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NEGOTIATING PEACE?

Trump, Putin and the future of Ukraine

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DEAR READER,

As Donald Trump was fighting for his next presidency we often heard his promise that under his leadership Russia's war against Ukraine would end in a day. Even if treated as a metaphor, this promise was to suggest that a fast ceasefire was possible. This vision, a dream for many, could not unfortunately come true. To anyone who observes the situation in Ukraine and ongoing Russian attacks it is unfortunately crystal clear that the main obstacle to peace is the unwillingness to end the war by the Russian Federation. Ukraine, on the other hand, has no choice but to continue its defence and resistance. With or without foreign aid.

As this issue is going to print, no peace has been reached, despite the nearly 100 days of Trump's presidency. We do not know, or have the ability to predict, how things will develop in the next 100 days. What we do know, however, is that in about 100 days the current package of US military aid will end and no talks of a new one are yet under way. This suggests that the autumn might be even harder for Ukraine. It is now agreed that Europe should step in as the United States is stepping out. This thinking is correct, provided there is enough political will on the continent and throughout European societies.

Faced with many uncertainties, we know that one thing is certain: something is coming to an end. It is the old world order, but also Transatlantic relations, where the United States played a crucial role, even that of a hegemon. This means that a new order will emerge at a certain point. Yet because we do not know what form it will take and what its leaders will be like, we experience anxiety and fear. And how worrisome of an emotion fear is for the societies, we know from history. Let us thus bring the words of another US President, Franklin D. Roosevelt who famously said: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself". The world belongs to the brave, as another saying goes. Let us not forget also this as we think about the future of our region in the months and years to come.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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Collectively, we are losing this war

An interview with Serhiy Sydorenko, editor of *European Pravda*. Interviewers: Adam Reichardt and Iwona Reichardt, *New Eastern Europe*

NEW EASTERN EUROPE: Let us look at the changes that are taking place globally. We clearly see some shifts in the world order. Do you think we are entering a completely new phase of global politics?

SERHIY SYDORENKO: We are not entering it; we are already in it. This is undisputable. Let's look specifically at international legal norms, which were violated by Russia in 2014 but was not widely recognized by the international community as a breakthrough moment (in Ukraine it largely was, but which not overseas). That's why in 2014 we did not talk about the full violation or destruction of the post-war world order. And that's important – the destruction of the world order starts to happen not when the changes are actually taking place but when there is a wide realisation about it.

That's what we've got since 2022 and after. Now there is no doubt in Europe that international norms were violated and that if the aggressor is not punished and forced to step back, the world order can no longer be preserved. When we talking about the global order we can say that while the old order has already been destroyed, the new one has not yet been built. Thus, we are in a transition phase, where we can only guess what may come next. We speculate with a strong degree of certainty that some of the existing arrangements will not survive. I do not see much chance for the OSCE, for example, unless it is fully remade. We are witnessing a process of NATO's reshaping. Let's face the truth. Are we sure that in a year we will have NATO with 32 allies participating in its military component? I'm not sure. The US is one of those countries that could leave the Alliance effectively. Not fully, but effectively. We have been in such a situation before. We've had allies leaving NATO for decades. You could claim that they were members of the organization in political terms, meaning they took part

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in summits, but they were not taking part in what we can call NATO's core. And that core is defence, not politics. Even though NATO is called a defensive and political union, defence comes first. So there is a chance that we will see a new reality even when it comes to NATO, the most effective military alliance in the world, and these are not just empty words. However, the situation is still evolving – we are at a phase where change has become real and is on the table. There are still plenty of mechanisms taking place, so we do not know what the world will look like in several years. I don't know what will happen with the United Nations, not as much in the short term but in the long term, in ten years. But I do not want to speculate because so much depends on the details which are not yet clear. For example, how long will Putin live? What will happen to Russia once he dies? We know it will happen one day, but we don't know what will happen afterwards. We also don't know what will happen once the Taiwan Strait is crossed by Chinese military ships. That is why we can say that the changes that are taking place now are not only about the European continent and its future, but about the new world order. This new system derives from the developments which have been in place for the last 11 years, or perhaps more, but specifically the last three and a half years.

What is your interpretation of the current stage of Russia's war against Ukraine and the negotiation process that has been initiated by the Donald Trump administration in the United Sates. Is there any room for optimism?

Let me be straight and say something which your readers may not like to hear, but which is the reality and that is why I need to say it. I cannot see any way, or almost no way, which would collectively allow the three main players in this war effort – that is Ukraine, the European Union (and its allies) and the United States – to not lose this war with Russia. When a country loses a part of its territory, it is already a defeat. I know that many of our allies say that we have saved our sovereignty and independence. Yes, we have. But you can save your sovereignty and independence and still lose a war. No one claims that Finland won the 1939 Winter War. The Finnish lost it, but they could have lost more. Just like us, Ukrainians, we could have lost more. We have managed to avoid the worst scenario, indeed. But this does not mean that this war is not a defeat for us. The US has also lost this war, but they don't care. And it is up to them to decide if they want to remain a superpower which plays a major role in this part of the world, or not. However, the fact that the US has lost this war is also a signal to China and for that reason this defeat could be a threat to American interests in the future. Europe has lost this war as well. It has lost it because it got itself into a situation where the aggressor, Russia, has not been properly punished for the atrocities it has committed. Instead, it

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has kept its territorial gains, which in turn has convinced Putin that it is him who has won. Therefore, Putin sees his name going into the history books as a leader who has gained territory for Russia. Europe, on the other hand, is in a very vulnerable situation, where many European countries are not sure whether this war will not spread to their own territories. This military defeat is not the end of the world. As Ukrainians, we have no choice but to keep living and doing our best to develop our country. However, it is important that we all face the truth and unfortunately I see many attempts from the West to deceive themselves by calling our defeat a "victory". It is not a "victory". The truth is, we have lost this war; together.

At what point did you realize that we are losing this war?

