLENSTEIN

Photo by Solveiga Kaļva

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TALLINN

It has been a year since the pandemic reached Tallinn. After the first wave ended, people were not so worried, as there was no high number of infections. Once winter came and the New Year was being celebrated the second wave of Covid was right around the corner. This time things were going differently with the infection rates somewhat higher than in the previous wave. You could sense that people were tired and stressed from the situation. Companies were struggling as well, especially in places where tourists would normally visit. Many shops and restaurants slashed prices by 50 per cent due to the lack of international visitors. In comparison to the first wave, there are more masks and more signs to remind people to be cautious in the situation. The signs are usually in two languages: in Estonian and Russian.

Paul Pärn is a local resident of Tallinn who currently works in the field of logistics, contributing to the functioning of maritime trade.

Photos by Paul Pärn

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RIGA

I first heard of the coronavirus when I was in Palestine. On January 27th 2020, I was at the post office sending some gifts to my friends and family back home in Latvia. A man working there asked me jokingly: "Are you sending corona too?" I had no clue what he was talking about. After returning home, it seemed that Latvian mass media was making a mountain out of a molehill, scaring people with a monster called COVID-19. Some people panicked, filling their homes with stacks of buckwheat, toilet paper, salt and other products, while others joked about corona. Face masks were often used to make a sarcastic note on the chaotic information circulating around, for example, placing them on musician's faces depicted on the covers of LPs in a store I passed by. Today, face masks and restrictions are our reality. Fashion advertisements are replaced by easy to cook product posters, and, while many businesses die out, this is a golden era for "e-everything", parcel lockers and food delivery services.

Solveiga Kaļva is from Riga, Latvia and runs a photo project called *Rīga detaļās* and a travel blog.

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## VILNIUS

In many regards, Vilnius had fallen into hibernation over the winter months. After the number of COVID infections had reached an alarming peak in December, measures for countering the virus were tightened: face masks became mandatory in public, mobility was restricted to the immediate municipalities, and shops and cultural institutions were closed down. As a resident, one could take lonely walks in the old town, having this world heritage all to one's self – except for the many food delivery guys fighting their way through the 30 cm snow cover on their mountain bikes. Eight weeks of solid negative temperatures added one snow layer after another, perfecting the impression of a magic city in a winter wonderland. The liveliest spots were the white hillslopes in the public parks which children occupied for jolly sleigh rides. But the strict lockdown paid off. Infection numbers are down significantly, the measures are carefully being relaxed and as the first rays of springtime sun melt the ice, pedestrians are reclaiming their city.

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Photos by Jakob Wöllenstein

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# Latvia prepares for big step in LGBTQ+ rights

RIČARDS UMBRAŠKO

The issue of granting parental rights to same-sex partners has become the most important fight for equality in modern day Latvia. As parliament prepares to decide on key amendments to the country's constitution, Latvians are struggling to understand that their freedom should not infringe on the freedom of others.

No one embodies the individual and collective fight for one's liberties and freedom in modern-day Latvia as much as Evita Goša. When her fiancée found out she was not entitled to a ten-day paid leave usually granted to fathers of new-borns, she petitioned the Constitutional Court of Latvia which agreed to hear the case. Goša and her lawyers argued that Article 110 of the Latvian Constitution, which declares that the state protects families, should also be applied to families with same-sex parents, and thus her partner's inability to receive the paid leave as per the national Civil Law should be declared unconstitutional.

In mid-November 2020, the constitutional court ruled that Goša's partner was indeed eligible for the ten-day paid leave after the birth of the couple's child. But what is more, the court also decided, in a landmark case, that same-sex couples are entitled to the same legal protections as heterosexual couples, thus giving the national legislature, the Saeima, 18 months to establish a legal framework for the protection of same-sex families.

The court reasoned that the definition of what constitutes a family should not be perceived so narrowly – a family is, by all means, a social construct that is based on close ties and mutual dignity and respect. These same close ties, the court ar-

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gued, can also be established not only through marriage but also by simply living together in the form of a civil union. More importantly, however, the court ruled that the state cannot simply deny same-sex couples the right to establish a legal family. It applied the principle of the inviolability of human dignity which, if denied the right to form a family, is a direct violation of the constitution.

## Standstill

The delight caused by the court's ruling was immense. It signalled the long journey that Latvians have made since joining the European Union in 2004, and holding their first gay pride parade a year later when human faeces and eggs were thrown at participants. The court's ruling was also a painful reminder of the 2005 constitutional amendments, pushed by the Christian nationalist Latvia's First Party, which took away the right for same-sex couples to establish a family in the first place and cemented homophobia in the constitution.

But the joy was short-lived. For substantial change to be implemented, the Saeima now needs to work on establishing the legal framework for the recognition of same-sex couples. This, however, has come to a standstill. On January 7th, two months after the historic ruling, the far-right National Alliance party introduced a bill to the Saeima that would target same-sex couples by specifying that a family, at its core, is a union between a father, who is a man, and a mother, who is a woman. The constitutional amendments were widely criticised by civil society, lawyers and activists. It directly violates the right of all Latvians – irrespective of their sexual orientation – to be entitled to basic human dignity and provisions that do not restrict their fundamental rights in a democracy. Lawyer Matīss Šķiņkis even indicated that if the amendments pass the supermajority vote in the Saeima, "we should then reconsider changing Article 1 of the constitution which describes Latvia as a democratic country".

Throughout history, Latvia has never been an entirely safe place for the LGBTQ+ community. Consensual sexual acts between men were illegal during the interwar period, but researcher Juris Ludvigs Lavrikovs argues that the law was rarely enforced and Latvia's non-heterosexual community felt largely safe in the country's largest cities. However, following the Soviet occupation in 1940, Soviet law, which also prohibited consensual sexual acts between men, was implemented with real-life consequences. Starting in 1961, men could find themselves in prison for five years for engaging in homosexual activities, and conversion therapy was often sought as a solution to cure homosexuality. Following the restoration of independence, Soviet-era provisions were finally struck down in 1992.

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In recent years, however, the rights of the Latvian LGBTQ+ community have still been neglected, and institutionalised homophobia is still a daily occurrence for many. According to the ILGA-Europe Index 2020, which reflects the legal and policy situation of LGBTQ+ people in Europe, Latvia ranks as the second-worst country in the EU in terms of equality, hate speech and civil society space for members of the community. Unsurprisingly, homophobic attitudes are reflected in real-life applications of the law – inheritance, property arrangement, tenancy, pensions, tax and social security are just a few of the areas in which the LGBTQ+ community has to deal with due to the government's inability to establish an effective framework for granting equal rights in the country.

Institutionalised homophobia is still a daily occurrence for many in Latvia.

In addition, the country's education system still retains Soviet-era attitudes when it comes to weeding out faculty's prejudices against the LGBTQ+ community. As the director of "Papardes zieds" – Latvia's largest reproductive rights campaign – Iveta Ķelle says: "there are still schools that are afraid of even mentioning homosexuality in the curriculum. When we go to schools to teach students about reproductive health, oftentimes teachers will ask us if we will be talking about homosexuality. When we say that we will, if someone asks about it, they no longer welcome us there."

## Deep polarisation exposed

Homophobic attitudes have recently been overshadowed by the far-right's own disbelief in institutions and the rule of law they proclaim to be the basis for a traditional and moral society. The court's ruling as well as the court as a body has been criticised by leading members of the National Alliance, who question the jurisdiction of the ruling, arguing that the court heavily overstepped its provisions that fall within the rule of law. There are similar parallels here, albeit less radical, to the 2015 Polish constitutional tribunal crisis where the vilification of judges who interpret the law accordingly and apply it to situations that bear significant consequences on a large fraction of the population should not be a tool prone to political manipulation. Instead, it should be something that we value and cherish, especially in a young democracy like Latvia.

Following the ruling, the court was relentlessly mystified by all fractions of society. The chief justice, Sanita Osipova, who authored the court's majority opinion in Goša's case, was selected as the European of the Year in Latvia for 2020 for "moving the country in the direction of tolerance and the rule of law". At the same

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time, conservative news outlets have described Osipova and supporters of the ruling as "die-hard leftists" that will bring about the destruction of the traditionalist state. In 2019 the *Guardian* wrote about the dangers of such rhetoric in accelerating anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in the context of Poland and the ruling PiS party. These recent statements also rub salt into the wounds of Latvia's already-galvanised political environment.

The court's ruling has only highlighted pre-existing political divisions that have largely gone unnoticed for years. More than 40 conservative citizen groups have sided with the National Alliance and drafted a plan for initiating a referendum to let Latvians decide for themselves if they are ready to accept the proposed amendments. But this very action raises the question: why should tax-payers' money be spent on organising a national referendum to decide whether the rights of a particular minority group should be violated?

On top of that, deep religious divisions have also contributed to the general discourse. Although the constitution establishes a separation between church and state, it is not uncommon for religious leaders to have subliminal and implicit influence on political decisions in Latvia. Catholic and Lutheran congregations have historically maintained a conservative position when it comes to LGBTQ+ and women's rights. The day following the court's ruling, the archbishop of Riga not only heavily condemned the "mutilation of what we know as 'family'" but, in a similar manner to several American Evangelical groups, invoked conspiracy theories about the climate emergency and the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis.

Recent polls show that more than 57 per cent of Latvians are opposed to the National Alliance's constitutional amendments.

Despite divisions, however, Latvians, especially younger generations, have become more supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. When one of the most popular Latvian fashion influencers, Elīna Didrihsone, spoke about how her religious beliefs prohibit her from accepting LGBTQ+ as equals, public backlash quickly consumed the media and several well-established companies rapidly cut their sponsorship ties with her. On the very frontlines are young people, the majority of who were born after Latvia gained its independence in 1991. Raised around the time when Latvia joined the EU, the struggles of Latvia's youth are very different from those decades ago. The new generation has become more open, more liberal, and more accepting of minority groups.

Even though the main impetus for change has come from younger generations, more than 57 per cent of Latvians are opposed to the National Alliance's constitutional amendments. The same poll also shown that out of the 72 MPs surveyed,

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65 per cent are in favour of the amendments – laying dangerously close to the 66 per cent required for the amendments to pass in parliament. By all means, it will be a close call.

## Ray of hope

What the National Alliance and other conservative parties fail to consider, however, is the wide scope of the court's ruling that would have an impact on real-life situations, including non-homosexual partners. There has recently been a myriad of stories emerging in Latvian media about unmarried heterosexual couples who have found themselves in legal dismay after the death of their partner. As the state only grants certain privileges and rights (e.g. the application of inheritance laws) to married couples, unmarried partners are not entitled to the same benefits as married ones. Therefore, a new citizen movement, titled "Dzīvesbiedri", has emerged in recent years to task the Saeima with coming up with a solution to recognise civil unions and partnerships for both same-sex and heterosexual couples.

Neighbouring Estonia is a prime example of such legislation – in 2016 it legalised civil partnerships, the first among the Baltic and ex-Soviet states to do so. "Dzīvesbiedri" has already collected over 20,000 signatures (out of the 10,000 required) for parliament to consider the legislative proposal, and in light of the recent ruling there is still a ray of hope that the legislature will heavily factor in public opinion on LGBTQ+ rights, as well as the wide range of benefits such a legal framework could bring upon every Latvian, regardless of their sexual orientation.

The fight for equality has never been so important in modern day Latvia. With increasing polarisation and a growing political gap between the generations, it is likely that a backlash will be inevitable if the Saeima votes against the amendments. The beacon of hope lies in Latvians' own ability to understand that their freedom should never go beyond the freedom of others. In an interview with the Latvian National television, Osipova vividly illustrates the court's ruling: "None of the basic rights guaranteed by the constitution can be applied without tolerance. If we want to have more rights but we are not yet ready to give the same rights to others; if we want to be free to restrict the rights of others… Guaranteeing our basic rights is impossible without tolerance and respecting each other's dignity."

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# How far right politics derailed Estonian higher education success

ANASTASIIA STARCHENKO

Estonia's success story in education recently made a U-turn. In less than two years, a grand coalition of populist parties have affected Estonia's international reputation and diplomatic relations, exerted pressure on civil society and the media, contributed to social polarisation, and undermined human rights. The coalition collapsed in January, but not before some serious damage was caused.

In recent years Estonia, an innovative e-state with a population of only 1.3 million, attracted much attention of world leaders, academics and venture capitalists thanks to its high-tech digital society and high performance in education. Fundamental reforms of the Soviet educational system took off in the early years of Estonian independence. According to the latest OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, Estonian basic education is ranked at the top, and has become the best in Europe in reading, mathematics and science. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 99 per cent of Estonian schools had been using some type of e-solutions for education, such as online databases, digital textbooks, e-learning materials, digital class diaries, and online assessments – thanks to the country's long-term investment in digital learning. Alongside equal access to pre-primary and basic education, Estonia demonstrated a high level of modernised vocational training, higher education, and adult education. Digital solutions and education – the latter being considered a crucial prerequisite of individual

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achievement and one of the main drivers of the country's development – lie at the heart of the Estonian success.

## Education nation

Every year, with over one hundred degree programmes in English, Estonian universities receive an increasing number of international students. In one of the smallest EU member states, tech-savvy Estonia took on the ambitious goal of competing with larger states and prestigious higher education institutions. While being at a relative disadvantage in terms of population and market size, Estonian soft power and foreign policy focused on digital solutions to governmental problems, international co-operation in cybersecurity and the internationalisation of higher education. Like Finland and Ireland, Estonia has recognised the significance of higher education and innovative systems for boosting national competitiveness on a global level.

Since 2007, when Estonia registered about 800 international degree students, the numbers have increased by over six-fold – up to 5,528 international students attended Estonian universities between 2019 and 2020. International students account for 12.2 per cent of all university students. With the exception of Finland, the largest sending country, most students come from outside the EU – Russia, Nigeria, Ukraine, India, Bangladesh, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Iran make up the top ten. The majority of international students complete their master's degree in information and communication technologies, as well as within social sciences, arts and humanities. According to the 2019 International Student Barometer – a study that tracks and compares international students' experiences from application to graduation – 91 per cent of students are happy with their life at Estonian universities and 97 per cent feel safe in the country.

Unfortunately, Estonia's success story has recently made a U-turn. The Estonian populist government – a coalition of the left-leaning Centre Party, the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), and the mainstream national-conservative Isamaa party – fell on January 13th this year over allegations of corruption that implicated a Centre Party official. In less than two years that "grand coalition" has affected Estonia's international reputation and diplomatic relations, exerted pressure on civil society and the media, contributed to social polarisation and undermined human rights in an otherwise liberal country. By the time of the highly divisive parliamentary elections in early 2019, EKRE politicians already earned a reputation as being stridently anti-immigration, racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, homophobic and Nazi-sympathising. During the inauguration ceremony lat-

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er that year, father and son Mart and Martin Helme – then the newly appointed interior minister and the EKRE leader, respectively – made what appeared to be white supremacy gestures. Many Estonians witnessed their worst fears come true.

## Xenophobia

The two Helmes are notorious for stoking fears of a non-existent refugee crisis and an alleged crime upsurge in Estonia, and for spreading hatred and lies against Estonia-based migrants, notably people of colour. "This does not make any difference whether they are from Ukraine or from Nigeria. … They are not Estonians", the younger Helme stated in a 2019 interview in an attempt to dampen EKRE's openly racist image. Yet, the reality showed a significant gap in the far-right perception of students arriving in Estonia from the former Soviet space versus those coming from states which, according to the government, present high risks of immigration: Bangladesh, India, Iran, Nigeria and Pakistan. "If you are black, go back" and "I want Estonia to be a white country" were some of Martin Helme's earlier comments made in defence of stricter immigration policies. It is no wonder that EKRE's leaders soon began pressuring Estonia-based non-EU students over alleged exploitation of temporary residence permits.

Already in early 2019 the three governing parties reached an agreement on tougher approaches to migration, including closer control of students arriving from outside the EU; according to Mart Helme, the then minister of interior, students are coming with the intention of gaining permanent residency in the EU, choosing work over their full-time studies. Official statements from the ministry motivated such concerns by the emergence of closed third-country communities which the ministry deemed to be posing high security risks to the country – a euphemism for EKRE's xenophobic agenda. While it is true that some non-EU/EEA students may opt to relocate their extended families to Estonia throughout the course of their studies, the government's unsubstantiated claims that third country graduates struggle to integrate into Estonian society and find high-skilled employment has presumptuously drawn a fine line between international students and terrorists.

In early 2019 the three governing parties reached an agreement on tougher approaches to migration, including over students from outside the EU.

When the coalition government began designing stricter conditions for non-EU nationals studying in Estonia, the COVID-19 pandemic opened the door to hasty, under-the-table changes to a previously flexible migration policy. Prepared

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in a rush without any real discussion or factual basis, a number of draft legislation proposals aimed to give credit to the conservative electorate while further damaging Estonia's liberal reputation internationally.

## Attracting talent

The proposals sponsored by the interior ministry envisioned tougher regulations on non-EU/EEA nationals coming to Estonia for study or work. They included a ban on spouses of third country nationals studying on a temporary residence permit from residing in Estonia for the first two years of study; a ban on third country nationals receiving tuition fee waivers in universities; and the prohibiting of students from outside the EU/EEA to work more than 16 hours per week. Upon concluding the bill, the ministry stated that the amendments would help encourage foreigners, who provide added social value, to settle in Estonia, and to prevent the abuse of national visas and residence permits. Such policy direction did not present any factual or statistical evidence to substantiate the increasing risks of illegal immigration nor would it benefit Estonia's international student mobility, the labour market and economic growth.

In 2019, over 5,500 international students attended higher education institutions across Estonia, 62 per cent came from outside the EU/EEA, and about half work besides studying. According to Statistics Estonia, between 2019 and 2020, international students paid 10 million euro in income and social tax in Estonia, while international graduates of the previous academic year contributed an additional 3.6 million euro. As stated by the Education and Youth Board – a government agency of the Estonian ministry of education – the economic benefits of bringing in international students, regardless of their origins, outweighs state investments in their studies; while the tuition fees brought in by non-EU students partly finance the Estonian curricula for local students. In addition to the tax revenue derived from the international students' participation in the domestic labour market, their studies also bring results in their living costs and visits by families – the International Student Barometer showed that the expenditure of international students between 2019 and 2020 alone totalled around 33 million euro.

The internalisation and diversification of universities boost the competitive strength of Estonian higher education on a global level, compensates national labour shortages, and raises the international standing of the economy. Small countries need to produce young graduates with the skills to support key industries and compensate labour shortages. English-taught programmes are competitive, which ensures that Estonia receives hundreds of international students with strong aca-

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demic performances; dropout rates are significantly lower compared to domestic students. International students with tuition fee waivers demonstrate even higher academic achievements which means that Estonia attracts talented students who start their career straight after graduation. Talent attraction benefits the country's labour market needs – Estonian skills and labour forecasting system (OSKA) estimates an annual shortage of over 2,000 highly-skilled graduates, particularly in the ICT, engineering and manufacturing industries. According to Statistics Estonia, those most likely to work alongside studying are international students who often stay working in Estonia after graduating.

## Estonia not only for Estonians

Needless to say, the amendments introduced without much regard to best practices reflected prejudices rather than evidence based policy. They have been vehemently opposed by the Estonian Student Union, the Education and Youth Board, the Estonian Employers' Confederation, and faced substantial scepticism from the ministry of education and research. If Estonia, an internationally-acclaimed start-up paradise, cannot bring in international talent its attractiveness in the long run will decrease, jobs will go elsewhere, and the state will lose the flow of investment along with the taxed incomes. In the end, EKRE officials proved to be short-sighted, populist and senseless – the party did not get much onto the policy agenda and instead resorted to divisive rhetoric.

At the end of January, Estonia's two largest political parties – the centre-right Reform Party and the ruling Centre Party – formed a new government led by the Reform party's leader, Kaja Kallas, as prime minister. It appears that the political class, civil society, many ordinary Estonians, as well as international students are now breathing a sigh of relief – following nearly two years of fatigue and embarrassment. It is time for Estonia's education and start-up culture to get back and reclaim its position as the poster child of the world – with some lessons learnt from the country's recent embrace of the far-right. NEE

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# Russia's police state showed its real face in latest protest crackdown

GIOVANNI PIGNI

Facing the largest street protests in a decade, Russian authorities responded with an unprecedented wave of repression. The harsh crackdown seems to have had the desired effect: Navalny's allies were forced to put their protests on hold.

Russian police detained Dmitry Gliuz, aged 30, on Sennaya Square, in the centre of St Petersburg, shortly after he came out from the metro. "I wasn't doing anything wrong, just standing and looking at my phone, when suddenly policemen grabbed me and punched me in the stomach". Gliuz was among the thousands of people detained on January 31st during the nationwide protests in support of Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny.

Gliuz, who is affected by a severe eye disease, was kept for 13 hours in a St Petersburg police station, despite the fact that, according to Russian law, people with disabilities cannot be detained for more than three hours. "I have always been opposing the arbitrariness of law enforcement and what happened that day reinforced my conviction even more," Gliuz says.

## Navalny as the catalyst of the protests

The arrest of Russia's main opposition leader, and his two years and eight months sentence in a penal colony, were accompanied by the largest nationwide

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Photo: Sofia Ivanova (pseud.)

Police in St Petersburg during a pro-Navalny rally. Despite the peaceful nature of the rallies, numerous episodes of unjustified police violence, brutality and even torture were registered.

protests in Russia for a decade. Despite the largely peaceful nature of the rallies, the authorities did not hesitate to unleash an unprecedented wave of repressive measures, thus sending a clear message: there can be no dialogue with Navalny's movement. In the last few years, the anti-corruption activist emerged as the informal leader of Russia's non-systemic opposition – a term that indicates oppositional forces that operate outside the official political establishment, largely subservient to the Kremlin.

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Last summer, Navalny's popularity received a boost after he survived a poisoning attempt, which the activist blames on the FSB, Russia's security services. After a period of recovery in Germany, Navalny flew back to Moscow where he was immediately detained at the airport. The Russian authorities accused him of violating a 2014 suspended sentence for fraud, which the European Court of Human Rights had previously defined as politically motivated. Following Navalny's arrest, his team released a bombshell video about a lavish palace allegedly belonging to the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, which racked up 120 million views over a few weeks.

As a result of these events, tens of thousands of people took the street of Moscow and St Petersburg. This time, large numbers even gathered in the usually more passive Russian province. While Navalny was the catalyst of the protests, the majority took to the street against political prosecution and government corruption. "I do not really sympathize with Navalny as a politician, but I can say that I support him as a person who is a victim of injustice", said Gliuz.

## The Empire strikes back

Ahead of the protests, authorities already declared them to be unlawful, and prepared to respond by flooding the streets with riot police. The main city centres of Moscow and St Petersburg were shut down. Armoured vehicles blocked the main streets and several metro stations were closed for "technical reasons".

"The main goal of such a deployment of forces was clearly to intimidate people, dissuading them from taking the streets," notes Kirill Shamiev, a PhD candidate at the Central European University, specialising in Russia's civil-military relations. The crackdown was the harshest Russia has witnessed over the last decade. According to the independent monitoring organisation OVD-info, around 11,000 people were detained across the country in two consecutive weekends of protests. Despite the peaceful nature of the rallies, numerous episodes of unjustified police violence, brutality and even torture were registered.

Around 11,000 people were detained across the country in two consecutive weekends of protests.

According to Tatyana Stanovaya, founder of the political analysis firm R. Politik, the authorities' reaction indicates that Navalny's movement in Russia is being de facto outlawed. "Russia's security apparatus was given carte-blanche to deal with Navalny's movement as a threat to national security," she says. That, according to Stanovaya, would support allegations of the FSB's involvement in Navalny's poisoning last August.

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Yet, riot police did not just target Navalny's supporters and other protesters. Numerous journalists covering the events and random bystanders were also detained. In the aftermath of the protests, hundreds of citizens were locked up in overcrowded police stations, often in reportedly degrading conditions. Pre-emptive measures were also deployed to stifle the protests and dissuade citizens from participating in future ones. The coordinators of the rallies were targeted with pre-emptive detentions, searches and interrogations. Reports came out on how Russian universities forbid students from participating in the rallies by threatening them with expulsion.

Russia's state TV channels unleashed an impressive information campaign ahead of the protests, framing them as illegal riots, emphasising the potential danger posed to minors and the potential career risks for young people participating in them. According to the state TV narrative, the rallies were organised by western intelligence agencies supporting Navalny in order to destabilise Russia.

## The politicisation of the rule-of-law

The authorities' most effective tool to counter the protests, however, was the judicial system, which, according to critics of the regime, have become increasingly politicised. In the aftermath of the rallies, around 9,000 administrative cases and 90 criminal cases were opened all over Russia. Most of them involved charges of extremism, hooliganism and violation of COVID-19 restrictions. As reported by OVD-info, evidence of police brutality did not result in any charge against the officers involved. The organisers of the protests were the ones hit the hardest: Navalny's top aid, Lyubov Sobol, was sentenced to house arrest for violating COVID-19 rules, while an arrest order was issued against Navalny's chief of staff, Leonid Volkov, who now lives in exile in the European Union. Volkov was accused of inciting minors to take part in illegal protests.

> Pre-emptive measures were deployed to stifle the protests and dissuade citizens from participating in future ones.

At times these cases were based on ridiculously absurd charges. Sergey Smirnov, editor in chief of news website *Mediazona*, for example, was sentenced to 25 days of administrative arrest (later reduced to 15 days) for sharing a tweet that showed the time and date of a rally in support of Navalny. "When the interests of the state are at stake, the court's decisions do not depend on the rule of law, as it should be, but rather on the signals coming from the presidential administration," says Ivan Pavlov, a lawyer and leader of Team 29, a human rights organisation. "The

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authorities are still using old Soviet methods, intimidating people with criminal cases and administrative arrests," he adds.

The formal reason given by authorities to justify the mass arrests was that rally organisers failed to obtain the necessary permission and for violating COVID-19 restrictions on mass gatherings. However, Russian authorities' record of arbitrarily denying these permits to the anti-systemic opposition stretches back well before the pandemic emerged.

"Authorities always find some excuse for denying us the permission to conduct meetings in public spaces," Irina Fatyanova tells me. She is the coordinator of Navalny's headquarter in St Petersburg.