I have been seeing movement in this direction for quite some time. Let me be frank and say that it is not only because of Donald Trump. Unfortunately, the current situation is also the result of US policy under the previous president – Joe Biden. However, at that time, Americans were more akin to hide their approach, even though they were implementing it as well. It was the previous administration which refused to associate the words "Ukraine" and "victory". They were the ones who invented the "incremental support" approach, which aimed to allow the Ukrainian army to sustain itself but not to win. But of course, once Trump got into office, his decisions and actions exceeded all of our negative expectations. Before I was trying to believe that losing the war was avoidable, but now it is clear to me. Let me also say that Europe too was hesitant to move with full speed and only until very recently did it realize how dangerous the situation was.

Speaking about the new American administration, and more specifically about the rare earth mineral deal, we can say that it went from bad to better, and now to worse. Where, in your view, is it actually leading Ukraine to?

I am not sure how relevant my words will be in two months or even in a month when your readers will be reading this issue, because we can see that the situation is still developing and we do not know now what we will see in the end. But I am very content that the Ukrainian leadership has finally understood the reality and sees how dangerous this new deal is. This is how we can interpret Volodymyr Zelenskyy's recent statements. From them we can see that the Ukrainian government is now convinced that we should not be paying for what was provided to us as grants, as an expression of support to Ukraine, nor for those weapons that we received but which not always were what we had asked for. It is absolutely unacceptable to convert these donations into loans (in the current mineral deal, Ukraine is expected to pay back the US for all the aid it has received since 2022 – editor's note). Should we agree to these conditions, they would bring huge consequences

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Photo courtesy of Serhiy Sydorenko

and from our point of view they are unacceptable. Fortunately, the Ukrainian authorities are aware of these risks. It is possible that we will end up with some form of an agreement that will eliminate the provision that stipulates that we have to compensate for the aid. I believe that this would be the outcome, but I don't know that for sure.

What could decide which of these options takes place?

What will decide here is which part of Trump's circle wins. I am convinced that around Trump there are people who understand that Ukraine should not pay for the assistance it has received. At the same time, there are also those who feed Trump's desire to go this way. The question is which group will win and this will define the outcome of the negotiations and whether we will sign the deal or not.

Are negotiations still possible?

Absolutely. From what I am seeing at the moment we are still at what we call the starting position. At this stage of negotiation, the proposals put for-

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ward can be unrealistic, because they are the starting point. When you put such a proposal on the table, you show that you are ready to negotiate. In international talks, we can see that parties often start with the toughest positions with something they can agree on. If, on the other hand, they start with a more realistic proposal, then they often end up with something worse than what they wanted. That is why I believe we are now seeing the starting position which has been deliberately drafted in an unacceptable form. And this explains why there is still room for negotiations. At the same time, I have no illusions that these negotiations will be difficult. We have already experienced this also this year when we negotiated that first draft, which was initially a disaster but which ended up being quite okay.

Let's get back to the recent developments in Europe and the reactions to the situation in Ukraine. We have some urgent summits, and the launching of the so-called "coalition of the willing", which is a group of countries that claim they are willing to send troops to Ukraine, once a peace agreement is reached. How do you assess these activities and Europe's overall engagement?

I would say that the coalition of the willing is as important as the processes taking place in the EU with regards to strengthening its own military production, procurement and so on. The EU has adopted a good approach, and I believe it will allow the EU to truly rearm. Frankly, we have to admit that it was completely unreasonable to have the US pay for European defence for so many decades. That is why I see some solid ground in the American demands. What was the justification for the US to pay for Germany, France and to some degree the UK's defence? I can see a reasonable justification for the US to help Poland or the Baltic states, as this assistance could contribute to some stability. But supporting Germany, which until recently was spending less than one per cent of its GDP on defence, makes no sense to me. It had to be addressed. Of course, now it is being dealt with in a very improper manner, with too much haste, but well, it had to end up this way. I see that Europe has finally come to terms with that and understands that the times when the US took care of European security are over. That is why all these efforts that Europe has undertaken recently make perfect sense to me. That multiplying of efforts to arm and increase military purchases would to some degree help Ukraine as well. It could help us sustain our military actions as I really don't know whether there will be a ceasefire.

I also think that while European efforts are belated, they are really needed. We know that it's always better when things are done later rather than never. And that's why the decisions that are being taken by the European leadership now are important. Yet, some implementation, such as sending troops to Ukraine, for example, requires a ceasefire. And I am not so sure if a ceasefire is going to take place. Had you asked me about the

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ceasefire before, even earlier this year, I would have told you that there would be no ceasefire without the US participation. Now, I believe we could have a ceasefire, just because there will be no US participation. Also, some countries are hesitant to participate in these newly proposed efforts. I understand why: political leaders want to be re-elected and for that they need to tell their voters that they will not send troops to the front line in Ukraine. This yet can change once a more or less sustainable peace is achieved. Then it should not be such a big problem to send troops to Ukraine. Even more, I believe it will make perfect sense for European armies to go to Ukraine to learn combat techniques. This will be especially valuable for countries that may need to defend their people and territories in the future. This group also includes those that are now saying that they will not send their soldiers anywhere – like Poland. Learning from the Ukrainian experience will certainly make European armies stronger.

Seemingly NATO has closed its doors to Ukraine, but the EU's doors remain open. How do you assess the EU process and the chances for integration?

Let me stress that I really believe that NATO's doors have not been closed forever. It is very important to state that and I am happy that our leadership makes such statements too. Let's also admit that we don't know if NATO will survive in its current form. Or whether there will be a new military alliance on the European continent. For Ukraine it is important to stay committed to its future membership which, I believe, will happen one day, nonetheless. I am realistic that it will not happen in the near future.

What about EU integration?

I can hardly see our accession as long as the hot war is ongoing. It's unimaginable and for plenty of reasons. They are technical, structural, political and so on. That is why I am more prone to believe that when this war is over – it has to be over one day – we will have a window of opportunity to integrate with the EU. It is important, however, to understand that EU membership is not a result of political will but large reforms. From what I am hearing from our political elite there is a growing understanding of that in Ukraine. The problem is we don't know when the hot war will be over. Let me stress here that I do not expect that this war will end with the worst case scenario for Ukraine. But I also cannot say that Kyiv will remain the capital of Ukraine until, let's say, 2030. I believe it will but I have no ground to say so with full certainty. The scenario that we say is the most probable today is that Ukraine would more or less be similar, not identical, as to what we have now. We can also predict that at a certain point both Ukraine and Russia will probably become exhausted. Hopefully there will be no nuclear strikes, but this is also something I cannot also exclude. If we exclude such a scenario, it means that we don't accept reality.

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Returning to the most possible scenario that I described, we may say that one day we will have some kind of peace which will be claimed to be long-standing and stable. And I'd like to stress that when I am saying that this peace "will be claimed", it does not mean that it will be long-standing and stable. However, it will be a moment when we will have a window of opportunity for concrete actions. This means that we have to prepare for that day when peace, even if temporary and semi-stable, becomes our reality. We have to be then as advanced as possible in our reforms. At that moment, we will also have a chance for success in our accession. Fortunately, the European leaders have come to an understanding of how important it is for Ukraine to survive, which is also important for them. Let me remind you what I said towards the beginning of our conversation – we have gotten to a point where it becomes almost unavoidable that Ukraine loses this war. And Europe will lose it too. Europe now understands that. There might be some public denial, but the leadership has an understanding of that. That is why they don't want to lose again. ❞

Serhiy Sydorenko is the co-founder and editor of *European Pravda*, the largest Ukrainian news portal with a primary focus on EU Affairs, European events, and Ukraine's European future.

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Russia's war is undermining the world order

ANDREAS UMLAND

Since 2014, Moscow has been transforming global affairs in the interests of international revisionism. This has already caused considerable damage to international law and the global rules-based order. In fact, the political implications of Russia's attack reach far beyond Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

Going into its 11th year of war against Ukraine, the results of Russia's attack on its alleged "brother nation" are ambiguous for the Kremlin. On the one hand, its image as a supposed military superpower has suffered greatly. Since 2022 the war has become an international embarrassment for the Russian leadership, army and weapons industry. Moscow's campaign in Ukraine also led to the loss of western partners, markets and investors. These and other setbacks will have far-reaching regional, geopolitical, economic and possibly domestic political consequences for Russia.

On the other hand, a number of partly ignored, partly underestimated results of Russia's Ukraine policy have weakened the international order and the West. Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24th 2022, to be sure, also led to a partial consolidation of the West. For example, NATO and the EU have moved closer together in light of Russia's escalation; western countries have supplied military and other support to Ukraine; Finland and Sweden have joined NATO; and the EU has started membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova alongside granting candidate status to Georgia. This has all been done in response to Russia's aggression.

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Destructive effects

Despite certain positive side effects of the confrontation, however, the global political damage caused by the Russian war is and will continue to be growing. Although this was not the Kremlin's primary goal, it should be assumed that the secondary destructive effects on international stability are also in Moscow's interest, if not actively pursued. Current and potential future revisionist actors across the planet are benefitting from Russia's subversion of the foundations of international law and order. The Russian attack on the world security system in many ways weakens the West and international organizations, thereby strengthening – at least in the Kremlin's zero-sum calculations – Moscow itself, its anti-western allies and other revanchist forces around the world.

Alongside the devastation in Ukraine, Russia's invasion dealt one of the hardest blows to global stability and cooperation since the end of the Second World War. The post-war Yalta order, with its spheres of influence and limitations on sovereignty, was never particularly just or liberal, to be sure. Since 1945, there have been several equally tragic wars in various regions – some with very high casualty figures. The legality of various armed interventions by western and non-western states under international law was and is also disputed.

Nonetheless, considering all its specific characteristics, the Russian war against Ukraine since 2014 and especially since 2022 has a new quality. It is not only Moscow's attempt to undo the European security order established by the Paris Charter of 1990 and restore the Yalta order. In reality, Putin's war goes in several respects beyond the conventions of even the pre-1990 Cold War era. A combination of five violations of the fundamental rules of interstate order and relations sets it apart from earlier military invasions following the Second World War.

The global political damage caused by Russia's war is and will continue to be growing.

First, in 2014, Russia attacked a hitherto completely peaceful and militarily powerless country without provocation. The Russian leadership has many times since pronounced that it was provoked by Ukraine, the West or both, but the change in Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies in 2014 was far less dramatic than Moscow and its apologists abroad have portrayed. Prior to Moscow's intervention, for example, Ukraine's policy towards the ethnic Russian minority remained tolerant, even after the Euromaidan revolution. It has only become more restrictive since 2014 as a result of Russia's war and since its escalation in 2022. Support for Ukrainian right-wing extremism is relatively marginal, especially when compared to other European states. The European Union's 2014 Association Agreement with

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Ukraine was not a challenge to Russia's then operational free trade agreement with the country. Ukraine's much-lamented accession to NATO was as distant a prospect in 2014 as it is today.

Kremlin logic?

According to the logic of Kremlin spokespersons and apologists, Moscow should have reacted far more resolutely and negatively than it did to NATO's significant eastern enlargements of 1999 and 2004. More recently, Russia should have attacked Finland in response to its application for NATO membership. After Helsinki's intention to join the Alliance was made public in early 2022, it was obvious that NATO would satisfy Finland's request far faster than Ukraine's simultaneous membership application. While the Russian-Finnish border is not quite as long as the Russian-Ukrainian border, it is still very long. When Finland joined NATO in 2023, this roughly doubled the total length of the NATO-Russia border.