In recent months, the Russian parliament has been increasingly approving a number of measures which critics see as intentionally designed to stifle mass protests. One approved in December makes blocking street traffic a criminal offense, punishable with imprisonment for up to a year. Following the protests, Putin signed a new law that significantly increased punishment for disobeying security officials.

The harsh crackdown had the desired effect: Navalny's allieswere forced to put their protests on hold.

## Is there a new hope for Navalny's opposition?

The harsh crackdown of protests has had the desired effect: Navalny's allies were forced to put their protests on hold. "Intimidation tends to work and people now stay at home because they do not want to get hit with batons," Stanovaya says. "The government showed that force is on its side."

Sources closed to the Kremlin revealed to *Reuters* that the Kremlin is ready to deploy even more force against protesters if deemed necessary. Nevertheless, Navalny's allies evaluate the protests as "a success" and the unprecedented deployment of security forces as the sign of the regime's weakness. "It is clear to me that authorities are scared," Fatyanova tells me. She is convinced that the police brutality will motivate more people in the future to join Navalny's cause.

The movement is now preparing for the State Duma elections which will take place in the autumn. "By making sure that real opposition candidates will make it into the Duma, we can stop more repressive laws to be adopted," Fatyanova adds. "And if the voting will be falsified, even more people will take the streets," she concludes.

According to political scientist Margarita Zavadskaya, the more the regime depends on the loyalty of the law enforcement apparatus, the more difficult it is to

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scale down repressions. "The regime itself becomes hostage of this repressive loop in which increasing resources are directed to fund the security apparatus," she says.

However, thinking that Putin's legitimacy is solely based on the loyalty of the law enforcement apparatus would be a mistake. Despite a decade of falling living standards and a stagnating economy, the Russian president can still count on a solid 64 per cent approval rating, according to independent pollster Levada Center. On the other hand, only five per cent of the public trusts Navalny as a politician; and only 22 per cent of Russians approve the protests. "For now, the popular support for the non-systemic opposition is too small," Stanovaya says.

As noted by Zavadskaya, Putin's Russia, compared to most other authoritarian regimes, is relatively wealthy. When we also factor in the loyalty of the security apparatus and political elite, Putin is likely to stay in power for the foreseeable future. "Unfortunately, this type of regime tends to enjoy significant longevity," Zavadskaya concludes. NEE

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# Everyone understands what is happening

VICTORIA ODISSONOVA

The space for freedom is shrinking in Russia. Many see a repetition of 1937 – a period of the most severe Stalinist terror, when government agents, at any moment, could come to any house and throw you in jail. The reason does not matter and it can happen to anyone. Yet still, everyone continues to stand by and stay silent.

On January 17th this year, the return of Alexei Navalny to Russia was being watched by the entire politically-minded society, or at least a large part of it. People across the political spectrum were equally fixated. I know many leftists (or liberals) who were sincerely worried, and many rightists (or conservatives) who rubbed their hands maliciously. All were watching via the internet livestream or traditional media, and some with one eye closed. The arrest of Navalny at Sheremetyevo airport became the starting point not only for street protests and clashes, but for intra-family disputes.

The case of Navalny is similar to that of the French Dreyfus affair in the 19th century. We can reference a famous cartoon from that time where, in the first frame, a large family is sitting peacefully at the dinner table; but in the second frame, the table is flipped over and a fight breaks out as soon as someone brings up the Frenchman and his Jewish origins. The difference is that while the French authorities were searching for someone to charge with suspected espionage, the prosecution cast at least a semblance of a doubt as to the innocence of the accused. In Navalny's case, both the charges and the sentences of the courts are simply farcical and absurd.

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## "Don't beat the police"

Perhaps there is no meeting today in Russia without a discussion on the political situation in our country. It seems that to be apolitical in Russia is shameful. The accusation that people only see black and white is only partially true. After the first protests on January 23rd, the state media immediately rushed to justify the actions of the riot police, to protect the injured police force that were (god forbid!) "hit with snowballs by the protesters". Furthermore, a police car driver even had an eye gouged out; however, as many journalists rightly noted, nobody knows the name of this police officer or his fate, or the subsequent fate of all the "unjustly" wronged police officers. But they quickly identified the person with a smashed skull pictured on the cover of *Novaya Gazeta*. His name, Maxim Lelyukov, appeared the next morning on telegram channels like *Mash* (whose journalist visited the palace in Gelendzhik after Navalny's investigation and claimed in a video report that "he did not manage to figure out the purpose of the building nor the owner's name"). *Novaya Gazeta* and I, as the photographer, were immediately accused of faking the photograph.

State media claim they did not stage anything, that protesters really did beat the police.

The next day Maxim was filmed by a journalist from *Mash* without a bandage. However, my photo showed that the bandage was covered in blood and not in ketchup, as several federal channels tried to prove for a week. The opposition, or independent media in Russia (these words have practically become synonyms in our country), were also accused of manipulating information. Among the main complaints they lodged, they claimed: "you justify the actions of the protesters, blaming only the police, and write nothing about the aggression on the part of the protesters themselves".

On January 23rd some of the protesters could have committed illegal and violent actions but were stopped by the larger crowd. For example, a group of men aggressively pulled down another man, who had an anti-Navalny poster, from a streetlight and began kicking him. But the nearby crowd dragged these men away, not allowing them to beat the provocateur. A similar situation happened to one of the policemen, beaten during the protests. During one of the clashes between the protesters and the riot police (OMON), some men "knocked out" one of the police officers, threw him to the ground and beat him. The group of seven or eight was immediately pulled apart with shouts of "Stop it! Don't beat the police!" Both incidents were recorded by journalists and streamed live on the internet.

It is difficult to say exactly where such violent actors come from. On one hand, the most popular account is that they are provocateurs, paid by law enforcement

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agencies to create such incidents. These cases gave the state media a number of visuals to use as propaganda. State media claim they did not stage anything, that protesters really did beat the police, so the officers, in defence, used force and special equipment. On the other hand, they could have been real protesters – with a high amount of inner aggression, anger and a desire to fight. And so, it turns out that from the point of view of most people, police violence is already becoming justified and even the norm.

From the conversations with people who are out of the loop from journalism, politics and protests, I constantly hear: "The police just did their job. Nothing else." This mantra becomes an excuse for the violence used by the police against protesters because the behaviour of provocateurs automatically spreads to other participants at the rally. And for the "uninitiated", this peaceful action turns into an aggressive mass, which is ready to attack not only the police but random citizens who happen to exit the subway at the wrong moment.

During a spontaneous meeting after the sentencing of Navalny on February 2nd, a video was uploaded on a Telegram channel which depicted how the police did not arrest a man after he said "Bryansk-North". (Bryansk is a Russian town.) It is believed the codeword indicates his involvement with a group of provocateurs whom the law enforcement agencies hired to stir riots. Then these riots are shown on state TV and that is that; the propaganda machine does its job. However, the existence of evidence of collaboration is not taken into consideration by state TV.

## Boiling point

After February 2nd, Navalny's PR team announced a temporary stop of the protests. At the same time, online disputes began. Is it time to stop when the protesters were still invigorated by the latest events? They had not come to a consensus, and on the weekend of February 6th and 7th suggestions about new protests in Moscow were announced on Facebook. Those private initiatives did not receive such a wide response, but they did receive the attention of the police: on Saturday and Sunday in Moscow and St Petersburg the police blocked everything in both city centres.

For now, it seems like Navalny's arrest and the subsequent detentions at the protests (even of journalists) have reached a boiling point. Most likely, there will be a series of trials of those detained. And the punitive measures will clearly be greater than those during the 2019 summer protests in Moscow, when the trials of those arrested (for throwing plastic cups at riot police) lasted the whole autumn. Those Moscow protests related to the elections to the Moscow Council. Many in-

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dependent candidates were not registered, and most of their votes were declared invalid. Here the cases could be more serious as there were real episodes of police resistance.

The repressive measures have already affected those public figures who did not attend the rallies. Russian actresses Varvara Shmykova, Alexandra Bortich, and Yana Troyanova, for instance, merely posted words of support for Navalny and the protesters on Instagram. Yet, Shmykova's photo has already been removed from the Meyerhold Centre of Theatrical Arts website, where she works. And the company Gazprommedia, which owns several entertainment TV channels, has removed Troyanova and Bortich from all its promos: they "cut" ads and photoshopped banners featuring the actresses.

> The whole situation is a vivid manifestation of the fact that free speech has not existed for a long time in Russia.

As for journalism, the whole situation is also a vivid manifestation of the fact that free speech has not existed for a long time in Russia. You can basically do whatever you want with journalists. As a journalist, I understand that if I appear at a protest on an editorial assignment, even wearing clear identification as a journalist with credentials, I can still be arrested and charged with participating in protests. When using tear gas, the police do not see our bright vests: two of my colleagues were directly bashed on the head with batons, and my camera lens was smashed. The editor in chief of the independent publication *Mediazona*, Sergey Smirnov, was detained while walking with his son. He now stands accused of reposting a joke from Twitter, which was seen as a call to participate in protests. This accusation is false. He did not make any such statements.

It is horrible to see how university knowledge differs from my own experience. During our studies at the department of journalism, we were taught critical thinking. The story of Navalny shows that for the next generation of journalists, it does not matter. It is important to be convenient to the government, to keep quiet and just accept what is happening. And whatever you do, do not say anything about politics on social media, otherwise the government will accuse you of destroying "the system".

## Change

I often hear the following when I start to complain: "If you don't like how things are, why don't you leave?" To be a journalist of an independent news medium in Russia today is to risk your life. And not only your life, but the lives of your family. I

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am aware of these risks. Is it scary? Of course, it is. But it sounds even more terrible for me to leave everything behind and go somewhere else, because, as the famous Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov wrote, "I hate the state, but I love my country". I want the government to listen to journalists' criticism and citizens' desires, and to change something and not get rid of those who are not pleasing the regime. I want my children to live in a country where it will be safe for them to express their opinions. As a journalist, I want to help change something in people's lives (I work a lot with social stories) and not to powerlessly observe from a distance.

There are also some positive changes, I think. The Russian people are reluctantly and gradually realising that something is very wrong with their government. Recently published data from the Levada Center shows that 26 per cent of Russian residents have watched Navalny's investigative film, another 10 per cent have not seen the film but are familiar with the content. In fact, this means that one in three Russians know what is happening with the investigation. Only a third of the viewers of the documentary are convinced that the facts in it are untrue. The rest are sure of the veracity of the investigation (17 per cent) or believe it to be mostly true (38 per cent).

The increased social tension is not only centred on politics and expressing one's opinion on social media, for which the authorities can fine or arrest you. More and more people are consulting psychotherapists because of the fear of going out, especially walking in city centres on weekends. However, the reason for the fear varies slightly. Some are afraid of the actions of the police, who may arrest a random pedestrian waiting for his or her tram. Others are afraid of the protesters themselves and the crowd. It seems that the former category is most prevalent.

The Russian people are reluctantly and gradually realising that something is very wrong with their government.

Looking around, many people see a repetition of 1937 – a period of the most severe Stalinist terror, when government agents, at any moment, could come to your house and throw you in jail. The reason does not matter. It can be you or one of your friends. And everyone will continue to stand by, keep silent and pretend this does not concern them. In Russia, there is a proverb that denotes alienation from social problems: "My house is the last one on the street". Today, it sounds like an excuse for their own learned helplessness, which many practice.

The impact of the Navalny case on society is analysed by a large number of interpersonal discussions, as well as memes that have appeared online. I cannot say whether it is only a Russian trait to make fun of terrible and unfair things. However, one of the most popular "entertainments" in recent weeks has been to evaluate

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your salary by the number of golden toilet brushes mentioned in Navalny's film. What is scary is that most Russians are not able to buy one such brush with their monthly earnings (it costs about 100 euro). Many do not share Navalny's political beliefs nor see him as a future politician (either as mayor of Moscow or president of the Russian Federation). He is accused of populism, excessive aggression, expressiveness and the bending of the truth for his political agenda. Yet every person, no matter how overcharged, has the right to express his or her opinion. And then I feel sorry for Alexei as a person and as a human being. It is very painful to watch his trial, under the portrait of Genrikh Yagoda, one of the initiators of Stalinist terror. It is physically unbearable to read online transcripts from the courtroom where the absurdity of the accusation is off the charts. And it is quite nauseating to see Navalny drawing a heart for his wife Yulia on the glass. Many people then finally understood: you cannot do this to a person. This is absolute nastiness and cowardice. Yet, while everyone understands what is happening, they still keep silent. NEE

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# Zelenskyy takes on Russia's information warfare campaign against Ukraine

TARAS KUZIO

On February 2nd Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a presidential decree sanctioning Lviv oligarch Taras Kozak's companies which owns three pro-Russian television channels. Unofficially, these channels are controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk, Putin's right-hand man in Ukraine. The US election victory of Joe Biden has stiffened western and Ukrainian resolve to take on Russian President Vladimir Putin at a time when he is facing growing opposition at home.

The question of information warfare and disinformation have become hot topics since the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Nevertheless, one should not assume that this threat was invented by Russian President Vladimir Putin as the Soviet Union had practised *dezinformatsiya* and *mokryie dela* (wet affairs – assassinations) for decades. But with the internet, 24-hour television and social media, Putin and other authoritarian leaders have turbo-charged their information warfare. The threat is evident in the new structures which have been created by the European Union, NATO, the United States and other democracies to counter it. As Russia's "guinea pig" for information warfare, Ukrainian civil society has undertaken major steps to develop counter strategies and rebut (often Ukrainophobic) disinformation. Nevertheless, there continues to be heated debates about how a democracy counters disinformation and fake news and if, for example, it was right for a private company to ban a president from using its social media platform.

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## Using freedom to bring down democracy

The three banned pro-Russian television channels in Ukraine, 112, NewsOne and ZiK, accounted for half of the Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda in the country, according to research by Detektor Media, an NGO media watchdog. The National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting had warned and fined these three channels 40 times for infringing Ukrainian law and for spreading disinformation. The three channels replayed typical Kremlin themes that ridiculed the Ukrainian language and described Russians and Ukrainians as "one people", played up life in occupied Donbas as better for Russian speakers than in Ukraine, blamed Ukraine for launching the Russian-Ukrainian war in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas, called the Euromaidan Revolution a putsch, justified the annexation of Crimea and portrayed Ukraine as a puppet of the United States.

The seven-year Russian-Ukrainian war and the intensity of Russia's barrage of disinformation has led to Ukraine's civil society and media organisations having no qualms about supporting the ban of pro-Russian TV channels. Six major media NGOs in Ukraine wrote: "In today's world, the relationship between freedom of speech and propaganda has become much more complex. Propaganda, disinformation and malicious information operations often use freedom of speech against itself. They use democracy to bring down democracy."

Ukrainian civil society and media do not view the ban as infringing media freedom in Ukraine because they never viewed Medvedchuk's three TV channels as part of the independent media space, but rather as a national security threat due to their ties to the "aggressor state" and Putin. This media should not be permitted to operate "in a country that has been the victim of external aggression," they stated. Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council (RNBO), described Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine as consisting of military aggression, "information terror" and espionage elements conducted with the assistance of pro-Russian proxies in the country. Russian agents and Ukrainians recruited by Russia and terrorists trained by Russia are unveiled on a weekly basis. Pondering the fate of journalists at the three TV channels, Danilov advised them to find work in Russia.

The February 2nd decree signed by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sanctioned Taras Kozak's companies, which own the three television channels, for a period of five years. Unofficially these channels are controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk, Putin's right-hand man in Ukraine. Kozak and Medvedchuk are leading members and financiers of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform-For Life party. 49 per cent of Ukrainians support (and 41 per cent oppose) sanctions leading to the closure of the three TV channels. This increases to 72 per cent support for sanctions if

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they are against individuals or entities which threaten Ukraine's national security and 85 per cent for those who support terrorism and separatism. In the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, 36 per cent and 30 per cent support the sanctions, respectively; with 51 per cent and 59 per cent opposed. Yet, respondents in southern and eastern parts say that if sanctions are introduced against those who supported terrorism or separatism, support increases to 79 and 80 per cent respectively, with only 16 per cent opposed. Similarly, if sanctions were introduced against those harming Ukraine's national security, 66 per cent and 65 per cent in southern and eastern Ukraine would support them respectively, with 29 per cent and 31 per cent opposed.

## Why now?

Danilov explained that an investigation into the three channels had been undertaken over the previous eight months by the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) counterintelligence – headed by Major General Ruslan Baranetskyy, a man who has received accolades and medals for his service fighting Russian and proxy forces in Donbas. SBU counterintelligence had provided the information which made Danilov confident that any attempts to overturn the ban in the courts would fail. That the SBU counterintelligence played an important role is beyond doubt, but one should ask why Ukraine's vibrant independent media have undertaken far more investigations of Kozak and Medvedchuk than official security services. The sources of their corruption were long known; *Ukrayinska Pravda* (*Ukrainian Truth*) and *Radio Svoboda* (*Liberty*) published major investigations in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Why did Zelenskyy only find the political will to take this step now, after first suggesting he would take this step this past summer? There are three factors.

The investigation into the three channels had been undertaken over an eight-month period by the Security Service of Ukraine.

Domestically, Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People party are declining in popularity in eastern and southern Ukraine, where it faces competition from the Opposition Platform-For Life. There is a new US administration which, unlike its predecessor, is providing stronger support for Ukraine. After nearly two years of proposing compromises to achieve peace in Donbas and met by Putin's inflexibility, Zelenskyy has reached the same conclusion as his predecessors (not counting Viktor Yanukovych) that Russia will constitute a major threat to Ukraine's security for the foreseeable future. This conclusion is reflected in a 2020 presidential NISS (National Institute for Strategic Studies)

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think tank report and in this year's Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine white book. A third factor is that Putin is weakened and distracted by mass protests in Russia, his imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and western sanctions imposed as a consequence of this.

Why did President Petro Poroshenko not take this step during his 2014–2019 presidency? After all, he had banned social media, print and electronic media, films, books and flights from Russia. In October 2018, Ukraine's parliament adopted a resolution sanctioning seven companies which owned the TV channels 112 and NewsOne TV (ZiK was purchased a year later). The new law on sanctions, adopted in 2018, permitted the RNBO to issue sanctions against foreign companies, individuals and states promoting "terrorism" and undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity. Sanctions can also be issued against Ukrainian citizens if they act as foreign agents of a terrorist entity, government or state (i.e., Medvedchuk and Kozak). Poroshenko did not transform the parliamentary resolution into a presidential decree, claiming it was because he did not want to close down TV channels during the presidential election campaign. Many doubt this to be true. The interior minister, Arsen Avakov, who held the same post during Poroshenko's presidency, believes he did not have the political will to do so. Two other reasons have been proposed. The first relates to the business dealings between Medvedchuk and Poroshenko. The second is that Poroshenko feared Putin's wrath if he undermined his representative, Medvedchuk, in Ukraine, who participated in the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group's peace negotiations and negotiated exchanges of prisoners of war.

The reason why Zelenskyy opted to act now, and not earlier, has a lot to do with who won the US elections. President Joe Biden has Putin in his sights for his operations against US national interests and for personal reasons. The US Democrats have never forgiven Putin for the 2016 intervention in the US presidential elections, which they believe was aimed at helping elect Donald Trump. The Democrats are also seeking to retaliate against Russia's large-scale cyber-attacks against the US and, according to intelligence reports, of Russia paying Afghan Taliban bounties to kill US soldiers in Afghanistan.

> The reason why Zelenskyy decided to act now has a lot to do with who won the US presidential election.

Russia has also targeted Biden's son, Hunter, in a major campaign through its Ukrainian agents, led by Andriy Derkach and Oleksandr Dubinsky, working with Trump's legal team headed by Rudy Giuliani, Ukrainian-American Lev Parnas, and Belarusian-American Igor Fruman. This operation was in turn financed by Ukrainian oligarch Dmitri Firtash who is under house arrest in Vienna since 2014 fighting extradition to the US (it is no coincidence that Giuliani and his team always

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flew through Vienna to and from Kyiv). Firtash hoped to spread disinformation on the Bidens, thus preventing him from winning the election, and in return Trump would have cancelled his extradition request. The US sanctioned Derkach, labelling him a "Russian agent" last September. Dubinsky, Dmytro Kovalchuk, Konstantin Kulyk, Oleksandr Onyshchenko, Anton Symonenko, Andriy Telizhenko, and Petro Zhuravel were also sanctioned as Russian agents in January this year. Importantly, the US only sanctioned seven of the eight Ukrainian Russian agents, and that happened after the US elections, presumably because they had been undertaking a Russian-led disinformation operation against Trump's opponent, Biden.

The US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, whose family has Ukrainian roots, demanded the expulsion of Dubinsky from the Servant of the People faction, which took place on February 1st, before he would agree to talk to Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's foreign minister. The meeting took place the following day. In the same week, Zelenskyy's decree sanctioned Kozak's companies which owned the three TV channels. US support for Zelenskyy's decree suggests that the US and Ukraine view the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns as part of a larger Putin-orchestrated campaign conducted through pro-Russian television channels and pro-Russian oligarchs in Ukraine.

One of these oligarchs, Ihor Kolomoyskyy, is under FBI investigation for money laundering in the US, for what has been described as the biggest bank fraud in history. Dubinsky was a member of a sub-group of 40 or so deputies within the Servant of the People parliamentary faction which is allied to Kolomoyskyy. After the IMF and western governments successfully lobbied Zelenskyy not to allow the return of Privat Bank to Kolomoyskyy, which was nationalised in 2016, he became pro-Russian. On March 5th, the US turned the heat up on Kolomoyskyy as a "public designation of oligarch and former Ukrainian public official Ihor Kolomoyskyy due to his involvement in significant corruption". Zelenskyy is under increasing pressure to act against Kolomoyskyy in return for US assistance and support.

## Putin's obsession with Ukraine

The Putin leadership developed a strategy during Poroshenko's presidency in response to his widespread banning of print and electronic media, social media and cultural and educational contacts from Russia. A majority of Ukrainians have switched from Russian-language VKontakte to Facebook, from .ru mail to Gmail, Odnoklassniki to Instagram, and Russian to Ukrainian television. By 2018, only a small number of Ukrainians were consuming newspapers and magazines (one per cent), radio (three per cent), and TV (seven per cent) from Russia. In 2020, only

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six per cent of Ukrainians watched TV from Russia and less than one per cent received their information from print media and websites from Russia. These figures demonstrate why the Kremlin believed it could only deliver its disinformation to Ukrainians by using domestic TV. The Opposition Platform-For Life's voters tend to be older, and most do not use social media.

Only six per cent of Ukrainians watch TV from Russia while less than one per cent get information from Russian print media.

With an eye to the 2019 and 2020 elections (after Zelenskyy's victory, the parliamentary elections were brought forward to 2019), Putin's strategy was two-fold. First, to take control of pro-Russian forces in Ukraine which had emerged from Yanukovych's former Party of Regions. Oligarchs prevented Putin and Medvedchuk from taking control of the Opposition Bloc and therefore Medvedchuk engineered a split creating a new force, the Kremlin controlled Opposition Platform-For Life party, which has become the main pro-Russian political force in Ukraine. Second, no longer able to broadcast the Kremlin's propaganda into Ukraine, Putin's strategy was to take control of a growing number of Ukrainian TV channels to promote the Kremlin's disinformation under the banner "freedom of speech".

Medvedchuk was sanctioned by the US in March 2014 but has bypassed this by placing his business assets in his wife's name (Oksana Marchenko) and TV channels in Kozak's name and that of his partner, Natalya Lavrenyuk. That the real owner is beyond any doubt: Opposition Platform-For Life oligarch Vadym Rabinovych is on record calling them "Medvedchuk's channels".

There are three major sources of funding for the Opposition Platform-For Life and Medvedchuk's TV channels. The first is connected to the oil industry in Russia, in which Marchenko and Lavrenyuk have interests. In 2017, Kozak's partner, Lavrenyuk, received 75 per cent of the shares in the Rostov-based oil refining company *Novoshakhtinsk*, with Lavrenyuk owning 25 per cent of the shares which supplies oil to Crimea and the DNR and LNR. Since then, Lavrenyuk has become fabulously wealthy, owning ten companies in Ukraine and Crimea, as a front to conceal Medvedchuk and Kozak's political operations in Ukraine. Recently Lavrenyuk, who illegally holds Russian and Ukrainian passports (Ukraine does not recognise dual citizenship), purchased a 13 million US dollar apartment in Moscow. The second source is the illegal coal trade between the DNR and LNR (the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republics – the Russian occupied Donbas) and Ukraine. Prior to 2014, Russian controlled Donbas included 88 coal mines while Ukrainian power stations lack coal. The illegal coal trade has been conducted since the beginning of the war, presumably with the knowledge of the Ukrainian authorities. Coal imported from the DNR and LNR was smuggled

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through a fake contract between the Hong Kong based company Arida Global and *Tsentrenergo* which pretended the coal was from South Africa. The third source is liquified gas, a sector Medvedchuk took control of in 2016, with the reported assistance of corrupt law enforcement which he used to squeeze out competition. With Russian-Ukrainian trade blocked by both sides, Putin transferred former Rosneft petrol stations to Medvedchuk.

On February 19th, two further decrees imposed sanctions on eight people and 19 companies. The eight included three Ukrainians: Medvedchuk, Marchenko and Lavrenyuk; and five Russians: Konstantin Vatskovsky, Vitaly Domchenko, Sergey Lisogor, Alexander Maslyuk and Mikhail Popov. The sanctions were imposed for "financing terrorism"; that is, using profits from coal imported from the DNR and LNR to finance three TV channels banned earlier that month. Two of the five Russians are owners of *Donetsk Ugly* (Donetsk Coal) in the DNR.