In addition, Finland's accession puts Putin and numerous other leading Russian politicians' native St Petersburg in a strategically precarious position. The second Russian capital is now in close proximity to NATO from both the west (Estonia) and the north (Finland). The new geopolitical situation for St Petersburg, one would assume according to Kremlin logic, should have made the actual Finnish accession to NATO a more worrying strategic issue for Russia than the distant and uncertain Ukrainian accession. Nonetheless, apart from some noise, there was no tangible Russian reaction to Finland's NATO application and accession. In fact, over the past three years, Russia has withdrawn troops from its western and northern military districts on or close to the Russian-Finnish border.

> The Russian invasion is not only a war for expansion, but also for the annihilation of the Ukrainian nation.

Second, the Russian invasions of 2014 and 2022 were not only aimed at the temporary occupation of conquered territories or Ukraine's inclusion in a zone of influence. The aim was a final and complete annexation, first of Crimea and later of four additional regions in Ukraine's south and east. Such a blatantly expansionist war to extend state territory at the expense of the borders of an internationally recognized neighbouring country is not unique. However, it has been an exceptional foreign policy, to say the least, since 1945.

Third, the Russian invasion since 2022 is a war not only for expansion into, but also the annihilation of, the Ukrainian nation. It aims to abolish Ukraine as a sovereign state and eradicate the Ukrainian people as an independent cultural com-

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munity separate from Russia. Moscow's genocidal intent is expressed not only in its many verbal statements but also in terrorist forms of behaviour. These include the deliberate bombing of civilian infrastructure; the targeted destruction of Ukrainian cultural institutions such as churches and libraries; the arbitrary mistreatment and killing of hundreds of civilians and prisoners of war; mass deportation of tens of thousands of accompanied and unaccompanied children; Russification campaigns in the occupied territories; re-education camps for Ukrainians of minor and adult age, and so on. This genocidal approach is also not a unique phenomenon, even since 1945. However, it has never been practiced in this form by a permanent member of the UN Security Council beyond its territory.

Far-reaching consequences

Related to this is a fourth specific feature of the war. This is Russia's purposeful use of the UN Security Council seat it inherited from the Soviet Union in 1991 to provide diplomatic cover for a war of annihilation and politically secure territorial enlargement. Since 2014, Russia's approach has turned the UN's original function on its head. Created to protect international law and, in particular, its member states' borders, integrity and sovereignty, the UN Security Council has, in Russia's hands, become an instrument of violation of these most basic principles.

A curious side issue is that Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, was one of the founders of the UN in 1945, while the predecessor Soviet republic of today's Russia, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), was not. Nonetheless, the successor state of the RSFSR, the Russian Federation, that joined the United Nations in late 1991, today officially includes five forcibly annexed regions of a UN founding republic. Against this backdrop, it might come as no surprise that Russia bombed Kyiv in late April 2022 even as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres was in the city. As a result, Guterres had to hide in a Kyiv bomb shelter from missiles sent by a permanent member of the UN Security Council that targeted his immediate vicinity.

The most far-reaching consequences of Moscow's behaviour for the world security system are related to a fifth feature – the nuclear aspect of Russia's war of expansion and annihilation against Ukraine. The behaviour of all actors in this confrontation is shaped by Russia's possession and Ukraine's non-possession of nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction. Ukraine, the West and the rest of the world are calculating their actions and signals in light of Moscow's blatant threats to use nuclear weapons and Kyiv's inability to do the same. The most scandalous aspect of this situation is that the Non-Proliferation Treaty, signed in 1968, explicitly al-

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lows Russia to possess atomic arms but strongly forbids Ukraine from acquiring or building them. Like the paradoxical effects of Russia's permanent seat on the UN Security Council, Moscow has turned the meaning of that treaty on its head. Conceived as an instrument for peacekeeping, today's consistent implementation of the treaty, in the context of Russia's behaviour towards the non-nuclear-weapon state of Ukraine, has had the effect of enabling a war of expansion.

Thanks to Russia, the UN Security Council has become an instrument to violate the UN's most basic principles.

As in the case of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic's UN membership in 1945, there is a further historical curiosity regarding the non-proliferation regime. After gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine briefly had the third largest arsenal of nuclear weapons after Russia and the US. At the time, Ukraine possessed more atomic warheads than the remaining three official nuclear-weapon states – the United Kingdom, France and China – put together. In the mid-1990s, however, Kyiv not only agreed to destroy its intercontinental missiles (which were unusable by that time) in exchange for the now infamous Budapest Memorandum of 1994, but was also persuaded to liquidate or hand over to Russia all militarily usable atomic stockpiles, radioactive materials and nuclear technologies, as well as all relevant delivery systems. Since 2022, a particularly tragicomic aspect of this story has been Russia's use of some of the delivery systems it received from Ukraine in the 1990s, as part of the 1994 Budapest deal, to destroy Ukrainian cities.

Gravedigger of the post-Cold War order

Russia's war against Ukraine since 2014, and its escalation in 2022, have shaken not only the liberal world order, but also the European security order and the rules-based international order. Russia's attack is directed not just against Ukraine's democracy but also the statehood, borders, sovereignty, identity and integrity of a UN founding republic and regular member state.

It is true that the massive sanctions imposed on Moscow by the West since 2022 have hampered Russian warfare and weakened the economy. However, they have not been able to fundamentally constrain Russia, let alone end the war. Western arms deliveries to Ukraine have not been insignificant, but rather reluctant, circumscribed and slow. They have remained limited in scope and excluded various crucial types of weaponry.

Russia's war also often indirectly and sometimes directly affects the security interests of European and other states. For example, this is clear when Russian

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missiles operate in the vicinity of Ukrainian nuclear power plants, target the embassy district of Kyiv or destroy Ukrainian grain silos. Even so, militarily powerful European states whose interests are visibly threatened or diminished by Russian warfare leave the protection of critical objects on Ukrainian territory exclusively to Kyiv's armed forces.

Last but not least, international involvement in non-military aid for Ukraine remains muted. Today, there are intense debates in the West on transferring Moscow's frozen funds to Kyiv; punishing Russia for its mass human rights violations in the occupied Ukrainian territories; and pushing for the repatriation of thousands of unaccompanied deported Ukrainian children from Russia to their homeland. However, there have thus far been few relevant practical steps taken to implement these and similar noble intentions.

The international embeddedness of Ukraine

The continuing gap between the West's public rhetoric and political practice gives the impression that the liberal international order is a mirage. To be sure, Russia is heading towards a dead end for its would-be empire and will emerge from the war as a loser. At the same time, however, the Kremlin has managed to partly destroy the UN-based world system that emerged after 1945 and the European security order that emerged from the Helsinki Accords of 1975 and the Paris Charter of 1990.

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To alleviate this situation, the words and deeds of western and non-western governments and international organizations must better match each other. Making national and multinational action in support of Ukraine more resolute will demand better explanatory work from western and non-western press offices, think tanks, media outlets, PR companies, educational institutions and other public bodies. They must clarify for their audiences the full range of risks and implications for international stability that emanate from Russia's subversive foreign behaviour. This concerns European actors above all but is also an issue beyond Europe. Western European and North American support for Ukraine is heavily driven by normative and emotional concerns, and often based on feelings of community, solidarity and empathy. While laudable, such motivations need to be supplemented by more explicit and rational consideration of the national and transnational costs of a continuing Russian devaluation of world order, international law and global security.

Outside the western realm, in contrast, values, emotions and norms have played a lower (or even negative) role in evaluating Ukraine's plight since February 2022. Many politicians and commentators in the Global South see the Russo-Ukrainian War as either a quarrel between different white people or a conflict between Russia and the West. Most commentators perceive it as an event largely unrelated to the interests of non-European nations. A number of politicians, diplomats and experts regard it as a confrontation that can and should be exploited by Asian, African and Latin American countries for their own benefit. Some even mistake Russia's imperial war, illegal annexations and genocidal behaviour as acts of anti-imperialist resistance against an allegedly expansive West – a curious misinterpretation also popular in western far-left and far-right circles.

The gap between rhetoric and practice gives the impression that the liberal international order is a mirage.

The rapid spread of such misunderstandings across the non-western world is paradoxical. Russia's rhetorical devaluation and practical subversion of international law, order and organization, through its nihilistic approach to Ukraine, does not only concern the European continent. It may be potentially more dangerous for militarily weak non-western countries than for well-protected NATO member states, or for close non-NATO allies of the US, such as Japan or South Korea. It is sometimes forgotten that Ukraine is itself – in broadly comparative terms – a country deeply entrenched in international structures. To illustrate the international embeddedness of Ukraine as of February 2024, it has been the beneficiary of an extraordinary Budapest Memorandum attached to the Non-Proliferation Treaty since 1994; a participant in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe since its creation in 1995; party to an especially detailed

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Association Agreement with the EU since 2014; a partner in far-reaching security agreements with the United Kingdom and Germany since early 2024; and co-convenor of a special NATO-Ukraine Council founded following 2022.

Many states around the world are less deeply entrenched in international structures or have less powerful partners and allies. The sovereignty and integrity of these non-European countries therefore rely – even more than Ukraine's – on the functioning of the international rules, organizations and laws that Russia is currently devaluing. ЕЕ

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Trump's new political technology

ANDREW WILSON

It's bad enough that Trump lives, to use Volodymyr Zelenskyy's words, "in this disinformation space". Countries like Ukraine have to cope with Trump imposing his virtual reality on the rest of us.

In 2023 I finished my book *Political Technology: The Globalisation of Political Manipulation* (see: www.politicaltechnology.blog). While the phrase is well known in Russia and throughout the post-Soviet world, which is my area of interest, it is not so much heard in the West. However, when properly defined – and my definition is "the supply-side engineering of the political system for partisan advantage" – plenty of examples can be found in the West. Spin doctors do more than spin the mediatization of politics. They engineer political and information systems. "Political consultants" do way more than consult. They run entire campaigns, and act as political technology wholesalers, buying in whatever services will provide their clients with the victory that they sell.

The MAGA "mediaverse"

Russian political technology has created full spectrum political control for the Kremlin. As a result, Russian politicians are basically just actors reading a script. In the United States, political technology works differently. Politicians are still independent actors but are surrounded by a political technology universe of dark money that includes Political Action Committees (PACs), "think tanks" that launder

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corporate interest as the public good, and astroturfing – the creation of artificial grassroots opinion and movements.

The most important part of this universe is the MAGA "mediaverse". It is this alternative to the "mainstream media" that has grown powerful enough to keep one half of the electorate captive in an alternative reality matrix. Since the January 2021 insurrection, incited by this mediaverse, also known as the "new media upside down" or the "fantasy-industrial complex", it has only continued to grow. Fox News already had a rival in One America News, with Real America's Voice appearing more recently. These are flanked by independent streams like the Daily Wire and the Tucker Carlson Network.

The MAGA "mediaverse" has grown powerful enough to keep half of the US electorate captive in an alternative reality matrix.

In 2024 Donald Trump skilfully branched out into the new world of MAGA podcasters. And despite his temporary removal from (the then) Twitter, Trump's Truth Social and Elon Musk's X are at the centre of this propaganda storm. The strength and growth of this network could be seen in the fact that between two-thirds to three-quarters of Republican voters stayed loyal to the "Stop the Steal" myth after January 2021 – the lie that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump.

The Biden administration made a huge strategic mistake in not properly levelling the playing field after 2020. Left to itself, US political technology has metastasized. If that were not bad enough, Trump has shown since his second inauguration that he will impose MAGA's alternative reality on the rest of us. The MAGA strategist and commentator Steve Bannon was notorious for saying that "politics is downstream from culture". Today we can say "politics is downstream from reality". First you create your own reality and then you govern through it. Trump does indeed "live in this disinformation space", to quote Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Pointing that out might bring diplomatic isolation, but Donald Trump is governing on his own alternative reality terms. "Big Lies" are now the basis of diplomacy. Thus we could hear from the US president that "Zelenskyy's rating was at four per cent," "Ukraine owed the US 350 billion dollars," and Ukraine is a "threat to Christianity".