Of the 19 companies sanctioned, the most important is *PrikarpatZakhidTrans*, the operator of the Ukrainian section of the Russian-owned Samara-West oil pipeline. Sanctioned Russian diesel and oil was supplied to Ukraine and the European Union through this pipeline using Belarusian licenses. Other sanctioned companies included air transportation used for flights between Kyiv and Moscow and joint companies registered in Russia, occupied Crimea, Moldova and Portugal. The sanctions will cripple the economic and other activities of those they were imposed against. *PrikarpatZakhidTrans*, which Medvedchuk has controlled since 2017 through his wife Marchenko, is to be nationalised by the Ukrainian state. The assets of the five Ukrainians are frozen, meaning they cannot use and manage or trade these properties, flights are prohibited, capital cannot be taken out of Ukraine and permissions and licenses for the import and export of hard currency is not allowed.

The February 19th decrees were meant to undermine the financial base of pro-Russian forces operating in Ukraine. They will also no doubt have an impact on the ability of the Opposition Platform-For Life party to function as an effective political force.

## Challenges ahead

Kozak grew up in Lviv and retains business interests there, including the Navariya hotel complex and the Galician Agricultural company. After a number of failures running for parliament, he was finally elected in 2014 by the Opposition Bloc, and in 2019 by the Opposition Platform-For Life. In 2017, a year before Kozak purchased the three television channels, his asset declaration reported 500,000 US dollars in cash, two houses and a land plot in Crimea. Not coincidentally, just

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ahead of Ukraine's 2019 elections, Kozak, Marchenko and Lavrenyuk became very wealthy. A corrupt system was created whereby income earned by Marchenko and Lavrenyuk was used to purchase NewsOne (October 2018), 112 (December 2018) and ZiK (June 2019). The Opposition Platform-For Life party activities and election campaigns and Medvedchuk's three television channels – which do not make a profit, costing about 1.5 million dollars each month running to nearly 60 million dollars per year – are corruptly financed by funding from Russian oil, diesel, illegal coal trade and the liquefied gas sector. The corrupt funding scheme used the Belarusian Absoliutbank, owned by pro-Alyaksandr Lukashenka oligarchs Mikalay Varabey and Alyaksei Aleksin, to bypass Russian sanctions by issuing Belarusian licenses for Russian oil and diesel.

Challenges in the months ahead will be made in the Supreme Court over the legality of the presidential decree and in the constitutional court over whether the decree constitutes an infringement of media freedom. The RNBO and Ukrainian authorities will presumably provide evidence to show that the owners of these three channels are agents of Russia and have been financing "terrorism" (i.e., pro-Russian proxies and separatism in the Donbas). If it is proven in court that Kozak and Medvedchuk are operating as agents of Russia, this will have a knock-on effect on whether the Opposition Platform-For Life is also acting as an agent of Russia in Ukraine.

The election victory of Joe Biden has stiffened western and Ukrainian resolve to take on Putin at a time when he is facing growing opposition at home. Putin has for many years conducted his personal war against the West without the US under President Trump pushing back in a tough manner. Ukraine's civil society and media NGOs have called for the US to expand its sanctions from Medvedchuk to his wife, Marchenko, and Kozak and Lavrenyuk for their financing of Russian propaganda and disinformation using corrupt proceeds from illegal trade with the DNR, LNR and Crimea. The banning of three pro-Russian television channels in Ukraine is a signal that the Trump era of cosying up to Putin is over and Ukraine has Washington's back in its fight against different forms of Russian aggression.

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# Joe Biden needs Eastern Europe as a success story

VLADYSLAV FARAPONOV

The European Union currently faces several domestic issues. It is still a union of member states, whose leaders have different approaches towards many challenges, and still has no common army or military strategy. That is why US engagement in the region is still necessary, just as it was in the 1990s after the fall of communism.

"America is back" – that is how Joe Biden began his speech regarding his foreign policy priorities. What does that mean for the world and Europe in particular? Since the Second World War, no US president has brought so much foreign policy expertise to the White House. Biden probably has the most significant international experience among current world leaders, and especially amongst American politicians. He served as chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for more than a decade. He is well aware of the challenges that Europe faces during his tenure and beyond.

Donald Trump has left the presidency with an unclear image of the US in front of the EU and non-EU states. Trump demonstrated sympathy for a few Eastern Europe leaders, and they sympathised with him. What is more, Trump clashed with Western Europe, and Biden will surely restore that relationship. However, Eastern Europe is not really on America's radar, and that is why Biden should give a particular emphasis on this region as a whole.

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## More realistic policy?

Scholars and politicians have voiced prejudices towards Biden mainly due to his experience in the previous Democratic administration. At the same time, Barack Obama was strongly criticised for his unwillingness to be "a realistic president" in his approach to foreign policy. Biden had a reputation of being more in the shadow of Obama's foreign policy. Yet, he was also responsible (probably more than any other US Vice President) for America's foreign policy, as the second-in-command in the Obama cabinet. Time will tell how Biden is going to address it during this ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The issue here is the following: while Western Europe has its financial, security and institutional support system, Eastern Europe desperately lacks one. If Biden realises this too late, he might go down in history as "non-realistic US president part 2".

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During the previous administration, Trump became pretty close with some allies in the region. Poland's President, Andrzej Duda, visited the White House just a week before the presidential election in Poland (Duda was re-elected). Trump increased the presence of American troops in Poland and started a draw down from Germany, reaffirming Poland's position in terms of European and Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán endorsed Trump, while the 45th US President welcomed Hungary's efforts towards curbing immigration. Some may argue that these two European leaders represent the conservative view in politics and that is why they easily engaged with Trump. However, Trump has now lost the presidency, while those two leaders are still in office. What is more, Trump has avoided direct talks with Ukraine and Russia after his first impeachment, "Ukrainegate", which means that a daunting list of issues needs to be added to the new administration's agenda.

These examples represent "a legacy" that Biden should take into account, and indeed he will. However, Poland and Hungary, for instance, are members of the EU and NATO; while Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus are not, and they continue to face risks of Russian influence. Biden should be ready to offer some specific ways of co-operation to all of these counties. Moreover, the countries of Eastern Europe will benefit if Biden is the first to offer a personal invitation to the White House. It should help him find a way to dialogue with other important neighbours of Poland. Biden will have to get along with Eastern Europe even more closely than Western Europe because it is the backbone of Europe's stability. The situation in Belarus indicates how Russian influence may lead to it being isolated by the West. Hence, an essential lesson in Europe from the Trump era is that without a strong US leadership, Europe – and the EU in particular – faces a serious challenge from Russia.

## First steps

The EU currently faces several domestic issues. It is still a union of member states, whose officials have different approaches towards many challenges, and has no common army or military strategy. That is why US engagement in the region is still necessary, as it was in the 1990s after the fall of communism. When facing domestic issues, Western European countries can count on their developed institutions and economies. But outside of the EU, in some Eastern European countries – such as Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – still require a security umbrella and western engagement to help establish a robust institutional architecture.

As a consistent transatlanticist, Biden needs to offer more generous political and military support to Ukraine, for example. It will secure his position not just

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in Europe but in US-Russia talks and to not let Russia's disinformation campaigns convince Europeans that such periphery as Ukraine is not needed. That is why Biden's biggest challenge is not just America's return to "normality" but Eastern Europe's as well.

A trio of American allies is willing to re-engage with Washington in this cause. Deciding not to wait for American or EU approval, Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland have created a new multilateral platform called the "Lublin Triangle". This new initiative should determine its dedication and objectives. However, the space where it has been created is rooted in historical ties, such as the Intermarium strategy (a strategy to strengthen relations of states between the Baltic and Black seas during the interwar period). These states are trying to find a more coherent and effective approach to stability in the region. And this can be complementary to the Biden administration's foreign policy and it should find ways to support such initiatives.

## Significant moves

President Biden should continue to support Ukraine through military, financial and political assistance. His former boss refused to provide weapons to Ukraine. The Obama administration did impose sanctions on Russia, but there remains some doubt as to whether they are very effective. Simultaneously, the most ambitious favour Kyiv may ask Washington is to recognise Ukraine as a major non-NATO ally. This status would define US determination towards Ukraine for the decades to come. The Biden administration, at least for now, has only voiced semi-formal statements on Crimea and Donbas.

Furthermore, Russia-EU clashes indicate that Brussels should take a more cautious note of Moscow. The recent visit of Josep Borrell to Moscow, and the developments and statements that followed, indicate how profound the EU's misunderstanding of Russia's unwillingness to continue constructive dialogue really is. Biden should take the position of an active participant in providing security in the region with an understanding that the economic and political success of Eastern Europe can be a success story for the US in Europe.

Walter Hallstein, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, once said that "Europe is like a bicycle: it must keep moving forward, or it will fall over." The question today is whether Biden is ready to help keep this bicycle going. And if yes, how far? NEE

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# Georgia's household debt crisis deepens in the wake of COVID-19

MACKENZIE BALDINGER

Georgia's household debt crisis existed long before COVID-19 hit, but it has been exacerbated by the current pandemic. To make matters worse, the credit environment is plagued with predatory conditions and a lack of regulation which has put many of Georgia's most vulnerable citizens in a perpetual debt cycle.

Approximately 150 kilometres north of Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, and nestled into a valley below Mount Kazbek lies the town of Stepantsminda. Home to a population of fewer than 2,000 permanent residents, Stepantsminda has become a popular destination over the last decade and has economically benefited from Georgia's growing tourism sector. Keti, a local woman from the Kazbegi region, joined the area's emergent hospitality sector in 2015. She opened a hotel with the help of a loan from one of the country's largest private banks, Bank of Georgia. At the time, Keti thought little of paying back the loan, noting that everyone else was taking loans when tourism was thriving in the town. Two years later, when she wanted to extend her business, she again approached the bank about another loan. This time it was TBC, Bank of Georgia's main competitor, which offered Keti a loan on the condition that she would transfer the existing debt to them. Keti agreed, but says that somewhere in the administrative process her original loan was registered as a personal loan.

She thought nothing of the technicalities between a business and personal loan until COVID-19 struck and devastated Georgia's tourism sector. In an effort to

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help struggling businesses, the government announced subsidies for the hospitality sector. An agreement between the major banks and the government allowed her to postpone payment on the principal part of her business loan and to pay 20 per cent of the monthly interest while the government would subsidise the other 80 per cent. However, her personal loan has had no such relief. With the exception of a three-month moratorium on personal loans, announced in March of 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, Keti was left with the prospect of having to make full payments at a time when the hotel had no incoming revenue.

## Growing vulnerability

Keti's struggle with mounting debt is a common narrative in Georgia and has only worsened with the pandemic. In a country that was initially lauded for its effective measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, the autumn and the winter which followed were plagued by a sharp increase in case numbers and political chaos. Following a contested election in October 2020 that resulted in opposition parties refusing to take their seats in parliament, the government announced three months of public health lockdown restrictions, including the closure of all non-essential businesses. The resulting economic fallout has increased unemployment and worsened a household debt crisis that is being largely neglected amid political infighting.

Fifty per cent of Georgian households are currently indebted and 30 per cent rank debt payments as their highest expense.

Georgia's household debt crisis existed long before the pandemic hit but has been considerably exacerbated by the current economic situation. Following a difficult transition from a centralised economy in the 1990s, many types of personal loans, such as mortgages and student loans, first became widely available in 2007. From 2007 to 2008, the number of loans issued increased by 97.5 per cent, signalling the Georgian public's high demand for credit. Since then, the amount of personal loans has continued to increase, multiplying 7.5 times in the last decade. According to the National Democratic Institute, 50 per cent of Georgian households are currently indebted and 30 per cent rank debt payments as their highest expense. Despite the widespread usage of loans, the credit sector is plagued with predatory conditions and a lack of regulation – that has put many vulnerable citizens in a perpetual debt cycle.

Until 2017 there was little regulation for loans, which resulted in extortionate interest rates. Microfinance organisations, known around the world for offering loans and financial training to impoverished communities, have a very differ-

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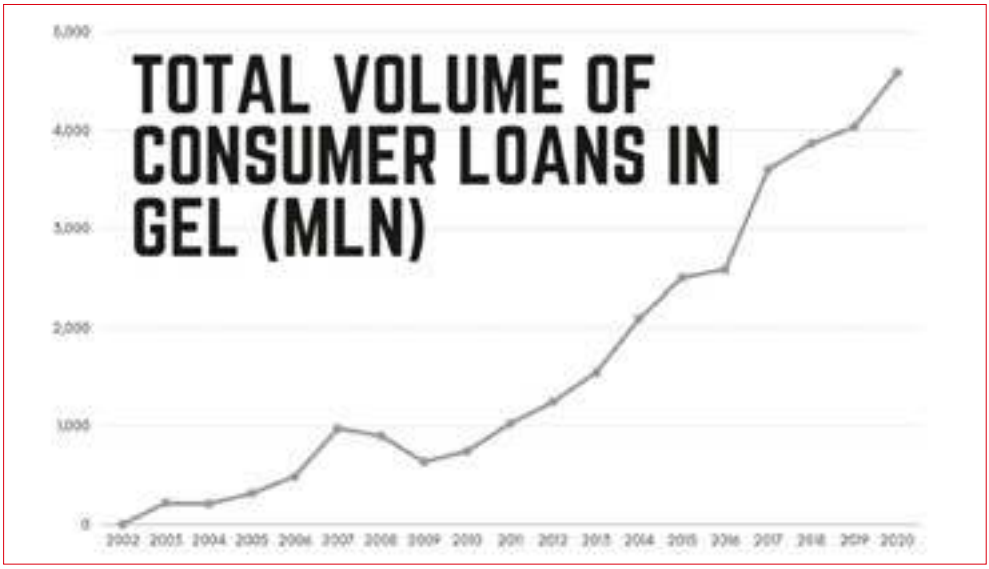


ent reputation in Georgia. These organisations, which are able to forego some of the regulatory requirements of a formal bank, have become notorious for offering loans without a credit or income check at outrageous interest rates, sometimes as high as 4,000 per cent. With a lack of credit or income checks, many found themselves owing an untenable amount of debt and were forced to turn to family or friends for support or take additional loans to service their original debt. Natia, a loan officer at one of Georgia's largest microfinance organisations, says that it has become common practice to help customers "restructure" their debt. For instance, if a borrower comes in needing 800 lari (around 200 euros), he or she will often be encouraged to request that amount of debt plus two months' payments. He or she receives the loan and immediately pays for two months. Natia says the customer often will return two months later, unable to make the next payment. Loan officers, who receive commission on the amount of debt they lend, are then encouraged to offer a new, larger loan to cover the original one. This practice, which stops the debtor from out rightly defaulting, creates a debt cycle that many are never able to escape. Most concerning, says Natia, is the frequent response she gets when she asks clients how they plan to repay the debt: "We will figure something out."

## Growing problem

For many Georgians, the burden of debt is further complicated by the stigma around it. According to Mikheil Svanidze, an analyst at GeoWel Research currently

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investigating household debt in Georgia, the conversation about debt is stifled by a sense of social embarrassment and unease. When a person is unable to pay a loan, he or she will often turn to family, friends, or neighbours for support. Social attitudes, which are characterised by a deep sense of community and a strong responsibility to support those in need, have contributed to the practice of informal loans. While this social net is a great asset for the community, it can also lead to a chain of indebtedness and degrade social networks when someone is unable to pay his or her debt.

The National Bank of Georgia disclosed in 2018 that more than 700,000 people were overdue on their loan payments.

Eva-Fernández Martín from the organisation People in Need, who currently manages a project called "Tackling Indebtedness in Georgia through Czech Innovations", says the social stigma around debt is "minimising the public conversation in Georgia, which makes it harder to grasp the real impact of debt". She notes that the stigma is "preventing people from seeking help and support" and limiting "their capacity to make informed choices to access credit in a safe and affordable way".

With the growing availability of easy credit and a lack of regulation, the number of households facing a heavy debt burden grew to an untenable position in 2017. The National Bank of Georgia disclosed in 2018 that more than 700,000 people were overdue on their loan payments. They noted that almost 30 per cent of mortgage loans had a 50 per cent or higher payment-to-income (PTI) ratio, meaning these payers were giving more than half of their monthly income just to service their mortgage debt. Furthermore, a UNICEF report found that 17 per cent of Georgian households reported overwhelming debt as the main issue they face.

In an effort to decrease debt burden, the National Bank of Georgia introduced new regulations in 2018 to limit the availability of credit. These included newly required income and credit checks as well as the introduction of a national registry of loans. They also instituted payment-to-income (PTI) and loans-to-value (LTV) requirements to limit the amount credit borrowers could access relative to their income and assets. One key aspect of the new regulation was a constraint on the ability of banks to offer foreign currency loans, a practice that had been commonplace and left borrowers exposed to the exchange rate volatility of the Georgian lari.

This effort to increase the "larisation" of loans, in addition to an announcement by the government in 2018 that it would provide debt relief to over 600,000 Georgians "blacklisted" by banks, seemed to be a positive step in combatting the crisis. However, in a 2019 report the National Bank of Georgia cautioned that introducing credit limits only decreased the supply of loans available and did little to satiate the demand for credit. In fact, critics expressed concern that a deficiency

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of formal credit for borrowers of excessive debt, who are characterised as willing to "accept credit with any conditions," could lead to a return of informal types of shadow borrowing.

## Pandemic complications

According to the National Bank of Georgia's 2019 financial stability report's credit assessment, "the vulnerability of the household sector to changes in economic circumstances in Georgia is particularly high". Less than a year after the report's release, COVID-19 shuttered the domestic economy and intensified the debt epidemic within the pandemic. The economic repercussions of the pandemic have not yet been fully realised, but unemployment during the last quarter of 2020 was reported to be a staggering 20.4 per cent.

In March 2020, as borders closed and a nationwide lockdown was declared, the government announced that it was co-operating with three of the county's largest banks to suspend personal loan payments for three months. Nino, a doctor in the western region of Imereti, says she received a text message from Liberty Bank requesting her to opt in or out of the suspended payment system. It was only three months later, when she resumed her payments, that Nino became aware that interest on her loan had been accruing during that time. She says no one from the bank reached out to explain the conditions of accepting the suspension.

For tourism businesses like Keti's in Stepantsminda, the government has extended loan subsidies until the end of October 2021 and will continue to pay 80 per cent of her interest until then. She is fortunate to have such a great loan officer at TBC who reached out to help her find a way to restructure her personal loan. The bank has agreed to let her suspend payments on the principal part of the loan until the autumn and is offering an additional loan each month to help her pay the interest. While she is pleased that the bank is willing to work with her, she knows this arrangement will increase her debt burden in the coming years.

> With economic prospects stifled by the pandemic, an epidemic of debt continues to rage in Georgia.

Keti considers herself one of the fortunate business owners in the area. She says other business owners have reached out to ask her how she is managing, noting that many feel they are operating in an "information vacuum" with no clear guidance from the banks or their loan officers. Many small guesthouse owners in the area have taken personal loans to finance their businesses so they do not qualify for COVID-19 business assistance from the government. Keti says it was only

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through working with People in Need's local action group that she became informed of the benefits of registering her business, a choice that is saving it from going under like many of her neighbours'.

Eva-Fernández Martín, the project's manager at People in Need, says that in order to combat the debt epidemic in Georgia, "it is essential to enhance consumer rights and ensure borrowers have the knowledge and resources to protect their rights". Her project, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme's Challenge Fund and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aims to address consumer debt at the grassroots and policy level in Georgia. Through the creation of a debt advisory guide and training materials for local action groups, the project hopes to raise financial literacy among citizens. They also plan to formulate policy recommendations at the government level, advocating for the introduction of a financial ombudsperson and regulation of pension debt and personal bankruptcy.

In the meantime, with economic prospects stifled by the pandemic, an epidemic of debt continues to rage in Georgia. Many of the temporary unemployment benefits and government subsidies expired soon after the governing Georgian Dream party won the parliamentary elections in October. In its 2020 financial stability report, the National Bank of Georgia indicated that it expects the number of non-performing loans, or defaults, to increase dramatically this year. While it has expressed confidence that the banking sector has the necessary reserves to weather the recession, many Georgians lack such a level of self-assurance.

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# What is really behind Ivanishvili's decision to quit politics

SOSO DZAMUKASHVILI

The announcement earlier this year of Bidzina Ivanishvili's departure from the political arena came at a time of domestic political unrest, and has been questioned by many in Georgia. Ivanishvili had already resigned from political life in 2013. Yet, kept ruling from behind the scenes. Will this time be any different?

On January 11th this year, Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder and chairman of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party and the country's most influential politician announced his retirement from politics "as party chairman, as well as from the party itself". The 65-year-old billionaire declared his mission was accomplished, having decided to return to his "private lifestyle" and to "completely withdraw from politics and let go of the reins of power". Ivanishvili stated that his party has laid a solid foundation for a "new history" in Georgia, characterised by peaceful and democratic development. This supposedly contrasts with Saakashvili's nine years of "authoritarianism, self-fetishisation, a dictatorship based on fear and torture, a seizure of public space, false propaganda and an attempt to reinforce and perpetuate personal power".

Ivanishvili is stepping out of the political limelight at a time of great turbulence in Georgian politics. His party won two-thirds of the votes in the October 2020 parliamentary elections. Despite this, most opposition parties have refused to take up their mandates and have accused Ivanishvili's party of having rigged the vote.

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As a result, Georgian Dream is facing yet another problem within a larger political crisis. The crisis dates back to the summer of 2019 when police cracked down on peaceful Georgians protesting the visit of Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian Communist member of the State Duma, and his presence in the Georgian parliament.

## Georgian juggernaut

Ivanishvili's decision is an inspirational one for the entire region. It sharply contrasts with other leaders in the post-Soviet space who tend to cling onto power. Last year, in Russia, President Vladimir Putin orchestrated constitutional amendments that guarantee his rule until 2036. In Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka managed to avoid being ousted after a rigged election. In this regard, Ivanishvili can be somehow compared to Kazakhstan's former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, who remains the de facto decision-maker in the country via his connections to government loyalists and powerful family members.

Yet, many Georgians did not take Ivanishvili's latest announcement at face value. Indeed, he had already announced his retirement from politics back in November 2013 when he voluntarily stepped down as prime minister. It is claimed, however, that he continued running the state from "behind the scenes". Five years after having formally returned to politics, there is a belief he will continue to govern on an informal basis. The current situation in Georgia, which is full of uncertainty and aggravated by the pandemic, is unlikely to change any time soon. This may have negative consequences for the ruling party, which faces harsh domestic and international criticism. In this turmoil, Ivanishvili's decision appears to be necessary for Georgian Dream's survival.

Under Saakashvili's administration, which was characterised as pro-western, yet illiberal and authoritarian and strengthened by a strict justice system, the then ruling United National Movement became widely criticised. Nonetheless, the opposition had been continuously weak and failed to bring about change. A shift came about in 2012 after Georgia's "Trumpian story" appeared in the headlines, with Ivanishvili establishing himself as a political juggernaut to lead the country.

Ivanishvili's eccentric personality – coming from a small village in western Georgia while residing in a futuristic steel and glass mansion, nicknamed the "glassle" – made for inspirational magazine stories. Ivanishvili is the richest man in the country with an estimated wealth of about 5.7 billion US dollars. This roughly equates to 30 per cent of Georgia's GDP. He made his fortune back in the 1990s by building up a collection of iron-ore producers, steel plants, banks and real-estate properties in Russia. His vast art collection includes Picasso's *Dora Maar with Cat*, which he

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bought at a New York auction for 95 million dollars. Having sold off most of his assets between 2003 and 2006, he decided to run in the country's elections in 2012.

After declaring Saakashvili's government corrupt, he established the Georgian Dream party in April 2012 to end "a façade economy and façade everything". Even though the United National Movement still enjoyed more support and dominated media coverage, Ivanishvili was immediately joined by Georgia's opposition, ranging from liberals to conservatives. At the same time, video footage was released showing government abuse of prisoners. This led many to vote for Georgian Dream. Ivanishvili's party, which vowed for more employment, free speech, democracy and human rights, won the first democratic elections in the country's history. The party dislodged Saakashvili's nine-year presidency the following year.

## Unfulfilled promises

Even though the party officially set out to uphold democratic values and support Georgia's European integration, it soon exhibited authoritarian tendencies. The party harassed opposition media and even politicised the judiciary system in order to weaken the opposition. Georgian Dream also established control over lucrative business sectors and blackmailed and persecuted political opponents. Georgia gradually became a "captured state" with little media pluralism, repressed freedom of speech and diminished judicial independence. Thus, the upward trend in democratic standards stumbled three years after the 2012 power shift.

Apart from the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union, which allowed visa-free travel for Georgian citizens to Schengen Area states, the Georgian Dream's "democratic" and "European" agenda remains in question. These accomplishments were vital for Ivanishvili's party as European integration had become a crucial issue for Georgian citizens. This became especially true after the August 2008 war and Russia's subsequent occupation of 20 per cent of the country's internationally recognised territory. This led the country to turn to the West for political, economic and diplomatic assistance. Between 2012 and 2020, public support for EU and NATO membership was continuously high, fluctuating between 70–80 per cent. It should be noted that despite successful diplomatic steps in regards to foreign trade and economic relations with the EU, and even with China (aiming to turn Georgia into a transit hub), the country has not seen any tangible results. This is largely due to underde-

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veloped transport infrastructures. Moreover, the country's first deep-sea port project in Anaklia, which had been projected as the centrepiece of the state's transit ambitions, remains incomplete. Some critics say this was due to Ivanishvili's fear of irritating Moscow.

Public dissatisfaction towards Ivanishvili and his party peaked in the summer of 2019, when the government invited Gavrilov to lead the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy in the Georgian parliament building. Having seen the Kremlin politician in the seat of the parliament speaker, thousands rallied to condemn the Russian occupation and worsening political situation. Protesters demanded electoral reforms in order to put an end to one-party rule. After months of demonstrations and negotiations between the opposition and ruling party, a memorandum was concluded on the electoral system. As a result, 120 seats would be elected on a proportional basis, while only 30 seats would be assigned to geographic constituencies, thereby replacing the 77/73 system. The agreement also touched upon issues related to the politicisation of the judiciary and the release of political prisoners. These issues have still not been solved and the government has continuously denied the existence of these problems.