American-style *grechka*

Three key questions need to be asked here: "What "normal political" factors explain Trump's victory?"; "How did political technology help Trump's victory?" and "How will political technology help Trump govern?"

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The first one is important. Not everything is political technology. The Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris, lost the electoral college and the popular vote, with the second representing the first Republican win since 2004. The Democrats did poorly in both the House and Senate races. Aspects of the celebrity-hugging Harris campaign were truly terrible. So I don't want to provide the Democrats with excuses for their own failings.

But political technology also helped Trump's victory. In 2024 Republicans actively gamed how to win the elections from another losing scenario like in 2020. Voter suppression was extended. According to the Brennan Centre for Justice, a watchdog organization: "In this presidential election, voters in 29 states face[d] at least 63 new restrictive laws that weren't in place for the last presidential election". Republicans tried to engineer all the steps of the election process from November to January. This involved everything from vote counting and certification to the Electoral College and congressional confirmation. If Trump had lost, there would have been no dignified concession. Trump also played the game of virtual political geometry, hoping to exploit the third candidate – Robert F. Kennedy Jr – who was

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backed by Timothy Mellon, the same oligarch who was also sponsoring Donald Trump.

Much has already been written about Elon Musk's role in the election. Significantly, he himself played the role of political technology wholesaler. He spent an estimated 277 million US dollars in dark money, mainly through his America PAC. Under Musk's ownership, X was transformed from a public platform into a right-wing echo chamber. The scheme to give away one million US dollars a day to voters in swing states was instantly recognizable as Hollywood-style vote buying. We can even say it was an upgrade to the post-Soviet *grechka* (free buckwheat), which is vote farming by supplying free goods or just cash.

Building America's Future, another dark money group connected to Musk, spent 45 million dollars on inventing "Progress 2028" – a disinformation campaign aimed at serving as a parallel to the radical agenda of the Republicans' own "Project 2025". The goal was to push fake "woke" pro-Harris ads to put off her voters and fire up the MAGA base. Meanwhile, together with the America First Policy Institute, Building America's Future acted as a political technology dark money "think tank" that converted falsehoods into "ideas" or "policy".

MAGA goes global

This is how the new US administration will govern. Trump and Musk arrived in office armed with a "reality" that outplays politics. Policy will emerge immaculate. It will not come from experts, bureaucrats or state machinery, but from "think tanks" and the MAGA world riffing out loud. Mainstream media has bended the knee. Social media platforms adjust their algorithms and ditch their fact checkers. A TikTok takeover looks almost imminent. MAGA media will act as an alternative "press lobby".

MAGA networks will interact with similar political technology networks globally, not because of their ideological alignment but because they work in the same way and mesh well. The Fidesz network in Hungary is key, as it has already shifted from importing to exporting its political technologies. In 2023 Hungarian political technologists worked in Poland and, more successfully, in Slovakia in 2024. The meme of the "Global War Party" somehow forcing Ukraine to fight against Russia echoed, via their efforts from the Hungarian elections in 2022, to Slovakia, Moldova and Georgia in 2023–25. We are now in a world where radical right British bloggers work for the *Hungarian Conservative* journal.

This is not, to repeat, just ideological. Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream – known for its anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and attacks on the so-called "Global War

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Party" – believed it could count on Trump as a safeguard against potential EU and US sanctions, after corrupted elections in 2024. They had an unlucky misfire, because they are not (yet) networked enough in Washington or Florida. Still, they quickly pivoted, framing the EU's stance as evidence of its capture by the "deep state", a familiar narrative used to rally their base and discredit western pressure.

Revenge for "Russiagate"

Political technologists cooperate and learn from each other from afar. Musk's dark money and social media interventions are now the new normal. In Germany, Musk tried to strengthen the far-right AfD party, and he will soon do the same in France. Even though it makes less sense to push this political force in Eastern Europe, where feeling is often vehemently anti-Russian, in Ukraine's case we are more likely to see the "peace" dialogue of the old Opposition Platform be used more and more.

Ukraine has become collateral damage in US domestic political battles, the victim of the US domestic "upstream"; in a fantasy universe created from the fallout from Donald Trump's first impeachment. What could be described as "Ukraine-something-gate" has served as a form of retaliation for the "Russiagate" scandal, fuelling a propaganda narrative designed to appeal to the MAGA world. This narrative portrays Ukraine as a haven for foreign spongers and corrupt elites, while absurdly linking US military aid to issues such as border security with Mexico. At the same time, American oligarchs with political ties are seemingly free to exploit Ukraine's mineral wealth. Trump's personal animosity towards Zelenskyy stems from the Ukrainian leader's refusal to do what so-called strong leaders want. Russia is America's ally, because in Trump's alternative reality they both suffered during "Russiagate".

American oligarchs with political ties are seemingly free to exploit Ukraine's mineral wealth.

In many ways, the weirdest idea of all involves criticism of moves against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on national security grounds – depicted as somehow "anti-Christian". Despite unconvincing attempts to drop the label "Moscow Patriarchate", it is still basically the "Russian Church" in Ukraine, which has enthusiastically supported the war. The entire *raison d'être* of the rival Orthodox Church of Ukraine, on the other hand, is to put God before power and money, and nation and loyalty to the Orthodox Ecumene before imperial ambition. Its faithful, and Ukrainians in general, are much more religiously observant than Russians.

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This leads to the question of what to do now? Talk to Donald Trump in a language he understands, or challenge the "fantasy-industrial complex"? If the second option is chosen, then gear up for the task. It is not just that Trump quotes some stuff he has heard from Tucker Carlson. He is trapped in something a lot bigger than a "disinformation space" or a "bubble". Now that global social media platforms are also enablers, even political technology entrepreneurs themselves, the world has to work out how to protect reality from alternative "reality". Because this "hyper-reality" is not reality, it always speaks loudly and is intolerant of the challenge of reality. The real world must be prepared to face backlash for challenging its untruths. Reality needs solidarity. Zelenskyy still doesn't need a ride. He needs ammunition and we all need to live in truth. ЕЕ

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Will Trump's peace-making efforts increase the likelihood of a bigger war?