A new crisis came in October 2020 after the parliamentary elections, in which Georgian Dream comfortably won 90 seats in Georgia's 150-seat legislature. The opposition – led by the UNM, European Georgia, and six other parties that won parliamentary representation – claimed the vote was rigged. The OSCE's electoral observation mission concluded that it was "competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected". However, the mission also claimed that there were "pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and a blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state". Thousands of opposition demonstrators, once again, took to the streets to express their disapproval of the official results. Consequently, the majority of parties refused to take up their mandates in December 2020 and demanded new elections. Georgian Dream rejected this demand and insisted the vote was free and fair. Approximately one-third of parliament's seats remain unoccupied by opposition MPs. This has severely impacted the legislature's ability to represent the country. The parliament's accountability has also suffered, both domestically and internationally.

## Political move

The announcement of Ivanishvili's departure, which came at a time of domestic political unrest, has been questioned by many in Georgia. Ivanishvili had already resigned from political life in 2013. Nevertheless, it was noted by domes-

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tic and international actors that the oligarch impeded decision-making and ruled from "behind the scenes". In 2018, prior to Ivanishvili's formal return to politics, then Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili resigned due to disagreements with him over economic policy.

Ivanishvili has enjoyed near full control of all branches and levels of government. This has led to constant criticism from the opposition, various international organisations and western partners. While leaving politics, Ivanishvili expressed his belief that "a constructive opposition has not been formed" in Georgia. This is despite the fact his own party had constantly used all possible opportunities to challenge the opposition and free press. Political prisoners, such as Giorgi Rurua, remain behind bars. On February 17th 2021 the court decided to sentence another opposition leader, Nika Melia, for allegedly provoking demonstrators to seize the parliament building in 2019. This led to yet another wave of domestic protests and international criticism. The EU ambassador to Georgia, Carl Hartzell, described the circumstances surrounding Melia's prosecution as a "dangerous trajectory for Georgia and Georgian democracy". The highly politicised decision even led Giorgi Gvakharia, the fifth prime minister in the past eight years, to resign the following day after a disagreement with his party and possibly Ivanishvili himself.

Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream have experienced a constant stream of international criticism. In the past years, US congressmen and senators, as well as EU politicians, expressed numerous concerns to the Georgian government following the recent crackdown of protesters in Tbilisi. These representatives also demanded electoral and judiciary reform and criticised the country's clear democratic backsliding. US Congressmen and Senators sent an official letter to then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and called out the ruling party and Ivanishvili for "efforts to crowd out legitimate American businesses" in Georgia, stating that "any such activities are motivated by geopolitical considerations" and reported ties between Ivanishvili and the Kremlin. A US National Security Strategy document also refers to Ivanishvili as Putin's close ally.

In last year's opinion polls, Ivanishvili was listed as the most disliked political figure in the country.

The situation was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which the government coped with relatively well during the first wave. Nevertheless, the country experienced an increase in infections after mid-October 2020. The Georgian lari witnessed a dramatic devaluation and state debt skyrocketed to around eight billion US dollars by the end of 2020. The unemployment rate soared to 15 per cent, further amplifying dissatisfaction with the government. As a result, in last year's opinion polls, Ivanishvili was listed as the most disliked political figure in the country. While

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around half of Georgians disapproved of Ivanishvili, only 17 per cent responded positively. This contrasts with 2019, when 39 per cent responded negatively, and 21 per cent positively.

In a political crisis that has lasted for almost two years, the ruling party has used all the cards it has to appease the society and international partners but without bringing about any real change. Severe social and economic problems also appeared at this critical time and further exacerbated the situation. For the richest and most powerful man in Georgia, whose popularity has plunged over the past couple of years, this resignation might be a political step. The narrative of his departure was designed to showcase his decision as a completely different, democratic and moral standard of giving up power. Ivanishvili even stated he is to stop supporting the party, which he handed over to his "lovely young friends". His announcement might have a small, positive effect on the crisis that his party has brought upon the country. Ivanishvili, by resigning, might have tried to ease domestic and international criticism.

As it has been evident for almost a decade, Ivanishvili does not need to be the official leader of his party to control the decision-making process. This has been noted by his opponents and international watchdogs. His network remains in key positions within all major state institutions and there is no restriction to his informal rule. As his former advisor, Ghia Khukhashvili, said, "all roads lead to Ivanishvili". Georgian Dream has become a means for him to promote his business, infrastructure projects and even his eccentric stunts. All of this requires control over state institutions. Civil society representatives often state that Bidzina Ivanishvili is Georgian Dream and Georgian Dream is Bidzina Ivanishvili and that the party is held together entirely by its creator. These figures also claim his main goal is to be able to do whatever he wants without hindrance.

As a result, the failure for Georgian Dream will mean the end of Ivanishvili's ability to ignore or adapt legislation to fit his personal business interests. Implementing crucial reforms could put an end to a political crisis that continues to undermine the ruling party's credibility and Ivanishvili's position in the country. Perhaps this is why Ivanishvili, after donating most of his fortune to his charity organisation Kartu Group, left a helicopter runway in his official possession. He still fears that his public career could end in the worst-case scenario. NEE

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# Farewell, nation!

ANTON SAIFULLAYEU

The symbols and language of the 2020 Belarus protests circumvented the terminological deadlock of Belarusian identity, which for years had been attempted to be explained by national templates. Unconventional actions by the public have revealed a hidden picture of the mentality in Belarus, which has become a huge step towards a post-national future.

The ongoing Belarusian protests in addition to its obvious political aims, also solves a much more important issue. The public is abandoning the national template of self-determination as a civil order. For Belarusians in 2020, so many things have changed. For the first time in more than a quarter century, the authorities in Minsk felt a real danger to their existence and lost control over public opinion. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's autocracy has completely exhausted itself of moral and ideological resources. This was caused by the outbreak of protests in 2020, which has a much deeper meaning. Lawlessness and violence from the authorities was a desperate reaction to the devaluation of their ideological values and the anachronistic narrative of state social care and order.

The external and internal discourse on Belarusian identity in the post-Soviet period has turned into a search for El Dorado. Trying to create a conceptual framework that explains national identity has long led to an ontological impasse. Despite their Marxist-Leninist origins, the intellectual and political elites were far removed from critical reflection upon the processes of breaking out of dependency at the level of emancipatory theories. Belarus, as a political and cultural subject, was formed within the framework of Russian imperialism and colonialism, which consequently led the local elites to a simplistic, template vision of what future emancipation should be. For some post-/anti-Soviet elites, nationalism was,

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in fact, their only ideological alternative in the 1990s, in which local intellectual elites tried to find ways to say farewell to the empire. However, the public, which was in a condition of frustration and economic desperation, was immune to any ideas of a rupture with the old metropole of the Soviet empire. A national project, primarily carried out by intellectual elites, was condemned to an axiological discussion and nothing more.

## Ambivalent sorrow

The provincialisation of the inner space of memory was an unconscious strategy, an acute confrontation with colonial knowledge. In fact, the narrative of the national-democratic elite was merely a re-interpretation of the old colonial historical-geographical discourse on the empire's peripheries. The logic of postcolonial nationalism, while ignoring reality, created an alternative space-time construct of the nation. It was based on historical traumas of subjugation and the search for a rationale of civilisational affiliation to Europe for the purpose of a rapid, discursive break with the colonial past. Society perceived the degradation of the empire with a sense of ambivalence for the lost past and the unrealised hopes for the future. There was a collapse in the outlook when individuals were forced to accept the rigours of the market, and a sense of nostalgia for the old "caring" state. Similar feelings can be found in Svetlana Alexievich's book, *Secondhand Time*, which demonstrates a sense of ambivalent sorrow for the old values in the new order. *Secondhand Time*'s sorrow is the impossibility of escaping from the past and its helplessness against the global changes to which the (post-) Soviet individual was subjected.

Svetlana Alexievich's book *Secondhand Time* demonstrates a sense of ambivalent sorrow for the old values in the new order.

Lukashenka had skilfully played on this sentiment in 1994, offering a nostalgic hard hand of order. At the same time, during his first presidential campaign, he made advising curtsies towards the symbols of post-Soviet liberation: freedom of speech, democracy, and national values. It was something qualitatively different from his opponents, who stuck to one concrete ideological paradigm. Lukashenka expressed the narrative of longing for a lost past and the unfulfilled future. As a consequence, he won the first, and probably the most democratic, presidential election in Belarus.

In Lukashenka's first presidential term, a purge of the political scene and free journalism began. But even then, he was anxious to create an ideological basis, namely the process of developing a national identity. One of the distinguishing

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features of this was the extreme reactionism towards matters of historical politics and to a lesser extent, culture. Ideological reactionism was based on a bipolar understanding of the past and present. At the same time, Lukashenka acted as the main adjuster of past values and present needs. Through the narrative of "acquired independence" the authorities were correcting the Soviet narrative of the past and were creating all the conditions for the de-historicisation of public opinion, limiting it to the existing colonial interpretation of the past. The national (renaissance) narratives of the past moved to the so-called "partisan" condition – now under government censorship.

A very similar approach was developed in the cultural sphere. The processes which formed the cultural space in Belarus during Soviet times have preserved their ideological structure. The People's/national culture remained at the level of an ethnographic epos, the Belarusian-speaking cultural environment, in the official discourse, was degraded to a representational function, and popular culture remained highly dependent on the Russian market. An independent, or rather unofficial, culture mostly exploited the diverse nature of the national discourse. Its agents created the opportunity for personal choice, but in a quite limited way. Already in the 21st century, the phenomenon of "cultural partisans," described by the philosopher Maksim Zhbankov, had been formed in Belarus. According to Zhbankov, a cultural partisan does not create a big canon, but rather creates his or her own small representation from fragments of alien culture. A partisan can equally consume the national, the global, and the colonial product. Culture for him or her is not a way to identify with something, but an opportunity to choose from a plurality of culture.

Perhaps that is the reason why the cultural aspect of the Belarusian protests last year was so creative and largely free from national contents. During just a few months of protest, protesters were able to dissolve the official discourse and the so-called "state ideology," which had been created over two decades ago. The language of the protests, coupled with social media, deconstructed all possible narrative lines in defence of power. After the first months of civil protest, the regime decided not to continue the culture and ideological struggle. Instead they used methods, tested over the years, to increase repressions, distort information, and create opposition along the principle of "they are traitors – we are defenders".

## Removed from the state

Last year Belarusian protesters discovered a number of mechanisms of collective interaction. These mechanisms go far beyond the concept of national identity,

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native language, or history. They include solidarity with the repressed, strategies to fight against COVID-19, foreign scholarship programmes, political and economic lobbying, and ways to provide material and moral support to victims of the regime. One of the innovations was neighbourhood chats and meetings, which led to the deepening of local communities without the participation of the authorities.

The media space has completely changed since last summer and has gone out of state control. Telegram has become the main information platform, which is largely created by the public. Despite the introduction of more propaganda, restrictions to public and non-state media, the information space has shifted to an autonomous mode from the state. The public has still managed to establish mechanisms of fixing crimes by concrete representatives of the authorities and power structures.

The protests have given the white-red-white flag a qualitatively new meaning of solidarity against violence and lawlessness.

The symbols and language of the protests circumvented the terminological deadlock of Belarusian identity, which for years had been explained by national templates. Unconventional actions in the cultural and ideological domains have revealed a hidden picture of society's mentality. The flexibility of the public manifesto against the current authorities disorients not only the authorities themselves, but the old "national-democratic" elites. They are forced, contrary to their convictions, to adjust to the civil interpretation of the cultural baggage of Belarus. One such example is the white-red-white flag, which has become a bright symbol of protest. The multiple meanings behind the white-red-white flag in the post-Soviet period has led to a limited and politicised perception of this symbol in Belarus and beyond. However, in 2020, it was the white-red-white flag that went beyond the historical symbol of Lukashenka's political opposition. The protests gave the white-red-white flag a qualitatively new meaning of solidarity (at least for a while) against violence and lawlessness. The colours of the flag acquired the accompanying semantics of "freedom", "change", "sacrifice" and "new times". The white-red-white flag contrasts strongly with the official red-green flag, which symbolizes the "Soviet" present and the flag of the regime.

Another interesting fact is that the standard "patriotic" and nationalist vocabulary is used exclusively by the authorities. The cumbersome semantic categories of "Fatherland," "Motherland," "defence of own country," and "external threats" are the only available linguistic tools for Lukashenka's analogous autocracy. The creativity with which the public is using language for the needs of protest stands in strong contrast to the uninspiring state propaganda. Surprisingly, in just a few months, the society in Belarus has deconstructed the entire ideology of power.

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Lukashism, a term that certainly flattered the authorities, suggests the existence of a serious ideological construct. Like other autocratic -isms (Stalinism, Hitlerism, Putinism, etc.), it assumes not only the discursive capacity to introduce ideology, but also the specific characteristics that distinguish it from other political systems. In this case, ideology would not only be what power proclaims, but also what its adepts believe. Belief in a "leader," no matter what, is the result of painstaking work in which minds and state structures have invested in for years. In just a couple of months, Lukashism has transformed from a long-term ideological long-build to a phantom idea of a minority.

## Yabat'ka

The Belarusian protest has literally crushed all the semantics of "Batka" (father of the nation). Yesterday's Lukashists became "*yabat'kas*" in an instant. Besides the fact that the semantic derivation of the word is associated with the Russian vulgarism "yebat" ("fuck"), it is interesting from a perspective of cultural meanings. Yabatka is a neologism based on the tracing of the popular symbol of solidarity in Russian "Ya/my" (I am/We are). It was actively used in the combination "I am/We are Batka" by state propaganda and the regime's PR during the first months of the protests.

According to the narrative of the protesters, "*yabat'ka*" is an opportunist and careerist, an individual without social and professional skills, seeking the approval of those in power through absolute social degradation. Following 26 years in power, Lukashenka was left with analogue adepts, aggressive and imitating love *yabat'kas*. Obviously in a world dominated by the national categorisation of "us" and "them," in which the authorities exploit and manipulate the national discourse, it is impossible to completely clear oneself of the semantic attachment to the concepts of the people or the nation.

> The uniqueness of the Belarusian case is that the society has managed to evolve into a modern one without national complexes.

However, in just half a year, the Belarusian protest has shown that the mechanisms of transforming the nation into a civic society are quite feasible under the proper stress situation. The public was able to demonstrate its full autonomous provision outside the national standard. And, of course, this happened in conditions of an absolute autocracy. The uniqueness of the Belarusian case is that, gradually passing through all the stages of accepting the collapse of the empire, society has managed to evolve from a "failed" one into a modern

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one without national complexes. Although it should be noted that this evolution is not fully complete. There is an ideological ambiguity that depends directly on the language of politics. In case the language of politics begins to dominate the public consciousness. People believe in it and the process of transformation could drag on for many years.

Surely though it is too early to speak about the public deconstruction of the ideological and cultural space of post-Soviet Belarus. But for the first time the entire society is given an opportunity to publicly oppose the existing norms and ideology. A society that had been "partisaning" for years and did not want to fit into the canonical algorithms of the collective self declared its desire to (de)structure them. Naturally, contradictions and ideological oxymorons will remain, but the baggage of meta-narratives will not go away by itself. There will be a lot of image work and one will have to constantly combine the present with the incongruous past. Contemporary world issues will emerge, such as the problems of socially excluded groups, discrimination, racism, gender inequality, class divisions, etc. Yet, a definite step forward has been made, and even without the realisation of political goals. Society can move towards a post-national future on its own and solve its problems autonomously from the state or external factors.

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# This conflict was always on the edge of Europe

An interview with Thomas de Waal, a senior fellow with Carnegie Europe. Interviewer: Bartłomiej Krzysztan.

BARTŁOMIEJ KRZYSZTAN: The second Nagorno-Karabakh war left the South Caucasus in new geopolitical circumstances. What do you perceive as the main changes from the perspective of the international order?

THOMAS DE WAAL: This war was a defeat for the attempt to achieve a multilateral, international peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Since the early 1990s that has been the vision: that this was a conflict which had not just Russian mediation, but also mediation from the United States and France. Part of the vision was that it would be some kind of multilateral peace, maybe similar to the one we have seen in the Balkans, but hopefully without its flaws, one which would take into account human rights abuses and be accompanied by some democratisation and a European integration agenda. That was the hope. But this conflict was always on the edge of Europe. It is much more marginal to Europe than the Balkan conflicts, and also the region is very different. It was not solved for various reasons, for which one can blame the West, or one can blame the Russians. But primarily we have to blame the local actors – Armenia and Azerbaijan – for not trying to take the opportunity. This conflict descended into a second war and a Russian-brokered peace. So, what we have now is a nominal continuation of the multilateral, international OSCE process, but in practice, we are seeing Russia as the main mediator and broker, and, indeed, security actor on the ground with a smaller role being afforded to Turkey. The Europeans and the United States are not completely out of the picture, but are certainly marginalised. I guess this is maybe one example in the world where we are looking at a regionally-brokered peace, with the international players left on the outside. It harkens back to the not-so-great traditions of the Caucasus of the 19th and early 20th century, when the big neigh-

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bours, the imperial powers – Russia, Turkey and Iran – were the main international actors. I guess this is the main geopolitical fallout of this conflict.

**Do you think we are heading in direction of a complete withdrawal of "the West", or "the Wests," in plural, from the Caucasus?**

No, I do not think so. The South Caucasus remains a region that is always going to be an international hub, a crossroads. It is the meeting point of different regions, different neighbourhoods and different powers. I do not see any particular power having primacy there. The Russians have come back to a much more crowded region than the one they left at the end of the Soviet Union. Turkey is there, China is there, Asian powers are there and the European Union is there, certainly in the economic sense – certainly in Georgia and to a lesser extent in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The United States is still also an important actor with economic interests. I think it is incorrect to say that there is a withdrawal of western powers, but it is very much up to the West to decide to what extent this region is a strategic priority. I think the main way they can gain influence again is by spending money. That relates, of course, to the question of whether they have the financial resources, because there are huge economic needs, particularly now in Armenia and Azerbaijan after the conflict. Money spent wisely with international assistance will definitely increase western influence.

**After the war, the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan has changed, but also the position of Georgia remains quite uncertain. How do you evaluate the new regional circumstances?**

Since the middle of the 1990s we saw the smallest power in the region, Armenia, exerting disproportionate influence due to its victory in the first Karabakh war. Azerbaijan was in very difficult circumstances having hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons. Now Azerbaijan has reversed that dynamic and I do not think they will want to let it change again. We are seeing that the Azerbaijan-Turkey axis is much stronger, with Armenia feeling exposed in the middle. That will lead to Armenia's increasing reliance on Russia as its main security patron and ally. This is also a wake-up call to Georgia. Georgia got used to the idea that it is the regional hub, the most open country in the South Caucasus, and the main East-West transit route. Now we see a challenge to that in the sense that we now have a Russian-proposed alternative – a planned Russian-Azerbaijani-Turkish transport network which goes through Russia, Azerbaijan, crosses a small part of southern Armenia into Nakhichevan and to Turkey. Eventually, railways and roads will be established there. This is an alternative East-West route that can be used by Russia, Turkey, and of course China. This is a challenge that is not welcomed in Georgia; they see an increase in Russian influence towards the south. Georgia, in this way, has to make its case

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better as a regional hub, as a transit route, and it has to look again at projects like the Anaklia Deep Port on the Black Sea. Unfortunately, from the events we see at the end of February, Georgia seems to be not drawing these conclusions at all; instead, we see the escalation of the domestic political crisis there, based on vendetta politics which have distracted the country for the past decade with the revenge match between the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement dominating domestic politics.

**Do you think that building infrastructure would be a possible way of creating reconciliation or it is rather some kind of devil's plan by Turkey and Azerbaijan to just close down Armenia even more?**

I think this is one of the most positive elements emerging from the end of this conflict. Of course, the most positive element of all is the humanitarian one – the right of return to internally displaced Azerbaijanis. Another positive element is the potential reopening of transport links between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and possibly between Armenia and Turkey. We know that Armenians and Azerbaijanis have always traded together quite normally, including during the years of protracted conflict. For the last 25 years, they have traded together in Georgia. That is positive, but I do not think it will become a truly sustainable driver of peace, at least until we see more political elements in the new order. What we have at the moment is basically a ceasefire agreement with some economic elements attached to it. There is really no agenda for political normalisation, for resolution of the issue with the Karabakh Armenians and their status, and an end to all the toxic nationalist discourse happening between the two countries. Without that political element, I think we can see a lot of fear and distrust between the two countries and a rather limited economic agenda, which will suit Azerbaijan and Turkey a little, maybe, but it does not mean a big step forward for the whole region.

**The Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement has altered the balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but at the same time it left many issues unresolved. How will those issues be addressed in the future by both Armenia and Azerbaijan? Do you think that, right now, we are entering into a stage when they have to find common ground or maybe this is a new "frozen conflict," and the rivalry will continue, but in a different form?**

What we have is not full peace. It is a ceasefire agreement that has stopped major fighting, but with a five-year window, which is the length of the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping mission to bring some kind of stabilisation, normalisation and political agreement. At the end of the five years, one of the parties, presumably Azerbaijan, has the right to veto the extension of that peacekeeping mission. Of course, Russians will try to find strong arguments to continue the mission, but it means that there is also a potential for a breakdown of this new order. Now, are the two nations interest-

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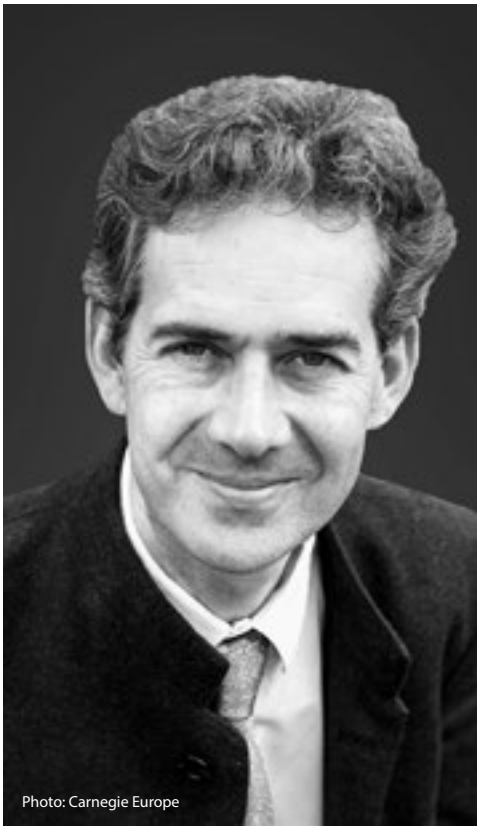
Photo: Carnegie Europe

ed in making a sustainable peace deal? That would be logical, but we have not seen much of that logic for the last 25 years. At the moment, both countries seem very much preoccupied with the domestic agendas. President Ilham Aliyev is consolidating his triumph in Azerbaijan, trying to further marginalise the opposition. And there is also this big, quite disturbing struggle taking place in Armenia where Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is fighting for his political career. That does not leave much room for forward thinking and working with the other side. The Russians are interested in some kind of stabilisation, but they also have a contrary interest – if there is full normalisation of relations, that removes the raison d'être for the Russian peacekeeping mission there. The Russians are not in a big hurry to see a full peace agreement either. I think the best we can say is that the cards have been shaken and the map has been changed. There are new opportunities there for people to seize. Hopefully some actors, maybe the business community can begin that, and later other actors can seize these opportunities. But, to be honest, I do not see much evidence of forward-looking strategic thinking in either Armenia or Azerbaijan.

What do you think about the Azerbaijani victory? Because we already see in Azerbaijan a certain triumphalism. Do you think that this is the moment when Aliyev will be consolidating his authoritarian regime even more? We are also seeing what is happening in Armenia. Do you perceive it as the failure of the 2018 Velvet Revolution?

To start with Azerbaijan, I think Aliyev almost certainly sees this as vindication of the policies he adopted over the last 10–15 years which is authoritarian consolidation and a non-aligned foreign policy. He picks different partners and works with them, but does not align with one particular regional order, be it Russia or the West. Indeed, relying on a quite repressive style of government, Aliyev looks around – he looks at Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, Turkey and he sees that all these countries had popular uprisings which have either chal-

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lenged or removed previous regimes. He thinks that Azerbaijan has avoided that. One could, of course, say that he just postponed the problems rather than resolved them, but I think he feels vindicated. I would not expect any alteration in that policy. The main weakness he has is the economic one. Oil revenues are falling. Last year they were worth 3.5 billion US dollars compared to 20 billion in 2011, which simply means he has fewer financial resources. His regime will also be likely to be pressured from the devaluation of the manat (the currency of Azerbaijan) in the upcoming months. The expenses of the war and the reconstruction process would even be more expensive. He has things to celebrate politically, but still has a difficult economic climate to contend with.

As for Armenia, certainly the Velvet Revolution now almost looks like a distant memory, even though it happened less than three years ago. Pashinyan came to power on a massive wave of popular support, but he has mainly used that to wage domestic political fights. There is not much evidence of institution-building in Armenia. His default reaction to any crisis is to call people out on the streets, which is more the action of the opposition leader than the head of the government. And, indeed, this is what he has done during the latest crisis. The Velvet Revolution succeeded in sweeping away one regime, but has not put a new political order in place. We can now see a kind of hybrid system with a still strong oligarchic presence. Pashinyan's popular government is less popular, of course, after the disastrous failure in the war, but it is still more popular than the opposition. But it does not have much of an agenda. I guess, the fear after the war is that many Armenians will prioritise national security issues over democracy, and they will see that it is more important to defend Armenia against Azerbaijan and Turkey than to build democracy. There are many reasons to be pessimistic about the democratic gains of the Velvet Revolution.

I want to ask you about the human costs of the war. You recently wrote that reconciliation should come from above. The speeches by Aliyev and Pashinyan after the war do not give much hope. This hatred, this building of the picture of the enemy from both sides continue even after the war is over. Do you think that politicians in Baku and Yerevan are aware of how damaging these speeches can be for reconciliation, or are they just instrumentalising the possibility?

One would hope that here is another way to change this discourse. For 30 years now Armenia and Azerbaijan had been yin and yang opposites. They both define themselves in opposition to the other. Armenia is anti-Azerbaijan; Azerbaijan is anti-Armenia. Their national projects have been based on defying, almost destroying, the other. One would hope that could change, but as you say the discourse continues – Armenophobic discourse in Azerbaijan without any acknowledgement that Azerbaijan could do anything wrong towards Armenians.

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And, again, this view in Armenia that Azerbaijanis are an existential threat to the country, that they are preparing the second genocide therefore justifies any Armenian actions. These discourses are quite strong and, indeed, have been strengthened by the recent conflict. Obviously, it would be nice to see political leadership from above to remind Armenians and Azerbaijanis that there are many examples in history of how the two nations got along well together, that they have reasons to co-operate. I do not expect that to happen any time soon. The best one can hope for is maybe this will tone down gradually. I guess the hope is that people-to-people contacts will begin to somewhat resume, particularly with the two sides living more in proximity and trading with one another. Armenians and Azerbaijanis have always found a lot in common on trade and other areas. Musicians still work together while neither of them works so closely with Georgians, because they have much more similar musical tradition. The hope is maybe that there will be small, gradual convergence and coming together. But I do not think anything will radically change until the message from above changes. That requires political leadership and political will.

Do you think that in order to achieve this, a change of leadership is necessary or a change within the leadership which is already in power?

Maybe different leaders could give different messages, but I think these leaders are emerging from a political culture which has a broad consensus on these issues. It might be a mistake to wait for different political leaders. Possibly the next political leaders would have the advantage that they would not be associated with this conflict and would be able to turn a new page, which I guess would be positive. One has to look for other elements in society as work to begin to change this discourse, whether that is cultural people, business people, or young people who may be fed up with the kind of messages older generations have been feeding them for many years.

The problem which I have always seen in relations between young Armenians and Azerbaijanis is that they do not remember when they were getting along, or hanging out together. Young people are very often much more confrontational, because they lack any experience of common living like during the Soviet times.

It is certainly the case that lots of the younger generations are antagonistic, having grown up with this brainwashing for the last 30 years while older people, who were living together during the Soviet times, have common memories and are often more tolerant. Having said that, I think some younger people are a bit dissident and are actively interested in building links with one another. I have discovered that personally. Since the conflict started, people have been in touch with me and want to actively meet people from the other side. Unfortunately, particularly in the Azerbai-

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jani case, many of these people are now outside of the country, because they are not feeling comfortable and safe within. There is perhaps – and I am being a little cautious here because one always has to be cautious about this conflict – the beginning of a kind of peace constituency among certain groups. We have seen that these groups can form in these new circumstances, the kind of peace constituency one sees in other conflict situations – like in Cyprus, for example, or in Northern Ireland, where it was large enough to change everything. In the Caucasus it has always been much smaller; it has been almost non-existent in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context, just a few individuals. Hopefully that peace constituency will grow a little over the next few years and be a factor to be reckoned with.

You said that you see one more positive outcome of the recent war – the right of return for Azerbaijani internally displaced persons from the 1990s. On the other hand, thousands of Armenians have now fled the districts which were regained by Azerbaijan. Thus, I have the impression that we are exchanging one humanitarian crisis for another. How can this problem be solved? Do you think that peaceful coexistence in Karabakh is possible?

There are several points which have to be addressed. First of all, of course, this is a tragedy that people have been displaced by this conflict, but in terms of raw numbers, the number of beneficiaries is much greater at the end of this conflict. More than half a million Azerbaijanis will have the right to return. I think we should talk about the right of return because it would be many years before these de-occupied districts of Azerbaijan are demined and reconstructed and then become liveable. People are already visiting their former homes in small numbers and this is positive. This affects a huge number of people. Certainly more than five per cent of the whole Azerbaijani population is affected by that. This can be viewed as a big deal, the big upside of this conflict. It is certainly a shame that it had been achieved by war when it could, theoretically, have been achieved by a peace agreement without blood being shed. But as you say, there are new people displaced by this conflict – more than 30,000 Armenians from Karabakh, particularly from the Hadrut region and the town of Shusha (or Shushi, as the Armenians call it). There are also several thousand Azerbaijanis who do not have a right to return at the moment, because there are also the Azerbaijanis from Khojaly in Karabakh and the town of Lachin. So that is the problem, these new displaced Armenians are certainly a tragic outcome of this war and will be an embittered constituency. Is peaceful coexistence possible? I think it will probably happen one day when there is a full political agreement. I think the best one can hope for at the moment is some kind of living side by side, some kind of interaction between the two sides, firstly through a certain level of trade and business. But the idea

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that Armenians and Azerbaijanis will be living side by side in the same population centres, I think that is a very, very distant prospect indeed.

**Many Armenians are in denial, while Azerbaijanis set a triumphalist, yet unrealistic, narrative. They are not understanding the real cost of rebuilding the de-occupied regions and part of Karabakh under Azerbaijani control. Does Nagorno-Karabakh as a separate, informal entity still exist? Or the status it had during the Soviet times and for the last 30 years is gone and we are not going to talk about its special status anymore?**

That is a very important question for which I am not sure we have an answer. Certainly, we can say that Nagorno-Karabakh, as a territorial entity within the borders that were drawn in 1923 when the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was created, no longer really exist in the sense that Azerbaijan is now in control of about one-third of that territory and no longer recognises it as a distinct entity. Having said that, the Karabakh Armenians are still there –for them it is their homeland. As we know, they are extremely tough people who are not just going to surrender to Azerbaijan. They believe they achieved their aspirations to separate from Azerbaijan, even if they then lost a lot of ground and a lot of hope in the war. But the idea that they would peacefully reintegrate into Azerbaijan is a fantasy. I think everyone knows that certainly is the case. The question then becomes what happens to these people within the rather smaller territory that remains to them. A lot in the short term depends on the Russian strategy, but what is Russia's plan? Does it plan to make them a little Russian enclave and give them Russian passports? Are they automatically less important for the Russian agenda than Azerbaijan? These are all unanswered questions. I think we can certainly say that the Karabakh Armenians are an important group in the region, certainly in the Armenian nation and the idea that they will just simply disappear and give up is not feasible. Giving them some kind of just solution, obviously far less than independence, but more than just becoming a normal district of Azerbaijan, is a challenge that remains. It was always at the core of this conflict and it will not be resolved until that question is settled. NEE

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# Navalny is a symbol of the opposition, not its leader

An interview with Boris Vishnevsky, a columnist and opposition member of the St Petersburg legislative assembly. Interviewer: Linas Jegelevicius.

LINAS JEGELEVICIUS: Did you take part in the recent protests in support of Alexei Navalny?

BORIS VISHNEVSKY: No, I did not. I act in a different role. Most recently, there were only two Russia-wide demonstrations in support of Navalny – on January 23rd and January 31st. Instead of marching with the demonstrators, I helped those who, as a result of these marches, ended up in the hands of the militia and security forces. Setting them free takes much longer and requires a lot of painstaking and time-consuming work. My assistance includes various forms, including legal aid in the courts. Unfortunately, more than 2,000 people, in St Petersburg alone, were detained during the protests. Along with my colleagues from the scarce opposition in the local legislative assembly (there are only three of us there), we raised the issue of investigating Navalny's poisoning, until we were deprived of the right to speak out on this matter and anything else the chamber authorities believe is unrelated to the topics of the discussions. The authorities may be accused of wishful thinking in that the discontent and protests will subside gradually, especially with warmer days ahead – but they are wrong, they will not go away.

How are the recent demonstrations in support of Navalny different from those in the past?

I do not agree with the opinion that now only Navalny's supporters are taking to the streets. In fact, many of the participants in the demonstrations are rather sceptical about Navalny. But they are simply fed up with the corrupt sys-

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tem we have and how the government functions. Not all the people necessarily want political change. Many just yearn for a better life, higher pensions, better social benefits, and so on. Unfortunately living standards in Russia have deteriorated and are getting worse.

You are a key member of the only registered opposition party, *Yabloko*. However, the relationship it has with Navalny's team is uneasy, to put it mildly. The article "No to Putinism and Populism," published earlier this year by former *Yabloko* chairman Grigory Yavlinsky, questions Navalny's methods. What do you make of the article?

Indeed, *Yabloko* has been heavily criticised for it, but there have been many who agree with what it says. This article is not about Navalny himself – something that our critics insist, but about the country in which we live. It is about Putin's repressive regime, what we should do next, and that we cannot fall into the trap of extremes – be it Putinism or populism. For me, this article is an exhortation to change our vicious system – not through street protests and violence, but peacefully, through elections. Note that *Yabloko* has always demanded the release of all political prisoners, as well as arrested participants of Navalny support marches, and it calls for an international investigation into the poisoning of Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza (a Russian oppositionist who was poisoned both in 2015 and 2017 as a recent Bellingcat investigation has found – editor's note). We also urge to investigate the assassinations of Boris Nemtsov, Timur Kuashev and others. But, yes, we do not urge everyone to take to the streets, something Navalny's team is doing, often insistently. The protests are unlikely to free Navalny. Their goal, as the organisers say themselves, is different – namely, to attract the attention of the public and to involve them in it. But is the price – I mean the detentions, heavy fines, lost employment, ruined careers and lives – worth it? Especially when it will be detainees who will have to pay the price, not those who urge them to take to the streets.

Personally, I do not think it is right to call on young people through social media to participate in protests. Sadly, there are many minors among the detainees, and their parents sometimes do not know anything about their apprehension until it is too late. And I cannot agree with what, for example, Leonid Volkov, Navalny's right hand, said in an address to parents on January 25th, when he insisted that the children themselves decide whether or not to participate in the protests. When underage children are taken away by police, they are under stress and often cry. I have seen it many times with my own eyes, as I am regularly visiting the local militia precincts helping the detainees. And the consequences they and their parents subsequently face are life-changing. Frankly, I do not support any political protests when blood is shed or may be shed. I am in favour of peaceful measures against the repressive system, Putinism.

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Photo: Konstantin Lenkov / Shutterstock

### What are they?

Educating people, disseminating information and, of course, free elections. It is not true that all opposition members are barred from participating in elections in Russia. There are already many high-profile cases where opposition candidates managed to win key positions. Regarding the upcoming elections to the State Duma, I do not think Putin's United Russia will succeed, despite all the efforts to achieve a resounding victory. In fact, I would say that the elections will be the most difficult for them. The people are disappointed and angry and despondency is growing. The situation changes every day, so a lot can happen before election day. To be honest with you, I would not be surprised if United Russia and Putin find themselves in a completely new situation on the day after the election. If so, then the continuation of their leading role would be impossible. This can happen despite the advantages the party has ahead of the election.

### Do you consider Navalny a leader of the Russian opposition?

I see Navalny as a symbol of the opposition, not its leader. A political leader must have a functioning political organisation, a political programme and, of course, a clear vision for the future. Although he runs an anti-corruption organisation and is a social media star, he is not, in a broad sense, an opposition leader. I say this clamouring while also being vehemently against his political persecution and calling on the authorities to allow him to participate in elections. But let's face it, honestly: Navalny is a nationalist. In his interview with *Der Spiegel* last autumn, he confessed that his views have not changed over the past 15 years. Meanwhile, in 2007, he was expelled from *Yabloko* precisely because of his nationalism. For *Yabloko*, nationalism is not acceptable. In addition, the desire of some of his supporters to offend anyone who criticises Navalny, and the wrath they demonstrate – which I have been observing for a long time – also does not sit well with me. Who can be convinced that Navalny and his people

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will not treat their critics in the same harsh way they are being treated now? Of course, if they get power. And, nevertheless, we are ready to discuss the issue of including Navalny's supporters in our electoral lists for the Duma elections in September. Many of them, I believe, are like-minded people, like us in *Yabloko*.

**Do you see anything in common with the protests in Belarus and Russia?**

I think that Alyaksandr Lukashenka will not last long. But Putin is another story. The system he has created is more stable and intricately entrenched in the many layers of the pyramid of power. Dismantling it would require a colossal effort, a lot of time, and the people themselves would have to be ready to make the transition. Unfortunately, many of my compatriots are still very apathetic. But the number of those who want change is growing – a good sign.

**What do you make of the documentary on Putin's palace, released by Navalny's people prior to his arrest? Do you see the timing as a mere coincidence?**

Of course it is no coincidence! *Yabloko* had published its own investigative report on the construction of the palace ten years ago. We were ringing the alarm bells loudly, but, well, few people were interested then. To tell you the truth, the film did not surprise me one bit. Most Russians would be far more stunned if the documentary said Putin has nothing. What worries me about the documentary is that it has the potential to trigger ideological fury, towards those who are rich or richer than the majority. Let's admit it: some people make money honestly. In Russia, too. But what sets Russia apart from the rest of the world is that we have seen how this kind of hatred has sparked sweeping revolutions. We ought not to wage a war against all those who are rich, but against the corrupt political system which is fostered by Putin and which allows his cronies to become super-rich.

**How important will the factor of the coronavirus pandemic be in the autumn elections?**

It will be important, to a greater or lesser extent, without a doubt. People see the inability of the authorities to properly tackle the crisis, and there is little support for local businesses suffering from it. As elsewhere, people in Russia want the pandemic to be over and they want to return to normal life as soon as possible – go on vacation, attend concerts and the theatre, see relatives without fear of contracting the virus. But life is unlikely to get back to where it was before the pandemic anytime soon. NEE

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# Remembering Mark Verlan

## The artist who bridged poetry and apocalyptic jest

GIOVANNA DI MAURO

The style of the late Moldovan artist Mark Verlan is not easy to classify. According to his nephew, the artist created a style that cannot be found in any other movement. He coined the term "ultra-stiobanism" to describe his uncle's artistic approach.

Talk to anyone who met Mark Verlan and they will have a story to tell. Like that time when the famous Swiss curator, Harald Szeemann, travelled to Chișinău just to meet him and offer him the opportunity to exhibit his work in *BLUT & HONIG* (*Blood and Honey*), a retrospective hosted by the Vienna Essl Collection. During the time that Szeemann spent in Chișinău, Verlan was nowhere to be found, but 25 of his paintings (more than any artist's present at the exhibition) made it to the retrospective. His friend and fellow artist Pavel Brăila recalls that, at the same exhibition, someone asked Verlan why he did not speak English and the artist sarcastically replied: "It was already difficult for me to learn Russian."

These stories show that Verlan was an artist who did not take himself too seriously, but they demonstrate his incredible talent. Born in Cocieri in 1963, Mark Verlan studied at what was once called the I.E. Repin Institute of Painting of Chișinău. He used to say that he took the name of *Marioca, Son of Rain* when he understood that the only thing he wanted to become in life was an artist. This happened on a rainy day, and he felt that "he was born in the rain". However, his friend Ovidiu Tichindeleanu recalls that he took this name in 1995 during one of his perfor-

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mances (*Barbie's funeral*) in a very dry summer in Chișinău. It would not be surprising if there were other versions of the origin story. Verlan told tales, changed them and answered questions in a playful way. As his interlocutors, we would never be sure what really happened, but we would not care, because our focus would be on his eclectic personality and fervid imagination. He would make us feel entertained, then fascinated and finally lost.

## *Stiob* and the political mockery

Harald Szeemann compared Verlan to Dieter Roth, the Swiss artist whose art was created from found objects. Like Roth, Verlan used objects that he found in the street to create exceptional artworks, transforming them into poetic objects. He treated pieces of glass and old photographs as surfaces on which he used to write letters in his beautiful calligraphy. He wrote letters every day to imaginary or real people, such as his sisters, whom he loved very much. In these loving letters, in which he imagined living in a past century, his romantic personality emerged. This sensitive trait of his character together with his irony is revealed in his unique artworks.

Mark Verlan's art is not easy to classify into a specific genre or movement. According to his nephew, Mark Verlan Jr, the artist created a style that cannot be found in any other artistic movement. He coined the term *ultra-stiobanism* to describe his uncle's artistic style. The term comes from the Russian word *stiob* that anthropologist Alexei Yourchak identified as a form of parody that imitated and inhabited the formal features of authoritative discourse to such an extent that it was often difficult to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.

In Verlan's portrait of Vladimir Putin, he depicts the Russian president dressed as Cesar, with a kind smile, directly looking at the viewers.

*Stiob* developed between the 1970s and the 1980s in the Soviet Union and involved an over identification with the dominant discourse while pushing it to its limits so that it was almost impossible to discern facts from invention, political support from dissent, creating uncertain and confused interpretations. One of the most relevant examples of *stiob* was a mock interview in 1991 with musician Sergei Kuryokhin during a popular cultural TV programme called *Pyatoe Koleso* (*The Fifth Wheel*). During this interview, Kuryokhin spoke for more than one hour about his encounter with experts who studied the Bolshevik revolutionaries. After a nonsensical discussion about the October Revo-

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Mark Verlan's exhibition at the Cocoşul Roşu in 2016. The drawing of the cat in the UFO represents the artist's signature that can be found in his artworks, but also on Chișinău's walls.

lution and the psychedelic properties of mushroom consumption, Kuryokhin concluded that Lenin might have been a mushroom himself.

This description and the general idea of *stiob* seem to correspond to Verlan's work in which he approaches the depicted subjects in a derisive way. Those who have curated his exhibitions testify to this mockery, but also to the difficulty in recognising the exact message that the artist wants to convey. It is indeed difficult for us, the viewers, to understand if the artist invites us to mock or have sympathy for the characters in his paintings. In this game of truth/untruth, we lose a sense of reality and enter a Verlanian world made of irony, dreams and tricks.

In his portrait of Vladimir Putin, Verlan depicts the Russian president dressed as Cesar, with a kind smile, directly looking at the viewers. His face seems friendly, but his hand is crushing the cat's head, revealing a different nature of the portrayed subject. The painting was accompanied by a letter and video addressed to the Russian president. Verlan was complimenting Putin and offering him the painting (which, of course, was never delivered to the president). The title of the painting, the painting itself and the letter accompanying it demonstrate Verlan's ability to make fun of those in power in a subtle and symbolic way. At first, the viewer can smile at the painting, but then a bitter feeling appears, provoked by the discomfort seen on the cat's face.

Verlan loved animals, he spent most of his life rescuing and sheltering stray dogs and cats. His love for animals was so strong that he was often seen walking in the streets of Chișinău surrounded by pets. He loved cats so much they often appeared

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in his paintings. If the cat in Putin's painting is suffering under Putin's hand, it can mean that the artist wants us to question his representation of the Russian leader. In this game of interpretations, he invites us to decipher the enigmatic signs and hints he has hidden. Some of these signs sometimes consist of messages written with characters inspired by the Egyptian hieroglyphs or the Japanese alphabet.

The playful aspect of his paintings can also be found in portraits of Buratino who often appears together with political leaders. Buratino was a fictional character of the book *The Golden Key* (1936) by Aleksey Tolstoy, who found inspiration in *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*) by Carlo Collodi. In the story, Buratino is a long nosed puppet who lives with his father and goes through different adventures. It is a recurring character in Verlan's paintings and Verlan Jr told me that, when as a child, he used to pose as Buratino for his uncle. As it was for Putin's painting, in *Buratino with Lenin* we can see Lenin looking at the viewer with a serious expression. In his right hand he holds a wooden sceptre (which is actually a stick), while a terrified Buratino stands on his left. At first glance, this seems like a normal portrait of the Bolshevik leader. However, if we look closer, we can see that flying seagulls are defecating on Lenin's head. These three irreverent provocations (Buratino, the wooden stick and the seagulls) are small tricks that Verlan used to mock Lenin. Buratino's scared face is there to remind us to not believe first impressions and to not trust this leader. It is however in the details of the paintings that one can recognise the artist's technical mastery and deep sensitivity. The moon in the painting of Lenin and the stars in that of Putin create a delicate effect in the background, contrasting with Lenin's harsh expression and Putin's dubious smile.

## Apocalyptic views

Verlan used to say that inspiration for his paintings mostly came to him in dreams; in fact, some of his works look like oneiric scenes in which the depicted characters themselves are asleep. *New York Under Water* (1994), for instance, represents an apocalyptic scene in which water submerges the Statue of Liberty. Underneath, the Twin Towers stand in the background and fish swim around the statue. On the right side of the painting, a transparent capsule shows a woman and a cat is peacefully sleeping on a bed. On the night table, two bottles of champagne stand. The surreal aspect of this painting transports the viewers into a world that is ending, but in which human beings are not bothered, as they conduct their daily activities. It is a painting that seems to anticipate the apocalyptic feeling that we are currently living during the COVID-19 pandemic. In another underwater painting, *Which*

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*Way Dreams Push Us* (2016), one can see a sunken boat with a house on top of it close to a wreck of a submarine and incongruous cars in its vicinity. The painting can be interpreted as the end of the world after a nuclear attack. The presence of the submarine is reminiscent of the Kursk submarine disaster in 2000, when the Russian submarine sank because of an accident during a naval exercise.

Once again, one can notice Verlan's admirable technique, especially in the clouds and sky of *New York Under Water*, and in the rays of sunshine underwater in *Which Way Dreams Push Us*. The use of nuance and detailed care build texture and make the painting almost realistic, creating an impressive visual effect in which he majestically replicated the transparency of water and light in the skies.

I only met Verlan once. It was in February 2016, during an exhibition of his work, organised by artist Pavel Brăila at the *Cocoșul Roșu* (*The Red Cockerel*) in Chișinău. The *Cocoșul Roșu*, located in the old town, is an artistic space where artists meet to attend workshops, concerts, exhibitions and cultural events. I was in Chișinău for my fieldwork and someone told me about the exhibition and the possibility of meeting, and perhaps interviewing, Verlan. I arrived at the *Cocoșul Roșu* earlier and could see the installation of the exhibition. It was the first time I saw all his work in one room and felt so inspired that I could not wait to meet him. When he finally arrived, I asked him if we could fix an appointment for an interview. Perhaps because of the linguistic barrier, Verlan was more interested in small talk.

I did not manage to get an appointment, but I realised how amusing and creative he was. In fact, a few minutes after our conversation, he sat on a chair with a cat on his lap, telling the audience a story about the apocalypse, while looking at a dented and scorched globe, one of his artistic creations. The story was about karmic death that the world will one day encounter. Then, the earth will be reversed: big states like the US will become tiny islands and small states, like Moldova, will cover continents. The tone of his voice was sarcastic and provocative, and everybody laughed at his jokes. And this is exactly how I want to remember him: surrounded by his art, stroking a cat, while talking about the end of the world with a smirk on his face. NEE

*The author would like to thank Maria Breskaya for the translations from Russian; Victoria Nagy Vajda and Theopen-art platform for the photographs of the paintings; Mark Verlan Jr, Pavel Brăila and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu for the interviews and for sharing their stories.*

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# Preserving Soviet-era mosaics in Georgia

A conversation with Nini Palavandishvili, a curator and researcher involved in the process of documenting and mapping Soviet-era mosaics in Georgia. Interviewer: Natalia Mosashvili.

NATALIA MOSASHVILI: Can you say a few words about the meaning of Soviet-era mosaics and why they are often reduced to propaganda of the Soviet system?

NINI PALAVANDISHVILI: I would like to start by saying that my position is the following: of course, these mosaics were created during the Soviet times, but they are not necessarily "Soviet" mosaics. During this period mosaics were created in Mexico, America, France, Spain, Portugal, and many other places. Emphasising them as "Soviet mosaics" is not right. If we divide them thematically, we can say that one stylistic line has been created as a characteristic of socialist countries. What is the most characteristic of these mosaics is that they were monumental art, and monumental art in the public space is a way of bringing about certain messages to as many people as possible. Monumental art reflects the spirit of that time.

Can you tell us more about their artistic significance, including their significance for that era?

One of the most important aspects of 20th-century Georgian mosaics is that they span a period of 30 years. So it has a historical significance as well. This is a field of art which developed with great intensity during a specific period, intensively creating monumental art, a field we no longer have today, or at least has become a great rarity. Also, the smalt – the glass that was used to create the mosaics – is almost no longer produced, since it is very expensive material; it is almost no longer utilised, nor popular. Many factors characterise the mosaics, which shows the importance why we must maintain and save them. Works of art made with this technology, on this scale and with this quantity, I doubt very much will ever be created again in Georgia.

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Photo courtesy of Nini Palavandishvili

I have noticed there is somewhat of a disrespectful attitude towards the mosaics, as many perceived them as Soviet propaganda and therefore do not care much about their fate. Their artistic or historical significance is lost. What do you think is the reason for this?

For most people the mosaics are associated with the Soviet period. There is this common attitude in society: "since it is Soviet, we do not want it". People do not look at the iconography, they do not look at it as art, they look at it emotionally. This emotion is associated with the Soviet Union – and because the Soviet Union was bad, we do not want it. But we need to reflect a little and focus on what is depicted in these mosaics and how important they are to us today. If we look attentively at the mosaics in Georgia, we find out that very few things are propagandistic. There are no great representations of communist ideals, neither glorification of leaders, nor waving of flags, and so on.

Instead we encounter people reflecting on everyday life. And, as I have mentioned, since mosaics are a reflection of a specific time: we encounter themes like equality between people, equality between the sexes, tolerance, strength, boldness – all these are still relevant and important today, but we do not look deep into the actual images and depictions. Even the fact that they have a Soviet legacy is equally important, it adds value to them. And if we delve deeper we will discover many more values. I would like to also note that many of these mosaics are made by famous and respected Georgian artists whose other work we value and preserve. We should not look at this in a primitive way – it is a very complex subject that requires deeper reflection.

There are frequent reports of the deliberate destruction of the mosaics, and, of course, negligence by the state. Who is responsible for this?

Unfortunately, most people do not perceive the true meaning and value of the mosaics, and, to be sure, it should receive more media coverage and more public awareness-raising. But first, I would start with the fact that the state and parliament do not understand the importance of this legacy. The biggest problem was that the monumental art

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was presented by larger public institutions and on industrial buildings and now all these buildings are in the hands of private owners. At the time of the privatisation, the state did not consider it necessary to include, in the terms of contracts, anything that would impose an obligation on new owners. Therefore, we cannot hold new owners legally accountable. Unfortunately, at this point, it is only goodwill that can protect the mosaics.

**The mosaics do not have any special status such as cultural heritage?**

Unfortunately, no. Although a status like this would only protect them against arbitrary treatment, even in cases of privatisation. There are examples in other countries – in Germany and Poland – where mosaics are protected by the state. I also understand very well that not all mosaics can be granted such special status. However, much of the research and description is complete, and to begin with it is a big step forward. Ninety-five per cent of the mosaics in Georgia are mapped out and I can share this material at any time. It is necessary to start with categorisation – defining values, material, regions, subject matters, etc. And then to decide which ones should be given special status.