JULIA KAZDOBINA

While the US tries to present itself as an honest broker engaged in shuttle diplomacy, it is difficult not to perceive its efforts as favouring the Russian side. Even before negotiations with Russia had started, the US defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, said Ukraine's NATO membership and the possibility of recapturing territories occupied by Russia were off limits.

After two months of botched peace-making efforts, the administration of Donald Trump has made little progress in bringing the war in Ukraine closer to an end. Simultaneously, the new US government has sought to disengage from Europe and exposed its weakness. If Trump decides to put pressure on Ukraine to end the war on terms that favour Russia, it will make a bigger war in Europe practically inevitable.

Frustrated with the "too little too late" approach of the Biden administration, many Ukrainians pinned their hopes on Donald Trump's return to the White House, believing it could bring an end to Russia's war of aggression through the "peace through strength" approach. Initially, this hope seemed vindicated when Trump threatened to impose "high levels" of sanctions and tariffs on Russian imports if Putin failed to reach a settlement with Ukraine. While speaking to the World Eco-

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nomic Forum in Davos on January 2025, Trump also said he would ask OPEC to lower the price of oil to strip Russia of its oil revenues. White House policy, however, then took an extremely sharp turn.

Dramatic change

First and foremost, Trump brought Putin out of diplomatic isolation. On February 12th 2025, they held a long phone conversation during which they discussed a wide range of topics. They agreed to "work very closely, including visiting each other's nations" and discussed "the great benefit that [they] will someday have in working together". Trump also claimed that he believed Putin's good intentions, despite him "bombing the hell out of Ukraine". The following week, the US delegation met with Russian representatives in Riyadh. They agreed to re-establish embassy staffing, work on a meeting between Trump and Putin, discuss future cooperation, and set up a high-level group that would work to end the war in Ukraine. The issue of sanctions relief was also raised.

For Ukraine the change in US policy was indeed dramatic. Instead of Biden's supporting Ukraine "for as long as it takes", Trump resorted to overt disinformation and bullying. On February 12th, Kyiv was presented with a draft deal treating the aid the US had previously given to Ukraine as a loan and providing it with no security guarantees once peace is established. In the proposed deal, Ukraine was meant to pay back the US with revenues from its critical rare earth minerals and other natural resources. Volodymyr Zelenskyy's refusal to sign the deal resulted in an angry outburst from Trump, who falsely called the Ukrainian president a dictator with only four per cent support and called for presidential elections in the country. The ugly scene at the Oval Office on February 28th 2025, which the entire world came to watch, unfolded when Trump and Vice President JD Vance publicly humiliated Zelenskyy and accused him of not being grateful for the American support. This public lashing was followed by the suspension of US military assistance and intelligence sharing and became the lowest point to date in US-Ukraine relations.

No less significantly, the official American interpretation of the war has changed. On February 24th, the US refused to vote for the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine and supporting the latter's territorial integrity. Instead, it drafted a resolution at the UN Security Council that called for the end of the war without mentioning Russia's role. The resolution was supported by Russia and China. The traditional US allies, the United Kingdom and France, abstained. Both Trump himself and members of his administration repeated Russian false narratives on the war. The most conspicuous case was the interview

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Trump's close associate Steve Witkoff had with Tucker Carlson, in which Witkoff claimed that Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine expressed in a referendum their desire to be a part of Russia.

No agreement reached

While the US tries to present itself as an honest broker engaged in shuttle diplomacy, it is difficult not to perceive its efforts as favouring the Russian side. Even before the negotiations had started, the US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that Ukraine's NATO membership and the possibility of recovering the territories occupied by Russia were off limits, thus taking off the table some issues important for Ukraine and weakening Kyiv's position. The US administration stressed on multiple occasions that both sides will have to make concessions for the sake of peace, at the same time failing to answer the question of what concessions the Russian side will have to make.

Substantive shuttle diplomacy to end the war began with the US-Ukraine joint declaration following the Jeddah meeting on March 11th. After nearly eight hours of talks, both sides issued a statement outlining key agreements: Ukraine accepted a US-proposed 30-day comprehensive ceasefire, extendable by mutual consent if Russia complies, while the US resumed intelligence sharing and security aid. The deal also included provisions for a POW exchange between Ukraine and Russia, the release of civilians held by Russia, and the return of Ukrainian children forcibly taken to Russia.

Following the Jeddah meeting, Trump had a phone call with Putin on March 18th. The agreement resulting from their conversation decreased the scope of the US-Ukraine accords to "an energy and infrastructure ceasefire, as well as technical negotiations on implementation of a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea". According to the White House, the two sides also discussed "enormous economic deals and geopolitical stability when peace has been achieved". In a separate statement, the Kremlin said that a precondition for a comprehensive ceasefire would be the "halt of forced mobilization in Ukraine and the rearmament of the Armed Forces of Ukraine", as well as stopping intelligence sharing. It also stressed that "eliminating the root causes of the crisis" and taking into consideration "Russia's legitimate security interests" were unconditional necessities.

A round of technical consultations between the US and Ukraine, on the one hand, and the US and Russia, on the other, followed in Saudi Arabia on March 24th and 25th. Both the Ukrainian and Russian delegations were in the same hotel, but in different rooms, and the US delegation consulted with them separately.

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Photo: (CC) White House (https://www.whitehouse.gov/gallery/president-trump-hosts-president-of-ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy/)

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with US President Donald Trump in the Oval Office on February 28th 2025. The entire world watched as Trump and Vice President JD Vance publicly humiliated Zelenskyy and accused him of not being grateful for the American support.