**You are actively involved in the process of documenting and mapping mosaics in Georgia, analysing their artistic value and raising awareness around them. Have you received any feedback from the state so far?**

No. Unfortunately, we have not received any. However, with our active engagement, we were able to save one of the most important mosaics in Batumi.

**And finally what should be done to avoid the absolute destruction of this cultural heritage? Is it possible and who should be involved in this process? Who should take the responsibility?**

The state should take a step on the legislative level. The involvement of the national agency of heritage preservation is necessary and should be done in communication with the new owners. If they cannot be preserved in their original place, they should be moved to an alternative space. This issue must be decided at the state level because the state is the heir of this cultural legacy, so first and foremost it should be its primary interest to protect and preserve these mosaics. NEE

Nini Palavandishvili is a curator and researcher actively involved in the process of documenting and mapping Soviet-era Mosaics in Georgia.

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# Who is afraid of the letter Ł?

## Łacinka and the Belarusian dictator

TOMASZ KAMUSELLA

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the regime in Belarus has progressively made Belarusian into a monoscriptal language, with Cyrillic as its single official script. This monoscriptality, Russification and the Union State with Russia appears to be Aljaksandar Łukašenka's only constant programme for Belarus and its citizenry.

Former Russian Deputy Prime Minister and opposition leader, Boris Nemtsov, did not hold Belarusian dictator Aljaksandar Łukašenka in high esteem (in this text we allow the author to use the national Latin script for Belarusian as explained later on in this essay – editor's note). Nemtsov deemed him to be "a Slavic Qaddafi. He is an outrageous murderer and dictator, a completely insane person. He has nowhere to retreat. It is not worth waiting for a velvet revolution to happen." No one cared to listen. Now Nemtsov is dead, assassinated in front of the Kremlin in 2015. The West even tried to do business with Łukašenka's Belarus, as usual, turning a blind eye to the ugly reality that Nemtsov succinctly described. But following the rigged presidential election in August 2020, which de facto gave a landslide victory to Śviatłana Cichanoŭskaja, Belarusians rose in exactly such a velvet revolution against the tyrant, who now added the distinction of usurper to the panoply of his haughtily worded titles and positions.

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## Orthography: An ideological battlefield

Like all long standing dictators who want to rule for life, Łukašenka is paranoid, vengeful and full of fear. Among others, he sees the Belarusian language as a breeding nest of opposition. That is why, in 1995, he made Russian an equal official language, which de facto marginalised the country's national language of Belarusian. Belarusian-medium schools and institutions were closed or seriously scaled down. Russian was imposed as the language of the Belarusian army. The population at large was discouraged from using Belarusian in speech and writing. As a result, the everyday use of this language plummeted and is attested only among a tenth of the Belarusian population.

Another step in Łukašenka's struggle against Belarusian language and culture was the re-imposition on Belarusian of the 1933 Soviet Russifying rules of spelling and writing. It is known as Narkamaŭka, because it had been originally approved by the council of the *narkamov*, that is, *narodnyja kamisary* (ministers) of Soviet Belarus. In independent Belarus these Soviet rules were replaced by the pre-Soviet classical orthography, as developed and published in 1918 by Branisłaŭ Taraškievič in Vilnius. The Łukašenka regime made the Soviet orthography official again, and began persecuting periodicals and publishing houses that dared to use the classical spelling. This classical orthography was posed to be a sign of disloyalty and even treason in Łukašenka's Belarus. In the regime's eyes the proof of the latter misdemeanour is the fact that in 2005, among others, the oldest Belarusian-language newspaper *Naša Niva* (established in 1906) and the Radio Svaboda (or the Belarusian service of the Radio Free Europe and the Radio Liberty) agreed on the updated version of Taraškieviča, as Classical Belarusian is often referred to.

A spiral of repressions commenced in Belarus, for instance, closing the possibility of printing and distributing *Naša Niva* through any official channels in the country. In late 2008, *Naša Niva* relented and in order to reach its readers on a regular basis, the newspaper adopted the now official Russifying spelling. In the summer of the same year, the regime had adopted an updated version of Narkamaŭka, which provided the newspaper with a pretext for replacing neo-Taraškieviča with Łukašenka's neo-Narkamaŭka. Cyberspace also became an ideological battlefield for the Belarusian opposition and the regime. In 2004 the Belarusian Wikipedia was founded. Initially, articles written both in Narkamaŭka and Taraškieviča were welcomed. Two years later, in late 2006, it was decided to continue the Wikipedia in Narkamaŭka only, while the articles in Taraškieviča were moved to a Wikipedia incubator. These articles were updated in line with the 2005 reform of Taraškieviča, and in 2007 another Belarusian Wikipedia, written exclusively in Classical Belarusian, was launched.

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## Łacinka

In the Soviet Union, all official documentation for use abroad was either in Russian or translated from Russian into a target foreign language, be it English or French. The thorny issue of Soviet personal names that were not originally Russian was "solved" first by endowing all the Soviet Union's ethnically non-Russian population with Russian-language versions of their names. Thus, the famous modern Belarusian writer Vasil Bykaŭ (Васіль Быкаў) became a Russianised "Vasil Bykov (Василь Быков)". Subsequently, when a foreign travel passport was issued to a Soviet citizen of a non-Russian origin, the Russian-language version of their name was noted down in Latin letters, following the principles of French spelling for Romanisation. Hence, the Belarusian dictator's name in his Soviet passport would be romanised as "Loukachenko". The Soviet authorities employed the French language-based romanisation of Russian in order *not* to use English for this purpose. During the Cold War, English symbolised the Kremlin's arch enemy, that is, the United States.

After Belarus became independent, this Russifying-cum-Gallicising Romanisation of personal names was ditched in favour of Łacinka (Лацінка in Cyrillic; literally Latin alphabet), or the Belarusian Latin alphabet. Some languages sport more than a single "alphabet" (script, writing system) for writing and publishing. Yugoslavia's state-wide language of Serbo-Croatian was a well-known Slavic case, before this language split following the bloody breakup of the federal country during the 1990s. Serbo-Croatian was a biscriptal language, that is, with two official scripts (or writing systems), namely, Cyrillic and Latin. Each word, text or name in Serbo-Croatian could be with equal ease written and published be it in Cyrillic or Latin letters. The equivalence of both alphabets obviated any need for Romanisation in the case of Serbo-Croatian. Both scripts continue to be in official use for the Montenegrin language, and de facto in the case of Serbian. When a need for Cyrillising a name in the Latin alphabet-based languages of Bosnian, Croatian or Slovenian appears, the Serbo-Croatian Cyrillic is employed as a rule of thumb. Likewise, any Romanisation of Macedonian is conducted with the employment of Serbo-Croatian's Latin alphabet.

Łacinka is the Latin alphabet of Belarusian, alongside the Belarusian Cyrillic. Between 1906 and 1912 *Naša Niva* was published in two parallel editions, one in Latin letters and the other in Cyrillic. The latter was earmarked for Orthodox Belarusians, while the former for Catholic Belarusians. During the First World War, the German occupation administration in Belarus (within Land Ober Ost) followed the same biscriptal pattern, but favoured Łacinka. Cyrillic was seen as too strongly associated with and symbolic of the enemy Russian Empire. At that time

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many referred to Cyrillic as the Russian alphabet. For the first time in history, the German occupation authorities also made Belarusian a medium of schooling and an official language of the local administration. Branisłaŭ Taraškievič published his classical standardising grammar of Belarusian for schools in two variants, that is, in Cyrillic and in Latin letters. In the interwar period, the use of Łacinka survived among the Belarusian diaspora and in Poland, in whose frontiers western Belarus was contained. In eastern Belarus, made into a Soviet republic within the Soviet Union, Cyrillic was the sole official alphabet used for writing and publishing in Belarusian. During the Second World War, the German occupation administration of Belarus favoured Łacinka over Cyrillic for Belarusian-language publications. In 1943, in occupied Minsk, Anton Losik's (Антон Лёсік) eighth edition of Taraškievič's grammar was published. It was titled *Biełaruski pravapis* (Belarusian Orthography) and was first printed exclusively in Łacinka. After the war, all of Belarus found itself in the Soviet Union, entailing the ideological compulsion to write and publish in Belarusian only in Cyrillic.

## More than symbolic

In Soviet Belarus and under the Łukašenka regime, Łacinka has been denigrated as a "fascist alphabet". Yet, Belarusian-language authors disagree. In 2017, in Minsk, a reprint of Losik's book came off the press with an added foreword in the Belarusian Cyrillic. Belarusian writers use words and phrases in Łacinka for emphasis, while during the post-Soviet decades the Belarusian Latin alphabet has spread on posters of theatre and music events and in advertising. At present, the knowledge of Łacinka is quite limited, because it is not taught at school. However, Belarusian-speaking intellectuals, dissidents and the educated public consider their national language to be biscriptal, that is, endowed with Cyrillic and Łacinka as its two equal and national alphabets.

Belarusian-speaking intellectuals, dissidents and the educated public consider their national language to be biscriptal.

However, without saying it openly, since the beginning of the 21st century, the regime has progressively made Belarusian into a monoscriptal language, or with Cyrillic as its single official script. In 2000, the first official document was published on the Romanisation principles for Belarusian. This Romanisation standard was finalised in 2007 and was proposed for international adoption in 2013. At least in cyberspace this adoption was effected, as evidenced by the Google Translate service, in which Cyrillic-based Belarusian-language texts are Romanised into this stand-

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ard by default. Proponents of Belarusian language and culture and the Belarusian opposition were appalled, because this Romanisation standard de facto means the ditching of Łacinka from any official use in Belarus and abroad.

Differences between Łacinka and this official Romanisation are not many, but they are crucial and highly symbolic. First and above all, on the sly, the Latin script was decommissioned from the role of Belarusian's second national alphabet. This move detaches Belarusian further from Europe as a sphere of culture and values associated with the Latin letters, and makes this language more similar to monoscriptal Russian. Second, the Romanisation standard does away with the use of the Łacinka letter [ł] for the Cyrillic letter [л], and [l] for [ль], replacing both in accordance with the contemporary English-based Romanisation of Russian, that is, with [l] and [Í], respectively. This change was executed because [ł] is commonly seen as a Polish letter, while next to no one in today's Belarus will note that [Í] is a uniquely Slovak letter.

Łukašenka has no proverbial beef with Slovakia, while the image of the "imperialist and dangerous Poland" features high in his propaganda. That is why, the regime looked on approvingly, when the Catholic community in western Belarus revived the religious and liturgical use of Polish, but with the innovative modification of religious publications printed in the Russian-style Cyrillic, although outside Belarus the Latin alphabet is exclusively employed for writing and publishing in Polish. Some hoped that such a Cyrillic-based Polish would be a mere stop-gap measure, given that the majority of the faithful had no knowledge of the Łacinka, let alone of the Polish Latin alphabet. However, on the contrary, the Polish Cyrillic became a permanent fixture of Catholicism in western Belarus. This is a dual victory for the regime, because this Polish Cyrillic distances the country's Catholics-cum-Polish minority both from Poland and the Belarusians. In the latter case the Belarusian Cyrillic was not even considered for underpinning the development of this Polish Cyrillic. Furthermore, the Russian-style Cyrillic pushes the Polish minority toward a scriptal, cultural and linguistic unity with Russia, alongside the overwhelming majority of the country's ethnic Belarusians who employ only, or predominantly, Russian for speaking and writing. Russification and the Union State with Russia is Łukašenka's only constant programme for Belarus and its citizenry.

> The image of the "imperialist and dangerous Poland" features high in Łukašenka's propaganda.

Hence, some may be surprised why in the official Romanisation of Belarusian Łukašenka allowed for such uniquely Polish letters as [ć], [ń], [ś] and [ź]. Like, [ł], they almost never occur in the Latin alphabet when employed for writing other languages. However, let us remember that the Belarusian dictator introduced [Í]

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instead of the Łacinka [l] for the Cyrillic diagraph [ль]. The diacritic sign "acute" ['] that features above all these Latin letters is driven by the orthographic conventions of the Belarusian Cyrillic, in which [ць] = [ć], [ль] = [Í], [нь] = [ń], [сь] = [ś] and [зь] = [ź] in accordance with the official Romanisation. On the other hand, the system closely emulates the currently standard English-based Romanisation for Russian, in which the apostrophe ['] is used to represent the Cyrillic letter [ь], so [ль] becomes [l'], or [нь] is Romanized as [n']. As a result, the official Romanisation of Belarusian may be interpreted as making this language closer to Russian in this aspect; it is yet another element of Łukašenka's overall policy of Russification.

## Politics is personal

A dictatorship is a masculine and very personal business. Like Muammar Qaddafi or Hugo Chavez, Łukašenka micromanages the entire state and its institutions, so that each official or entrepreneur of a state, regional and even county-level stature must be personally nominated (or approved) by the dictator, and thus fully dependent on his good will. Thus the reader may ask, why I insist on this "strange" form of the dictator's surname: "Łukašenka" instead of settling on "Lukashenka" which is the norm in English-language literature (including in *New Eastern Europe* – editor's note). The answer is simple, in order to reveal the acutely personal manner of his rule and politics.

The Belarusian version of the dictator's name in Narkamaŭka is Аляксандр Лукашэнка. The official Romanisation yields the following form: Aliaksandr Lukašenka. The Romanisation of the Russian version Александр Лукашенко results in quite a similar form, namely, Aleksandr Lukashenko. Because in most English-language sources his first name is anglicised to Alexander, the sole difference perceptible to the western ear is the surname's ending, or [-a] in the Belarusian version and [-o] in the Russian one. The English-language version of the official website of the Office of the President of Belarus employs the Russian-based version of his name, that is, Lukashenko. This Russifying preference is also visible in the article on the dictator in the English Wikipedia.

I suspect that his presidential office closely monitors and manages this article, given that it tends to be edited several times per day. Not only is the Russian form of the dictator's personal name preferred to the Belarusian one. What is acutely missing from any publications on the dictator and is meticulously expunged from Wikipedia, is the Łacinka form of his name, or Aljaksandar Łukašenka, as derived from the Taraškieviča version of the dictator's name, that is, Аляксандар Лукашэнка. The Taraškieviča form of his name is suffered in the Wikipedia composed in Clas-

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sical Belarusian, but displaying the dictator's name in Belarusian's second national alphabet is a strictly forbidden area. The Polish capital letter [Ł] at the beginning of the dictator's own surname clashes with his anti-Polish rhetoric, and some may say that actually outs Łukašenka as a "Polish spy".

How Łukašenka manages the linguistic forms and Romanisation of his personal name closely reflects his policy of Russifying Belarus and moving it away from Europe, ever closer to Russia, at the expense of the Belarusian language and culture. However, does the European Union or the West need to observe any red lines drawn by an illegitimate dictator who usurped the country's presidency in 2020? And for that matter, the dictator who chose to sideline and suppress his native Belarusian language and culture as long as they do not fit his personal and political needs, irrespective of the Belarusians' wishes.

Perhaps, the international community could protest peacefully and effectively against the dictator's cruel and arbitrary rule by adopting the use of Łacinka for Romanising his name and the names of other Belarusian personalities, localities and institutions. This costs little, but is sure to anger (and even unhinge) this very personal regime of Łukašenka. So from now on, not Minsk but Miensk, not Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya *but* Śviatłana Cichanoŭskaja, *not* Svetlana Alexievich but Śviatłana Aljeksjevič, *not* Yulya Tsimafeyeva but Julia Cimafiejeva, *not* Stanislav Shushkevich but Stanisłaŭ Šuškievič, *not* Grodno but Horadnia…

Not only does the letter [Ŭ] distinguish Belarusian as a language, but also the character [Ł], so much hated by the dictator that he decided to liquidate the Belarusian Latin alphabet. As such "Ł" is becoming a symbol for Belarusian democracy, alongside the red-white-red national tricolour now so obstinately targeted at the dictator's behest by all his militia and security forces. NEE

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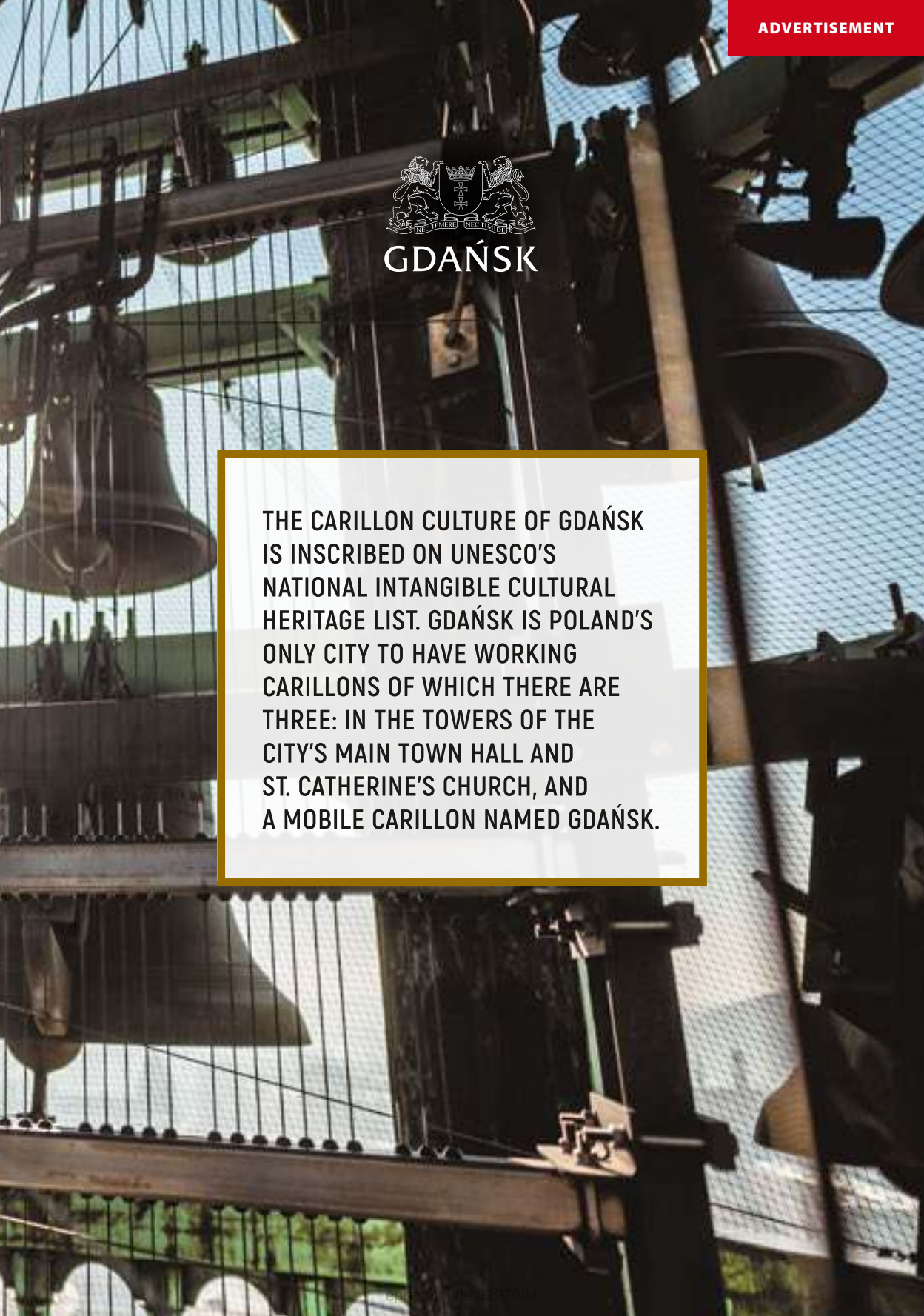


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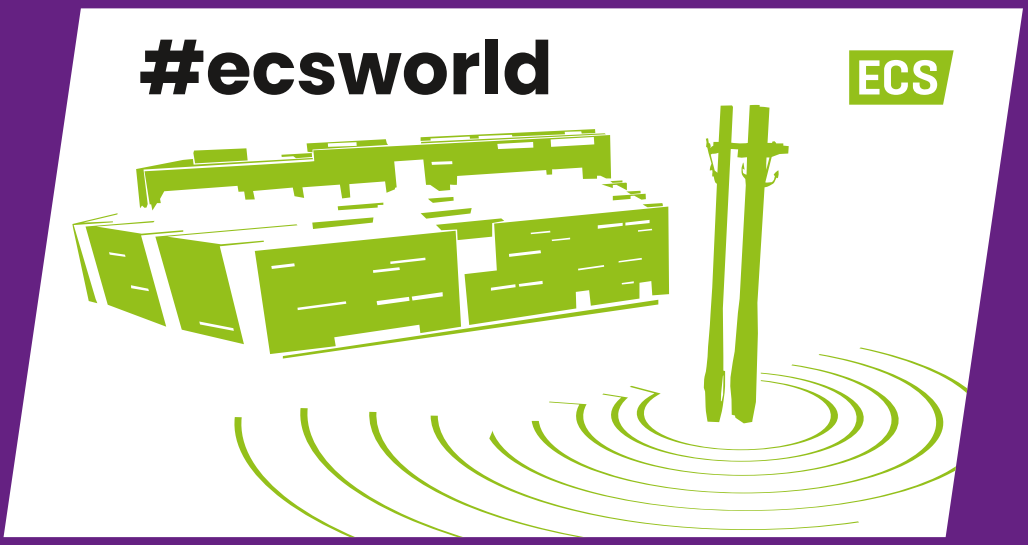


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# Not all that glitters is gold

DYLAN VAN DE VEN

The completion of a gold mine construction project on Armenia's Amulsar mountain, headed by the multi-national company Lydian International, remains in serious doubt. Years of corruption, local protests, regime change and war with Azerbaijan have taken their toll on the massive initiative. Yet, the negative impact of the half-way completed mine has left the local community scarred.

Lydian International's half a billion USD dollar goldmine on Armenia's Amulsar mountain is the largest greenfield mining project ever financed in the country. Poised to be the leading goldmine to open globally in 2018, no gold has yet to be extracted. Nor is it expected that any gold will be mined anytime soon since Lydian entered bankruptcy litigation, is winding up its assets in Toronto, its Canadian headquarters, and was appointed liquidators. The project became marred by allegations of corruption and environmental negligence. The Amulsar project represents the refined practices of state capture as the Armenian elite appropriated foreign funds and multinational corporations exploited resources – ignoring local outcries and breaking international conventions.

Resource extraction is a cornerstone of the Armenian economy. Hundreds of mining operations, most of which flaunt international environmental standards, account for more than half of Armenia's exports. Mines, which opened since Armenia's independence, are usually part owned by oligarchs, politicians, or both. There is no shortage of allegations of corruption and conflicts of interest. Amulsar's track record, initially, did not seem to differ from such mining projects – other than the

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fact that it actually exploited resources. It differs, however, due to the extraordinary success of the local community in organising itself to halt the mine's opening.

## Breeding ground for corruption

Efforts by environmental activists, anti-corruption lobbyists, and organised local groups ensured that Amulsar was top-of-mind for citizens and politicians. However, it was due to the Velvet Revolution that their endeavours came to fruition. Specifically, the defenestration of the elites with close ties to Amulsar, and a reshuffling of ministry positions with previous ties with Lydian International, resulted in few vested interests in the project's continuation. As protests flared without being doused by violent, government-sponsored crackdowns, protesters besieged all roads leading to the goldmine during the two-and-a-half year's standoff. Lydian International – lacking both physical access to its mine and sufficient support from the new regime under Nikol Pashinyan – was left with no choice but to file for bankruptcy protection.

Mining is one of Armenia's top economic sectors in terms of export and inflows of foreign exchange making it a cornerstone of the economy. Most productivity gains over the past decade were reaped in the mining sector. While contributing to the moderate per capita growth experienced since the new millennium, the industry is capital intensive but generates few jobs. In 2019, the World Bank estimated that just one per cent of Armenia's workforce is employed in the mining industry. Investors estimated that 700 direct jobs and thousands of indirect ones would be created by Amulsar. Lydian would be one of the top five corporate taxpayers in the country, adding 50 million dollars in annual taxes to state coffins.

The highly profitable mining industry makes it a breeding ground for political interference and embezzlement.

The highly profitable industry makes it a breeding ground for political interference and embezzlement. After Russia and Kazakhstan, Armenia was the largest mining republic in the Soviet Union. With independence came a wave of mine privatisations under the presidencies of Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan. In a textbook example of state capture, Ter-Petrosyan (president between 1991–1998) and friendly business ties lauded Armenia as a mining-friendly country: the industry was deregulated and it was ensured they gained their share of profits through bribes and direct ownership of firms. Ter-Petrosyan's legacy continues under successive presidents. Vardan Ayvazyan, a mining tycoon and former minister of environmental protection within Kocharyan's government, was found

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guilty by a US court for soliciting a bribe to exploit a goldmine. He was ordered to pay 37 million dollars in damages. Kocharyan himself was charged in 2018 with taking a three million dollar bribe to allow the sale of a mining company. In 2020, Serzh Sargsyan, president of Armenia between 2008 and 2018, was put on trial for an embezzlement scheme to enrich government officials. The ruling indicated that no mine was exploited without the highest level of government's personal involvement. Under Sargsyan's tenure, Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan attended Amulsar's official opening ceremony.

## Winds of change

The 2018 Velvet Revolution changed the balance of power. Pashinyan led a protest movement which peacefully overthrew the Sargsyan's authoritarian regime and heralded a democratic transformation. Riding on the tails of the revolutionary surge, Jermuk and nearby communities around Amulsar rose in revolt against the mine's construction in May 2018. For years activists had unsuccessfully contested the operation. In 2011, locals were made aware of the mining activities to come: five years after investors first indicated their interest and three years after Lydian received its first license.

Various reports by third parties and activists indicate that dozens of infringements of international and Armenian law were taking place, including violations of Water and Lake Sevan Legislation (Armenia's largest lake, lying downstream from Amulsar), the Bern Convention (on critically endangered species) and the EU directive on habitats diversity (on flora and fauna). The IFC, Bankwatch, and other independent organisations would later confirm legal, environmental and social transgressions took place throughout the project's approval and construction.

Regardless, locals were unable to do much more than voice their concerns. "If we protested during Serzh Sargsyan's rule, we would have been arrested right away," says one local resident. After 2011, town halls were held in communities to discuss the project's social, environmental and financial impact. However, these consultations were restricted to those labelled "affected communities". Jermuk, a mountain spa town whose facilities contribute significantly to the livelihoods and the region's economy, was not included. Jermuk lies six kilometres downstream from Amulsar's cyanide leaching facilities. Other communities, too, were excluded from this designation and the consultations. Dissent was generally subdued in pre-revolutionary Armenia, especially for those in fear of reprisals and job losses, says Fidanka Bacheva-McGrath of Bankwatch, a network of environmental NGOs. Over two-thirds of those employed in the region are employed by the government.

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Even under Pashinyan, those that were actively protesting faced systemic marginalisation and public smear campaigns, according to Bankwatch. Debasing information about environmentalists and Jermuk residents was published on Facebook in order to quash dissent. Tehmine Yenoqyan, a local activist, discovered that Lydian International employees were photographing her and her house for months, sharing the images online using fake profiles along with reprehensible comments and insinuations.

In parallel, Lydian International launched a tsunami of legal challenges against more than 30 individuals for "expressions that damaged their business reputation". The company is litigating various government entities for their alleged refusal to deal with the activists and "honour past agreements". Nazeli Vardanyan, an environmental lawyer investigating Amulsar since 2009 and appointed by the Pashinyan government to aid an Amulsar fact-finding mission, is being sued for defamation. She has twice called for hearings to contest the defamation claim requiring her to pay Lydian, with the court deciding both times in favour of Lydian International. Currently undergoing trial in Armenia's cassation court, she is willing to take the case to Strasbourg's European Court of Human Rights. Armenia's Civil Society Institute raised the issue with the International Federation for Human Rights to urge authorities to end the alleged judicial harassment. The cases are still ongoing.

## Sitting on a goldmine

Arpine Galfayan and Anna Shahnazaryan are part of the Armenian Ecological Front, a prominent collective responsible for whipping up domestic and international interest, organising protests and mounting challenges against Lydian International. They too are facing lawsuits. They corroborate that the interests of local communities and the impact on the economy in Jermuk and elsewhere had been ignored. However, catalysed by the political winds of change, protests grew in intensity and culminated in the blockade of the mining site to halt construction spur the new government into action. The blockade was met with generally positive responses, as protesters in Yerevan and other cities drew awareness to the Amulsar cause and its environmental and legal shortcomings.

The protesters caught the attention of the country through incessant media exposure and public outrage – Pashinyan even travelled to Amulsar at the end of 2018 to speak to the protesters and reassure them that the environment comes first. Worried that the siege would ruin Armenia's international reputation and turn the country into a "black hole on the world's economic map", Pashinyan subsequently changed track, calling for the protestors to end their blockade. Despite

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this apparent reversal, Pashinyan did not exert much pressure to lift the blockade, only sending in the police to break up the occasional clashes between Lydian's hired security forces and the activists. The Armenian Ecological Front states that police brutality decreased under Pashinyan watch, but it did not provide further support. As a result of the blocking of the three access roads, activities built makeshift barricades and facilities for the long haul. The blockade continues for over two and a half years, including winters where temperatures dropped below -20 degrees Celsius.

The post-revolution government's mixed messaging provides insight to other factors at play: international interests, especially from the United States and the United Kingdom. Lydian International's financial backers are two American funds (together contributing 325 million dollars) and a Canadian mining business contributing nearly 100 million dollars. To finance its capital-intensive equipment, it has contracts worth over 86 million dollars with Armenian, British, Dutch and Danish firms. The International Finance Corporation and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development were early backers of the project.

The UK ambassador under Sargsyan's government stressed that he was impressed by Lydian International's approach to environmental issues, stating that this is likely to be the largest ever British investment in the country. Lydian International's HQ lies in Jersey, a known tax haven, and it employed no people in the British Isles. Prince Charles already visited the country in 2013 to improve business standing and lobby for Amulsar, amongst other investments. US ambassador Richard Mills praised it during a site visit in 2015. According to a European Union report, Pashinyan himself is under intense pressure from the international community. A US spokesperson called for the respect of law in a predictable and transparent manner to provide confidence to existing and potential investors. The message is clear: comply with done deals of the previous government. Or else.

Catalysed by political winds of change, protests grew in and culminated in the blockade of the mining site.

Not all beneficiaries are foreign. As mentioned, Armenian politicians at the highest levels of state are connected to mining projects, including Lydian International. Armen Sargsyan, the former prime minister (1996–1997) and current president since 2018, served on Lydian International's board in 2013, although he denies holding any shares in the "Lydian Armenia Company". Lydian's complex organisation is split into 11 subsidiaries, and Sargsyan, intentionally or not, only refers to his links with one of them. In the past he also served as governor of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and was the Armenian ambassador to the UK. A visit (presumed to be to Amulsar) with Prince Charles was called off

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as protesters prevented the royal convoy from reaching the mountain. Separately, Yura Ivanyan was the head of the Investigative Committee probing the Amulsar project under Pashinyan. Exposed as being the cousin of the previous minister of environmental protection (who approved the goldmine), Ivanyan was dismissed. These close-knit ties provide a glance into the myriad of relations that permeate the contemporary Armenian political and economic landscape.

Embezzlement allegations on a more local scale is rife. Hayrapet Mkrtchyan, the former mayor of Gndevaz, for instance, is being investigated for selling real estate to his underage son at below-market price. His son went on to sell the property for 300,000 dollars – a 3,500 per cent mark-up – to Lydian International who needed this site following an amended plan for its greenfield investment. Dozens of such cases are listed in an investigation into Gndevaz's land privatisation. Jermuk's mayor vocally opposed the goldmine in 2011–2012, once Jermuk was considered part of the "affected community". In the following years, Lydian International is alleged to have transferred 150,000 dollars to the Jermuk Development Fund, whose director was the mayor's son. From here on, the mayor halted anti-mine petitions as well as public consultations. The Gndevaz mayor, a staunch Lydian International supporter, repeatedly stated that there were no opponents to the project, while downplaying any damaging impact on local livelihoods. Once the mine construction started, though, the harmful impacts manifested itself as locals' incomes, and health and quality of life deteriorated.

## Environmental negligence

Allegations of negligent ecological and social due diligence lie at the core of the project's opposition. Environmental and social impact assessments evaluate the economic aspects of mining projects, including environmental and social consequences. They are mandatory in order to make use of natural resources in most countries. According to an EU report, Armenia's government had rid itself of the expertise to conduct these independently. Bureaucrats were left to rubber stamp the environmental audits put forward by commercial players. Bacheva-McGrath from Bankwatch reveals that many of the relevant experts in the Armenian scientific community were bought out to ensure the project's approval in 2016. Despite protests, construction started the same year and continued until the siege's start in 2018.

The potentially harmful impacts of the project were insufficiently taken into consideration. Development banks are also to blame. In the early stages of the project, the EBRD determined the impact to be site-specific and controllable. It was

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Photo: Irina Ovchinnikova / Shutterstock

A panorama of Jermuk, a mountain spa town whose facilities contribute significantly to the livelihoods and the region's economy and lies six kilometres downstream from Amulsar's cyanide leaching facilities.

wrong in both cases: polluted waterways and a reduction in tourism in Jermuk due to noise complaints and dust pollution swiftly accompanied the initial construction. The EBRD did manage to get environmental concessions from Lydian International, earmarking two tranches of funds to create a biodiversity reserve and a water treatment facility. A 2020 EBRD internal review argues that the project did not cause material harm and that the bank complied with its environmental policies. Nor does it agree that it failed to adequately disclose information and engage stakeholders. This resonates with the marginalisation and side-lining of opponents during the Sargsyan period. The bank officially divested its shares in 2020. The IFC of the World Bank Group already divested its investments in 2017 following an investigation in environmental concerns and illicit land sale procedures.

Pashinyan's regime solicited a foreign auditor to conduct another report, which initially concluded that risks could generally be mitigated, until the auditor backtracked: the information received by Lydian International was incomplete and parts were falsified. The auditor even called for a new report. Nonetheless, Pashinyan used the original audit's conclusions to argue that Amulsar must be mined. In

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2020, Lydian International declared bankruptcy and underwent a restructuring process in Canada, where it was listed on the stock market, and now continues as Restructured Lydian. Amulsar activists finally lifted the siege as they picked up arms against Azerbaijan in the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh. The blockade is down, and some key figures are missing having become prisoners of war, or having lost their lives in the conflict. Protests might resume as spring comes.

Support for mining projects is increasing, as politicians and others express the need for funds to revitalise the country. They point to the battered economy, the attractiveness of mines to foreign investors and the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as reasons to launch new projects. Amulsar portrays the democratic deficiencies in the decision-making and approval processes for international projects in Armenia, marred by allegations of corruption and breaches of environmental and social considerations. It also demonstrates how events can converge in a critical juncture, as a revolution inspired Armenians to act while those in power did not have the same stakes in the game as the *Ancien Regime*.

With the government blamed for the recent loss in the war against Azerbaijan and the country's track record in handling the pandemic, Pashinyan's support is decimated. With an alleged coup declared on February 25th and with the political crisis unfolding, new elections are likely to be held later this year. A decision on Amulsar is not a political priority. The question is whether Pashinyan will still be in power to make the verdict. If the old regime returns, the stakes will be higher and previous obligations may have to be met. NEE

Dylan van de Ven is a consultant working for multinationals, international organisations and policymakers. Holding degrees in economics, finance and management, his main areas of interest are political and economic development, peacebuilding and the fostering of democracy. He contributes to these fields through research and analysis as part of the Eastern Circles editorial team, a geopolitics club focusing on the post-Soviet region, by working with various regional NGOs, and as a freelance journalist.

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# Redeeming Europe

JACEK HAJDUK

In the first half of the 11th century, the Byzantine Empire, a global empire with the capital in Constantinople, had a territory which comprised of the lands that belong to today's Greece, the Balkans, Turkey, Armenia and Crimea, as well as Syria and Italy. The Byzantine Empire, which played an important role in the Middle Ages, had contacts with Slavic countries and directly influenced the statehood and religious life in what today we call Eastern Europe.

Europe is an idea. Matter-of-factly, the European civilisation, as we call it today, had come into being before states and nations, its capricious children, were born. Throughout the ages, it matured, was formed and clashed with other civilisations. It learnt from them and shared its achievements with them. Finally, as a result of these clashes, as well as the less noticeable internal transformations, this concept has undergone numerous metamorphoses. This process can be illustrated through different forms: from the palace in Knossos to the palace in Versailles, from the battle of Troy to the battle of Stalingrad, from the Roman Senate to the US Senate. Since the period of the Dactylic hexameter in Greek poetry, which is seen as the marker of the grand style of classical poetry, the European idea has been carried through literature. Thus, Homer and Hesiod have become known as the first poets of our civilisation. Their steps were followed by the Greek philosophers and tragedians. Those who lived in Alexandria and Pergamon.

## Multiple movements

In Rome, the European idea was explored by the poets and historians, while in the medieval times it found its place in the written texts of monks, scholiasts,

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chroniclers, biographers and epic poets. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, the idea of Europe was explored by playwrights (Shakespeare in the first place), but also by philosophers and men of letters. Then came the romantic bards and the novelists of the 19th and 20th centuries. Later, avant-garde artists and other creative minds were working both in the realms of the so-called high culture and pop culture.

All said, it is quite clear that Europe, especially its most emancipated element (i.e., the West), has been in the building-process for many centuries. These past centuries that have made Europe what it is today. That is why there is nothing wrong to point to this century's long heritage, as long as we avoid all the naïveté and superficiality that often comes with it. The great Michelangelo, when asked how he made his sculptures, supposedly said that he would simply remove the useless parts of the marble with his chisel. The same can be said about the concept of Europe, or the European idea. If understood as a geographic or political term, Europe has many definitions, and is much harder to capture as a concept. Unless we apply some wise and pictorial rhetoric.

Drawing from the works of various philosophers we can attempt to remove the bits and pieces that do not constitute the concept of Europe. They include: some foreign concepts of time, divinity and the afterlife, power and the state, individual rights (or lack thereof) and obligations. Such attempts will nonetheless always result in simplifications, as clearly the Europe of Agamemnon and Achilles is different from the Europe of Pericles or Cicero, and even more different to the Europe of Charlemagne, Voltaire or Bismarck. Put differently, Europe is made by many different past and present movements, including those that promote centralisation, those that opt for separatism, those that aim at construction, and those that want destruction. This is all Europe.

If understood as a geographic or political term, Europe has many definitions, and is much harder to capture as a concept.

The question is: who are today's Europeans? Are we the embodiment of ancient Greeks? Or a reincarnation of medieval fanatics? The descendants of the Renaissance or children of the 19th century industrial revolution? Perhaps a mix of the above, or a completely new incarnation? The answer is: no matter where we come from (be it Germany, Poland or Ukraine), we all share our DNA with the ancient Greeks, Romans and Vikings.

This means that no matter what, the European idea is not (it cannot be!) some abstract concept. Something that is detached from reality and discussed only by high-brow intellectuals, isolated in their ivory towers. We can no longer limit this concept to the inquiry of the selected few. We need a wider discussion on the mat-

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ter especially as we now find ourselves on the eve of a great encounter between two civilisations: Western and Eastern.

Unavoidably, soon we will be faced with the question: whom will these travellers from the Far East meet face to face? There is no simple answer here. However, we can try to search for it in our history, or – more precisely – in the history of our intellect. The latter has been developing for centuries, regardless of our will.

## Late antiquity

Until recently, the period of antiquity was understood as it was defined during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods. Characteristically, antiquity was seen as a time when the will and imagination were assigned higher value than facts and empirical evidence. It was the 19th century that brought us the archaeological revolution, while in the 20th century a revolution in history studies took place. Thus, Edward Gibbon's great vision of "the decline and fall of the Roman Empire", just like some other similar theories, is now history itself, although until now we have not fully freed ourselves from looking at civilisations as if they were organisms. Nor are we liberated from the thinking that they die and are born, grow in power and get weaker (this catchy rhetoric is so tempting that I even use it in this text). We should thus adhere more to the many thinkers who, already in the 20th century, argued that historical inquiry is very complex. As such, it cannot be described by the above presented categories, as the question remains whether any description is possible at all.

Until recently, the period of antiquity was understood as it was defined during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods.

The more recent revolution – which, in a way, was a result of previous ones – included the introduction of the term "late antiquity". It was coined by Peter Brown, a British historian who, in 1971, published his breakthrough book titled *The World of Late Antiquity*. Brown tried to prove that the ancient world did not end at one set moment, which, at the same time, marked the beginning of the Middle Ages. Instead, he argued that from the second to the seventh centuries (or, put differently, from the time of Marc Aurelius to Mohamed), Europe created its own distinct culture, which was not merely a shadow of its ancient heritage. This period is characterised by its own philosophy and theology, its own ideas and practices.

In many regards, the period from the second to the seventh centuries – especially its later phase (from the sixth century onwards) – was of key importance. It determined European spirituality, which developed both in written works of the

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medieval clergy and the discussions of church councils and everyday practices. The cult of saints and relics were the most visible signs in this regard.

As simple as they may sound, these facts need to be constantly discussed because, willingly or not, we tend to simplify our past. That is why I will reiterate: as much as there was no one Greece, there was no one Rome. The latter, especially, should be seen as stretched on a vast territory: from Gibraltar to Syria, from England to Egypt. Needless to say, all of these lands were very different from each other. For the same reason, we have to be constantly reminded that the transmission of these ancient worlds did not take place just on its own. Instead it was the work of many people, including those who were removed from the public eye.

## The Latin West

As much as I try to avoid phrases like "the fall of the Roman Empire" or the "end of antiquity", I cannot but agree that at a certain point – be it in the above mentioned sixth century or later – we could see a moment of significant departure from the Roman state model as it had developed in the West. Evidently so, even as some thinkers from this period noted that while the old world had passed, the need was to not allow it to vanish irrevocably.

In the mission to save this ancient heritage for future generations, a great role was specifically played by two men: Boethius and Cassiodorus. They both experienced the transformation of Europe, from a continent dominated by the Romans into one dominated by the Goths. To save the memory of the old world, they translated, wrote commentaries, as well as published and promoted ancient works, many of which would have been doomed for oblivion. Thanks to that, future generations could learn about ancient mathematicians, astronomers, philosophers and scientists, musicians as well as art and military historians.

In the following centuries a special role in preserving ancient culture fell on the monasteries. It was behind their thick walls where – in deep seclusion and silence – the monks devoted their lives to copying the works of ancient texts. They did it either because of their great admiration of the wisdom and style or to collect "evidence" on how rotten that past was. Today, we know that the practice of burning books was aimed at heretic works; while the ancient texts, which did not directly attack or relate to Christianity, were moved to the deep cellars. Just like we read in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* on the fate of the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

It remains impossible to determine how many ancient books have been saved by the monks (Italian, French or Irish), who rewrote the works of Greek and Ro-

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man authors, and how many have been lost. Personally, I would like to believe that there were more people among the prominent Christians of the past centuries like St Jerome or St Augustin who were not as much inspired by the Bible as they were by the Ancient Greek and Roman traditions. I would also like to believe that today there are still some ancient works to be found throughout Europe and that these sources will expand our knowledge about Greek and Roman antiquity. The good thing is that many ancient works have already left monastery libraries and are now located in different universities, public institutions and private collections.

## The Greek East

In the first half of the 11th century, the Byzantine Empire – in reality a global empire with the capital in Constantinople – had a territory which comprised of the lands that belong to today's Greece, the Balkans, Turkey, Armenia and Crimea, but also Syria and Italy. It played an important role in the Middle Ages, had contacts with Slavic regions and directly influenced the statehood and religious life in what we today call Eastern Europe.

Without a doubt, Europe's East was always Greek. Be it at the time of the Trojan wars or the Persian wars. And when it was formally ruled by the Roman emperor and later when it was under the influence of Byzantine. The Greeks were always known for self-reflection, but it was during the Hellenistic period when diverse studies really developed in Greece. Academic institutions flourished in Alexandria and Pergamon, but also in Athens and on Rhodes. In all these places numerous works were being collected and analysed. These efforts marked the early stages of what later became known as philology – the study of language and linguistic sources. These Greek intellectual centres stayed active until Roman times. They had a great reputation, drew students from all over the world, which would include the sons of influential Roman families who would later become senators, consuls and emperors.

This ancient Eastern Europe from the period of the earlier Byzantine – however bizarre it may sound – included: Alexandria, Antiochia, Beirut, and Constantinople. It was in these centres where the ancient traditions were cultivated and Greek literature and traditions were maintained. It was where science and art flourished. With time, but also after the change of position and influence of the Greek language, Syrian, Armenian, and Arabic authors grew in importance.

In the East, the clergy, including Photios I (the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople from 858 to 867 and from 877 to 867), were also the champions of translating ancient texts. Some emperors, such as Constantine VII Flavius Por-

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phyrogenitus, became patrons of such endeavours. As a result, vast amounts of studies into antiquity, including its literature and language, were carried out in the Byzantine Empire. This process took place in parallel to the studies that were then undertaken by western academics.

The year 1204 was a turning point. It was the year of the Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople. During this event, the crusaders plundered several of Constantinople's libraries and many ancient works disappeared as a result. From the perspective of the history of literature, 1204 was probably more important than the 1453 siege which marked the fall of Constantinople and the beginning of the 400-year rule of the Ottoman Empire. However, the siege was one of these moments in world history which left a permanent mark in our collective thinking, as it was the date of the fall of the Second Rome.

Vast amounts of studies into antiquity, including its literature and language, were carried out in the Byzantine Empire.

In 1453, Zoe Palaiologina (the Byzantine princess) was only a few years old. Her family, the last rulers of the Byzantine Empire, lost power. The young princess was relocated to Rome where she spent a few years at the papal court. Born as Eastern Orthodox, she was raised as Roman Catholic. In 1469 Pope Paul II, her legal guardian at the time, proposed her to be the wife of Grand Prince Ivan III of Moscow (in the future, she would become the mother of his son, Ivan the Young and the grandmother of Ivan the Great). However, despite the Pope's intention to strengthen the influence of the Catholic Church in Russia, it was actually Moscow, not Rome, which profited from the arrangement. By marrying the last of the Palaiologina princesses and taking over the Byzantine emblem (the two-headed eagle which the Russian state still uses today), the Grand Prince – and the Russian rulers that followed him – managed to get hold of something much bigger – the right to claim over a centuries' long tradition.

## Europe's *longue durée*

Europe is an idea and this is what makes it immortal. Even when, at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, we feel that we are at a critical moment experiencing the crisis of liberal democracy, a potential return of authoritarianism and separatism, we should remember that this is only one of many crises that have taken place. As such, it is neither more nor less terrible than the previous ones. And this is what makes Europe different the countries that periodically develop and then decline, or even disappear from it. Regardless of their size, they all

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share this fate. Europe, in turn, profits from its permanent metamorphosis. However, what constitutes its content – namely, the European idea – lasts permanently.

With its origins in ancient Greece and Rome, European civilisation is reborn almost every day. Each of its transformations save Europe and makes it stronger. Just like it was saves by the scholars in Alexandria and by the Romans. But also – with equal zeal – by many anonymous monks. It was also saved by the non-Europeans – Arabs in particular – who were also fascinated by its idea.

The revival of Europe as an idea – and to some its salvation – also came from the marriage between Constantinople and Moscow. It was thanks to this metamorphosis that the European idea still exists today. Finally, we cannot forget about Europe's transatlantic colonial expeditions, which included the genocide of the Native American population (yes, unfortunately genocides are also a European tradition) and, with time, the establishment of the United States of America. Its existence, along with its architecture, literature and ideals, is also a reflection of the homage that the modern world continues to pay to ancient Greece and Rome.

*Translated by Iwona Reichardt*

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# EASTERN CAFÉ

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# A book judged by its cover

MAXIM RUST

*Revolution*. By: Victor Martinovich.
Published in Belarus by Knihazbor, Minsk 2020.

The latest book by Victor Martinovich, one of the most well-known contemporary Belarusian writers, was published by a Belarusian publishing house last autumn. As expected, this novel, tellingly titled *Revolution*, had generated a lot of hype even before it appeared on the bookshop shelves. Thus, we can say that it was either the author's luck or curse that his book, with such a title, was published in Belarus in 2020. Needless to say, such a publication could not go unnoticed by official censors. Consequently, the first published copies were stopped from distribution by the Belarusian law enforcement and meetings with the author were cancelled. As a forbidden fruit, the book obviously became even more interesting and tempting to Belarusian readers.

As it often happens, the nervous reaction of the authorities to the publishing of the novel turned out to be groundless. *Revolution* is not a book about Belarus. It was censored mainly because of its title to which some decision-makers reacted like a bull to a red flag without even making an effort to check what was inside.

## Intellectual provocation

If read more closely, the book title may suggest some kind of intellectual provocation intended by Martinovich, who at the time of writing had no intention of making any references to the Belarusian revolution in 2020; the protests only coincidentally overlapped with the publication. Having said that, only

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time will tell whether I am right about this. With the book itself, Martinovich showed a new literary face, quite different from his previous ones. Prior to publication, Martinovich focused on the Belarusian reality, creating his own artistic universe. Through these works he popularised contemporary Belarusian literature. However, due to the nuances and details of contemporary Belarusianness that is presented, Martinovich's prose is often very difficult to translate into other (apart from East Slavic) languages. The situation changed a bit with his 2018 novel, titled *Night*. This is a post-apocalyptic novel, masterful and universal; it could probably be used as the basis for a popular series on Netflix or HBO. Two years later *Revolution* came about, moving these earlier works somewhat to the background.

The plot takes place in Moscow in the first decade of the 21st century. At that time Moscow was a place that, even 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, remains the main centre for many citizens of the independent post-Soviet republics. It is a metropolis, still not hit by the 2008–2009 financial crisis, where the rhythm of life is set by dizzying money and modern predatory inhabitants: a place where a man exists in the intersection of submission and temptation, where the will most often is the will to have power.

The novel's main character is an immigrant lecturer from Belarus, who finds himself in a whirlwind of trials that makes him re-understand why the denial of personal freedom and the possibility of total submission is often so temptingly sweet. He meets a "dinosaur of Soviet power", who is a former member of the Politburo and still exercises power in the post-Soviet world. The man is in charge of a special organisation which resembles a para-state or mafia. This is an organisation where every – even the most unexpected – dangerous and drastic order must be immediately carried out.

Its leader, who is nearing the end of his life, is still thinking about the heir. His choice falls on the main character, a university lecturer who was manipulated into joining the organisation. To keep his place and to fit the new hierarchy, he is subjected to various tests and trials. The protagonist slowly gives up his old beliefs, love and universal moral principles. With time, he comes to the conclusion that he must initiate a revolution within the ranks of the organisation.

## Power

Martinovich admits that it took him 12 years to write the novel which he did in various European capitals. It is probably a result of these experiences that his main character warns us by saying: "the public power that we see every day is only a version of power for the broad masses, a pop-cultural power that ex-

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ists so that every citizen does not think too much about why s/he should pay taxes, submit to the orders of public services and be loyal to the state. The true power, on the other hand, is something completely different, it is written in our genetic code and it rules us through our instincts. This true power is the ancient code of our world that lives in our every cell and manifests itself in every reflex of our social life."

Indeed, *Revolution* is a novel about power in general, even though it is set in the post-Soviet reality. It is also a story explaining why the so-called escapes of freedom have become more and more popular. For those who are less interested in the recent history of Eastern Europe, *Revolution* can be an engaging political fiction thriller. In turn, those who are more familiar with this region in their everyday life will find references to some of the most famous political processes in Russia (and not only) that have taken place over the last two decades. Although probably as a result of coincidence, it is more evident that Martinovich's *Revolution* is gaining more universal relevance. This may be due to the recent protests in Russia and Belarus. NEE

Maxim Rust is a political analyst and researcher of political elites in the post-Soviet space. He has a PhD in Political Science and Administration from the University of Warsaw. He is also a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe* and lecturer and researcher at the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw.

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# Living with the beast

MACIEJ MAKULSKI

*Potwór pamięci* (*The Memory Monster*). By: Yishai Sarid. Published in Polish by the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław, Poland, 2021.

We, the generations that have fortunately not experienced the Second World War or the Holocaust, are morally obliged to remember those who lost their lives in those events. But what if a memory of a past event imperceptibly takes control of us, like a monster who refuses to let us escape? That is what happened to the protagonist of Yishai Sarid's book, *The Memory Monster*. It is something that could happen to any of us.

The book has a report-like form. It is a report of an employee to his supervisor – the Chairman of Yad Vashem, an institution established in 1953 in Jerusalem that aims to preserve the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The employee's main task is to guide school groups, businessmen, and sometimes political dignitaries from Israel around the places of remembrance to the Nazi concentration and death camps located on the territory of Poland under German occupation.

## Knowns and unknowns

In his report, the guide describes an incident he caused during one of the tours organised for a German film director who wanted to collect material for his new production. The plot of the book provides us with little information about the main character himself. We only learn about his career development at Yad Vashem. We do not even learn his name, but we know he

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has a wife and child – both of whom he spends long periods being away from when he is guiding groups in Poland. Nevertheless, the way this Yad Vashem employee provides clarifications to his boss proves he highly respects his employer and carries out his duties with dedication. At the same time, we learn he was involved in the profession rather accidentally. He had considered becoming a historian at an academy.

The report, however, goes far beyond the barren description of events. It has become a vivisection on the process of how memory gained control of the reporter. He might be perceived as an extreme case, however. Besides working as a guide, he completed a PhD and quickly became a specialist on how the mechanisms of killing in Nazi camps worked. He possessed detailed knowledge of how Germans organised the whole process of mass killing. Due to this knowledge of the ins and outs, he is aware of all similarities and differences that existed in each death camp, not to say anything about the exact numbers of victims. He has made attempts to visualise himself on how the last walk of Jews from the train ramp to a "bathhouse" in a death camp, where they were finally gassed, could look like. He pondered how small German crews could have been able to manage the process of annihilating entire communities over which they were often outnumbered. There were periods when one delegation from Israel was coming after another so often that he used to live in Poland without returning home to his family for several weeks or months. During those periods, speaking about death was his daily routine. After a few years, he became an expert on the subject. His expertise was used by the Israeli army and a video game developer. Not all of us are exposed to such deep reconstructing and reliving tragedies again and again. In short, the book's protagonist went deep into this cruel past.

Every person, community and nation has its own historical context and own tragedies that feed the memory monster.

"It has a personal meaning for me," Sarid tells me when I asked him about his motivation behind the book. "As for the majority of Israelis," he added. However, for me, a person who has no direct, individual bond with the tragedy of the Shoah, the book has brought reflections about how all of us are exposed to the memory monster. Every person, community, and nation has its own historical context and own tragedies that feed that monster. The history of every mature community provides enough nourishment for the monster's long life.

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The hidden message of the book might be that all of us are prone to be captured by a memory monster. The monster is always there, and we are caught between an obligation to remember events of the past and being obsessed with memory. The threshold of obsession is lower than we expect – this is what I read between the words of Sarid's novel. It is more a matter of crossing the thin line in our minds than our choices we can get under control.

## The monster's legacy

Sarid's book can also be seen as a literary attempt to present the state of the post-Holocaust debate that continues in Israel. The characters appearing in the Yad Vashem employee's report represent various ways of argumentation, which probably appear with different intensity in the public discourse. A part of this story is also the protagonist's observation about the attitudes that visitors present towards what they see and how interested they are by what they experience. Very often their interest is superficial. Should we blame teenagers for their indifference during such trips? I have no answer, but I see tension between how we want to talk about memory and how often memory does not lend itself to our intentions.

The question then arises: what are our chances in the struggle against the memory monster? One of the answers comes from the conclusion a student made after a visit to death camps: "To survive you have to be a bit of a Nazi". It met the expectation of the guide even if it caused consternation among some of the student's peers. When I asked Sarid about the meaning of this statement, he told me: "It's an issue of how you defend yourself and how you live in this cruel world. After such a trauma your first instinct is: I have to be very strong, not let it happen again. And that's very natural and justified. But to what extent do you go with this instinct and what measures you allow yourself to take to defend yourself? And that's an issue we face in Israel daily; how much force can we use against our neighbours, against our enemies, what kind of risk can we take? And you cannot wipe out the Second World War and the Holocaust. You cannot delete it. It's there to stay. And some people tell them, tell, you know, and write about it in Israel."

Presumably, the defence strategy against the memory monster presented in the above passage is not the only one in Israel. My guess is there is a sizeable group of people for whom memory after the Holocaust does not keep them awake. As Sarid explained to me his book provoked more discussions abroad than in Israel, while Yad Vashem did not show much interest in the book. The message of his book corresponds with the thought expressed by the historian Timothy Sny-

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der in the prologue to his *Black Earth. The Holocaust as history and warning*, to which I returned after reading *The Memory Monster* and which I (hopefully) understand better: "is it justified to be certain that after the Holocaust we have any worthy the future? … The story of the Holocaust is not over. It is an eternal precedent from which we have not yet drawn the right conclusions".

Sarid's book leaves the reader with a feeling of powerlessness when it comes to facing the memory monster. On the one hand, the desire to defend one's nation and not let anything tragic happen again to the community is understandable. On the other hand, this desire makes us prisoners of memory, especially if we go deep into trying to comprehend what happened. Yet, I wonder if after reading the book, that being a prisoner of memory is the price we have to pay to prevent similar, tragic events from happening in the future. This is the task of the post-Holocaust generations. After all, it is not an exorbitant price. Perhaps what Sarid is telling us is that we cannot defeat the memory monster. Our only task is to acknowledge its existence and try to not go crazy.

*A conversation with the author Yishai Sarid was recently featured on the Talk Eastern Europe podcast. You can find all episodes at: www.neweasterneurope.eu/talkeasterneurope*

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# A sort of magic realism

KATERYNA PRYSHCHEPA

*Yupak*. By: Serhiy Serhiyovych Saigon.
Publisher: Bilka, Kyiv, 2020.

In December 2020, a jury of distinguished journalists and literary critics designated *Yupak* by Serhii Serhiyovych Saigon as the Ukrainian fiction book of the year. The BBC Book of the Year prize has been awarded in Ukraine since 2005 and is regarded by many as *the* literary award in the country. As a result, Saigon now belongs to a circle of distinguished Ukrainian writers, a status he achieved just years after he published (under his pen name) diaries from the frontline in Donbas. When awarded with the prize at the official ceremony, Saigon first remarked: "I haven't prepared anything." As exhibited on the book cover, "Yupak is a novel about the Ukrainian countryside – its traditions, dialects, ways of doing things, customs and all its faults." The novel's title is a reference to the motorcycle brand, Yupiter, which was scarce during Soviet times. Due to a lack of supply, motorcycles turned into desirable goods, especially for rural folks in Ukraine. For them, a motorcycle with a sidecar was a prized vehicle, synonymous with the ability to travel across difficult village roads. Goods could also be loaded into the side car.

*Yupak*'s storyline begins during the last years of the Soviet Union. A man from a village in Southern Ukraine manages to get a motorcycle, for which his family and the motorcycle are cursed by an envious woman. As a result of the curse, the motorcycle would spend long years in the shed and reappear only in the early 2000s. It will go on to change owners and bring tragedies and havoc to those who were in its possession. The deadly curse would be destroyed by an old witch, however at a cost for its last owner. In the meantime, the Yupak's numerous owners give the reader an insight into a plethora of village characters, their stories, troubles and hopes.

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## A refreshing revival

The secret to the novel's success can be explained by a few things. First, its plot refers to a segment of Ukrainian society mostly overlooked by other Ukrainian authors. These are the present day rural dwellers. Saigon makes a somewhat unexpected return to the classic subject of Ukrainian literature. Namely, the 19th century where the classical canon of Ukrainian prose is heavily loaded with novels dedicated to Ukrainian peasants. These works have long become the nemesis of high school students who are obliged to read them for their matriculation exams. The return of rural life as a subject of modern fiction breaks the spell of rural themes being anachronistic and somewhat irrelevant to the modern reader.

As in most of Europe today, Ukrainian writers prefer to focus on the life of modern urbanites. However, while many Ukrainians live in large urban areas and the rural population is declining rapidly, most city dwellers have close or extended family members living in the countryside. In this way, a book that portrays rural youth is both exotic and close to many Ukrainian readers.

The second factor that explains the book's success is the vividness of story details. Although Saigon openly states that events presented in the novel are fictional, it is clear that they were inspired by his life experiences. Thus, we can say that the "fictional" parts are the parts that are down to the author's storytelling talents. That is to say, many of the details are clearly told by someone who has experienced them in one form or another. They are realistic and accurately reflect Ukraine's lesser known parts. "People in my village who read the book didn't see anything 'special' about it," Saigon told BBC News Ukrainian. "I just wrote about life the way it is. This is an ordinary story of your average person from the steppes".

*Yupak*'s plot refers to a segment of Ukrainian society mostly overlooked by other Ukrainian authors. These are the present day rural dwellers.

Saigon was born and raised in Petrykivka, a village in the Dnipropetrovsk region mainly known as the centre of a traditional folk decorative painting style called Petrykivka painting. This style draws from a rich colour palette, utilising floral and animal motives and is said to be an epitome of romanticized Ukrainian folk traditions – pastoral and peaceful. In *Yupak*, however, Saigon presents modern day village life as far removed from this bucolic paradise. It is haunted by difficulties, which include the

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limited opportunities for young people to find employment and earn a decent living, the potential danger people face when in contact with law enforcement, not to mention limited access to culture and widespread prejudice. But the book is also about ingenuity and morals. And this is another reason for its success.

## A subject for debate

*Yupak* is available in two language versions – Ukrainian and Russian. The two versions differ by the colour of the volume's book cover. Both versions include huge portions of speech in *surzhyk* (a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, which is often used in everyday conversations). The original version of the novel was written in Russian and subsequently translated into Ukrainian by Viktoriya Nazarenko. Writing in Russian is not an obvious choice for an author raised in a Ukrainian village. Saigon himself explained in interviews that he decided to write in Russian because, as a teenager, he read books in Russian and remained under their influence.

> Today's Ukrainian literature offers a plethora of styles, from historical crime fiction, through light romance and drama along with novels that investigate burning societal issues.

Evidently, Saigon is not the only author in Ukraine to have books written in Russian before translating them to Ukrainian. Other Donbas war veterans published their books in two language versions – Ukrainian and Russian. An interesting case was a book titled *Slidy na dorozi* (*Traces on the Road*). It was one of the 2018 bestsellers, authored by another Donbas war veteran, Valeriy Ananiev. The book was originally written in Russian, but only published in Ukrainian. This case shows how the social use of the Ukrainian language is embodied by this newest literary wave.

The award for *Yupak* was not guaranteed as the BBC Ukraine Book of the Year shortlist also included books by some of Ukraine's long established household names, such as Sofia Andrukhovych and Maria Matios. Anrukhovych's novel, *Amadoka*, for example, was awarded best fiction book in 2020 by the Litaktsent book prize, while *Yupak* did not even make it to the shortlist. The difference in prize winners between the BBC Book of the Year and the Litaktsent reflects the difference of their jury composition.

While the Litaktsent can be called an "industry" award and its jury is composed

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of literary critics, the BBC Book of the Year jury is traditionally composed predominantly of journalists and public figures. The prize committee tries to engage with the public by encouraging them to write reviews for shortlisted books. The best submissions are published on the BBC Ukrainian Service website. Thus, while *Amadoka* explores the depths of the Ukrainian national psyche and discusses unresolved historical traumas, *Yupak* brings dynamism and action with elements of black magic.

Saigon, as a matter of fact, almost declared his mission is to make modern Ukrainian literature less elaborate in style and closer to the audience. In his view the overload of "psychologism" and the lack of realism is what makes Ukrainian literature so hard for readers to accept. This view, that it reflects the current state of Ukrainian literature, can be debated. The truth is that today's Ukrainian literature offers a plethora of styles, from historical crime fiction, through light romance and drama along with novels that investigate burning societal issues.

Thus, Saigon's comments should be treated more as a reflection of an ongoing debate in Ukraine's literary circles. It centres on the future of the new wave of writers who write stories based on their experiences in the trenches in eastern parts of the country. One might risk saying that this kind of war literature is the result of the authors' need to undergo some kind of "catharsis". Some established critics, however, have started to state that works authored by Donbas veterans have become repetitive. They point to the fact that most of the books directly describe the writer's war experiences. In addition, as for most of these authors, war memoirs are their first attempt at producing a literary work, their writing style often shows signs of being immature and naïve.

Regardless of that, the veterans have established a loyal audience. Seemingly, Ukrainians go for these war memoirs not only because of their literary style, but because of the contents they find there. Clearly they are interested in the ongoing war and Ukraine's struggle to defend its integrity and sovereignty. Additionally, this interest in war literature can be treated as a sign of respect and appreciation to those who actively serve (or served) at the frontline.

The two worlds of traditional and new veterans' literature, however, are not totally separated. Artem Chekh, an author who published a number of books before the war in Donbas, served on the frontline from 2015 to 2016. His war memoire, *Point Zero*, was published in 2017. Serhiy Zhadan, who was not in the trenches but made numerous visits to the frontline to meet the soldiers and hold his readings there, is one of the established Ukrainian "guild" writers who declared his support for veteran literature.

All said, this new wave of authors and publishers of war literature is becoming more noticed in Ukraine. Notably, *Yupak* is the second book published by Bilka publishing house, which received

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the Fiction Book of the Year Prize. In 2019 the BBC Ukraine book prize (in the fiction category) was awarded to a war drama titled *Dotsia* (*A little girl*). It became the first published novel of Tamara Gorikha Zernia – a translator who, at the beginning of the war, began collecting donations and organised supplies for troops in Donbas. Her novel tells a story about a group that went undercover in 2014 trying to fight the separatists and Russian military forces in Donetsk.

Although *Yupak*'s plot did not directly relate to the war, Saigon decided to tie the storyline to it by writing a sort of post scriptum in the last chapter. He described how the main characters behaved in 2014 by placing one of them in the trenches on the Ukrainian side and the other of them on the Russian one. Yet, in the comments he made in the press and on social media, Saigon declared that the war will not be the subject of his future projects. He wants to move on.

Saigon, as a daring novice, showed off by finishing the final chapter of *Yupak* by showing he was in Paris. He visited the capital of France to present the Ukrainian diaspora with his earlier (his first actually) book, *Грязь*/*Khaki* (*Dirt*/*Khaki*). It seems that by provoking discussions and occasionally showing off, Saigon may depart from his trademark in the future. NEE

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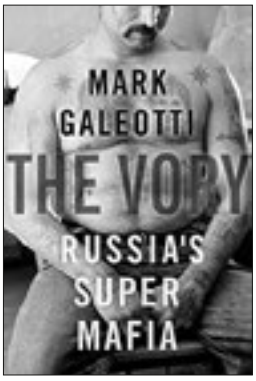
# The thieves in law

LASHA BREGVALADZE

*The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia*. By: Mark Galeotti.
Publisher: Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 2018.




The first time I picked up Mark Galeotti's book, *The Vory*, I was overwhelmed and my heart started beating a little faster. Not many books have been written on this subject. The issue is very specific and a bit complicated to formulate and analyse. As far as we know, no representative of the former post-Soviet countries has even attempted to publish something on the subject, neither literary nor an in depth academic analysis. Whereas this topic is delicate, some people are more concerned about personal issues while others just try to forget about it altogether. Given the complicated nature of this topic (the *vory* are a type of criminal organisation which cannot be found anywhere else outside post-Soviet countries), the titanic work carried out by Mark Galeotti, an Honorary Professor at the University of London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies, is quite impressive. The book is written very lucidly and it does a good job of describing certain events, starting with tsarist Russia and ending with today's realities.

## Criminal class

Galeotti introduces all the vicious practices that have developed since the time of the Russian Empire, and later within the Soviet Russian Empire when it reached its peak. After the *perestroika* period and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the *vory* had been transformed into a much stronger and more dangerous organisation, becoming a threat to the country itself (here I mean Russia

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and a few young republics where this subculture had deeply penetrated into society), and the rest of the world. As the author describes, after these criminal gangs became stronger they started robbing and oppressing citizens (mostly during the so-called "wild 90s") and consuming the country's main resources they also drew their attention to European and American cities. Galeotti tried to describe the representatives of the criminal subculture formed in the young republics and their structures, although it is easy to see that this topic is not well reviewed in certain places (for example, in Chechnya and Georgia). For readers not well aware of these issues, they will gain a lot of interesting information after reading this book.

As someone who grew up in this environment, and participated in the reforms that took place in the Georgian penitentiary system after the 2003 "Rose Revolution", I had quite a close relationship with criminals of all levels, including the so-called *vory*, translated as "thieves in law". Starting with the historical part of the book, the author depicted the story of Benyia Zubriak. By describing his life, Galeotti tried to show the dark side that is common with this subculture. It would have been better to delve deeper into the history of the origin of the *vory*. It is noteworthy that the first so-called authorities appeared in Odesa during tsarist Russia. They were named "fartovyy" (*фартовый*) which means "lucky". The people with this title had special respect in the criminal world. The term *vory* or "Ramkiani" was introduced later on. After the formation of the Soviet republics, there was a need to control and contain the criminal sphere. As it is with the economy, demand always creates a need to produce. In this case, high-ranking officials of the NKVD and other security services encouraged the emergence of these types of criminals, who became a new and untouchable caste.

Unfortunately, two of my fellow-countrymen, Ioseb Jughashvili (Jospeh Stalin) and Lavrenti Beria, facilitated their formation. The rules of conduct were created for those who followed a thieving tradition. It is ridiculous that this code puts law enforcements in an advantageous position and makes it easier for them to control the thieves (for example, it was strictly forbidden to make any kind of confession or write a complaint). However, after the Second World War, this set was also transformed and led to a major confrontation between two powerful groups. The "righteous thieves" who, in their view, lived a proper life, confronted those who were well-disposed towards the prison administration, on the path to correction, or who participated in the war (the so-called "suki"). Of course, this confrontation was won by the latter group, with the support of security services and law enforcement agencies.

This fact is decisive in the vicious transformation that this sequence finally received. It has become common practice between the prison administration and criminals to exchange and co-operate in certain activities. Eventually, after many

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years, this relationship would turn into a criminal formation that does not shun the use of special black cars with passes, taking advantage of prison guards, participating in public tenders, and receiving funding for large state projects.

## Georgian Robin Hood

It would have been better, in my view, if the subcultures in Georgia and Chechnya had been studied in greater detail, since the emergence of a criminal mentality dates back to the tsarist period. The outlaws at the time were patriots who loved their countries and fought against Russian tsarism, such as the hero of Chechenia, Imam Shamil, who was actively fighting against the Russians and was declared an outlaw. Georgian outlaws "Abrages" (outlaw "Abragi" or a man who goes to the forest and his way of life was robbery), Khareba Djibuti and Gogia Kenkishvili, are still very popular figures in Georgia. Also it is noteworthy to mention Arsena Marabdeli, who actually existed in the 19th century and was distinguished by the fact that he mugged the rich and gave to the poor – a sort of Georgian Robin Hood. Similarly, the book *Data Tutashkhia*, which was written by the famous Georgian writer Chabua Amirejibi, is considered one of the most significant stories in Georgian literature. This literary work accurately expresses the problems that plagued the Georgian people at that time and it describes the real situation of many Georgians.

Coming back to Galeotti's book, I would like to refer to the chapter titled "Georgia" which describes the phenomenon of the thieves' understanding in Georgia. Galeotti describes the odious Jaba Ioseliani, who started his life like a *vory* and in the 1990s created one of the most powerful and ruthless gangs in Georgia, the Mkhedrioni. This criminal group, under the shield of "patriotism", murdered hundreds of people during the civil war. Ioseliani managed to reach a high position in government. It is interesting that this issue has not been studied as scrupulously as it should have been, because Mkhedrioni was created by him. In fact, it was a "sectarian" movement in the thieving world with similar customs and rules of conduct. In the case of the murder of two prominent thieves in law for that period (Arsen Mikeladze and Anzor Aghayani), there were suspicions about the involvement of Jaba Ioseliani. This led to action against Ioseliani and his gang (they lost their status and privileges).

Galeotti also refers to the influential and powerful person Anzor Kvantrishvili, who was nicknamed the "golden brother" (*золотой фраер*) as a sign of respect and attention by the *vory*; he was actually a bridge between the criminals and the government. He created a charity fund which in reality was a huge money laun-

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dering organisation. Kvantrishvili was in close contact with prominent singers like Ioseb Kabzon and Alla Pugacheva. In fact, he kept close ties with influential and successful people from various areas of life. In all the cases where the interests of representatives of the state or the law enforcement system were crossed with criminals, the "Golden Brother" was involved.

## Quest for more

The fact that there was such a large percentage of Georgian "thieves in law" in the Soviet Union was because they could keep balance among the criminals from other nations, such as those from other Caucasus republics including Chechens, Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Other Caucasian nations, in fact, considered Georgian criminals to be an equal, and often authoritative due to their strong character. It was much easier to communicate with a Georgian because it was understood he would never break his word, something that is very important in Caucasian culture.

As for the chapter on Chechnya, it is worth mentioning that perhaps more deliberation was needed to describe the life of someone like Imam Shamil, who for many years opposed Russian tsarism, uniting Dagestan, Cherkessia and Chechnya into a united Islamic Imamate. Despite having patriotic goals, he was considered an outlaw for many years. It is sad to mention that, currently, we have such an odious figure in Chechnya as Ramzan Kadyrov. What is happening in Chechnya today is that the nation is divided into two groups: the patriots and those serving Russia for their survival.

Galeotti's book comes across as very interesting and informative. I would emphasise that the topic of the *vory* requires a more in-depth examination. This area is quite specific and it is necessary to expose all the vicious practices and developments that happen between the *vory* and post-Soviet law enforcement agencies. In many cases, this relationship has grown into co-operation and mutual benefit.

Criminals, for a long time, have been taking instructions or interfering in democratic processes such as elections. They assist law enforcement agencies in maintaining power and in return, the regime provides guarantees of inviolability and financial well-being. The fact is that this sequence, which was still in its infancy during the tsarist period, was based on the cornerstone of protest and disobedience of the system. Unfortunately, the strong (or rather the influential) always take advantage of a relatively weak opponent. NEE

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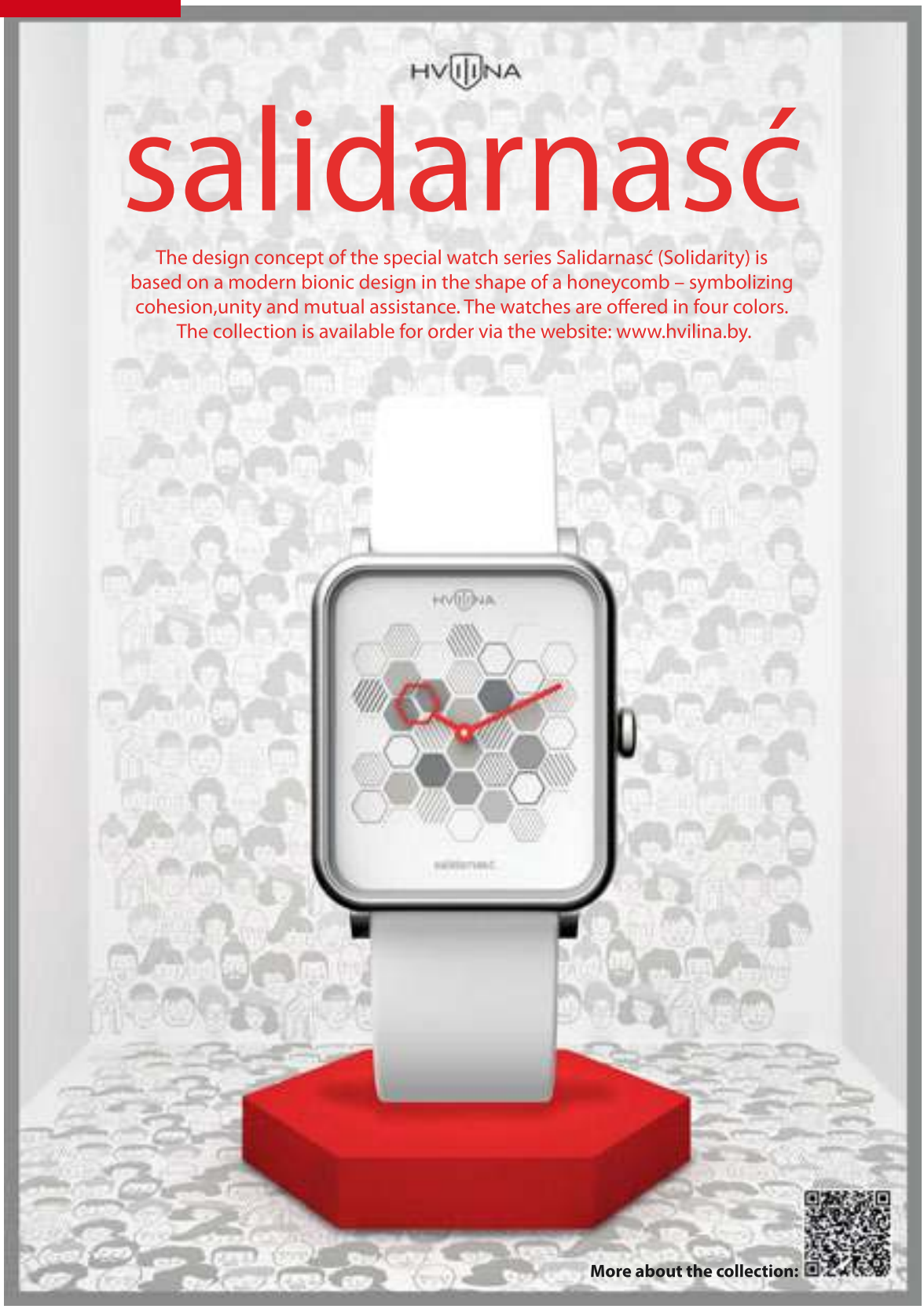


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