The consultations dealt with two issues: stopping infrastructure attacks and establishing a ceasefire in the Black Sea. While Ukraine and the US coordinated a list of prohibited targets, the list Russia published after the end of its consultations with the US was not the same. Not only was it limited to energy infrastructure (as opposed to energy and infrastructure) but it also did not include the oil and gas extraction facilities that helped Ukraine get through the winter without importing Russian gas, and which Russia has been attacking again recently. Ukraine, on the other hand, said it expected not to use its long-range capabilities against any Russian energy targets.

The Black Sea element of the agreements had even more discrepancies. The US agreed to partially lift sanctions against the Russian Federation to facilitate food exports from Russian Black Sea ports. This is something Ukraine opposes, believing that no sanctions should be lifted on Russia until the war ends. This was the reason why no joint statement was made public after the consultations. The caveat is also that the US cannot lift the desired sanctions unilaterally. For that, it would need an EU decision. However, if the sanctions are lifted, Russia has agreed to come back to the Black Sea Grain initiative that it left in the summer of 2023. Ukraine, meanwhile, has no interest in this development, since it was able to create a corridor for its commercial vessels free of Russian obstructions. It is also important

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for Ukraine that Russia's Black Sea fleet remains in Russian territorial waters, as is the case after Ukraine drew it away from occupied Crimea. Nevertheless, despite the talks, Russian attacks on Ukraine continue and have even intensified.

Deal or no deal?

Despite the changed American interpretation of the war, it remains Russia's war of choice and unprovoked aggression. While the US has made it clear that both sides will have to make concessions, if a deal is made (which looks increasingly unlikely), Russia will not achieve its maximalist goals. Consequently, it will have an incentive to continue fighting. This means that unless Russia is stripped of its ability to continue the war, security guarantees are essential for Ukraine to deter a further Russian aggression.

Ukraine has not been able to receive security guarantees from the US. Zelenskyy insisted that guarantees should be a part of the so-called minerals deal mentioned above. However, the Americans insisted that its economic presence is enough of a security guarantee and would not consider any military dimension. In addition, the Trump administration has been adamant that European security is for Europeans to ensure, not the Americans.

If Russia does not achieve its maximalist goals, it will have an incentive to continue fighting.

While France and Great Britain reacted to the change in US policy with an attempt to build a "coalition of the willing", the task appears to be harder than initially thought. The summit in Paris produced a promise to support Ukraine in order to give it the strongest possible negotiating position. An agreement on troop commitment and the mandate of a possible force to keep the peace, if it is achieved, is still elusive with only two European states – the United Kingdom and France – expressing a clear readiness to send in their soldiers. Other European countries are aware of their dependence on the US. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni even hopes it would be possible to involve the US in the next round of European consultations.

In addition to refusing to back up the force in Ukraine, the US is dismantling the existing security mechanisms in Europe. It has disengaged from the Ramstein Format (the consultation platform for countries to provide Ukraine with military aid – editor's note) and handed it over to the UK. The US is likely to withdraw 20,000 troops that the Biden administration had sent to Europe to reassure its allies after the 2022 full-scale invasion. The decision to halt the already approved arms

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shipments and stop intelligence sharing with Ukraine has made US allies feel extremely insecure. They are now questioning the US commitment to NATO's Article Five – the backbone of Europe's security to date. These processes reveal European weakness and it is weakness that may invite aggression from the Russian state.

No quick end to the war

At this point it is not clear what is going to come next. So far, Russia has not made any concessions and intensified its attacks on Ukrainian cities. It has also put forward unacceptable demands as a precondition for a ceasefire. This puts the US president in a tough spot. His campaign promise was a quick end to the war. Russia's behaviour makes it clear that this is not going to happen. The ceasefire is not there yet and both sides have not even got to the core issues that would have to be resolved in proper peace talks. They include Ukraine's future status and its security arrangements, territory (which for Ukraine also means the fate of the Ukrainian people who are living in the occupied territories and are subjected to Russification and genocide), and elections in Ukraine. On these issues the positions of Russia and Ukraine are the complete opposite.

In this situation, as long as Trump does not decide to disengage completely, he may choose to put more pressure on Ukraine. He has already demonstrated that he has no scruples with this approach. Alternatively, he could put pressure on Russia and try to force it into concessions. So far, he has been reluctant to do so. In addition, Moscow continues to promote various economic opportunities and flatter him to make this outcome less likely. In addition, putting pressure on Russia would require a commitment of additional resources – something the current US administration is reluctant to do. All of these make the second option quite unlikely.

The first two options leave both Ukraine and Europe unprotected in the face of continued Russian aggression. In the first case, they will be alone against Russia and in the second one, the US will be on Russia's side. Especially if the American sanctions are lifted in the process, Russia will be able to reconstitute itself quite quickly and launch another war. ŁŁ

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Where do Ukrainians find the strength to stand?

OLHA VOROZHBYT

Hope and anxiety are the two feelings that Ukrainians are experiencing the most during the current war. A recent survey shows that for 55 per cent of Ukrainians, the strongest feeling that they were experiencing at the end of 2024 was hope. Anxiety came in second with 45 per cent.

The winter of 1948. Europe is returning back to normal life after the years of the Second World War. European nations are preparing to conclude the Brussels Pact. Formally known as the Treaty of Brussels, this agreement was signed on March 17th 1948 by Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In other words, these were the members of the Western Union, which operated as an expansion of the Treaty of Dunkirk. This other treaty had been signed the previous year between the UK and France the to guard against possible German or Soviet aggression after the end of the war.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Ukrainians are trying to make a life far away in remote and cold Siberia, where they were brought in freight cars a few months prior and placed in isolated and haunting settlements. Among them was my grandmother and her entire family. At that time Mariya, my grandmother's name, was only 19 years old. In Yavoriv, a small town near Lviv, she had just completed a stenographer's course and was going to "study to be a teacher". This career path was stopped for her in October 1947, when she was deported to Kuzbass in south-western Siberia, where she would later work in the coal mines.

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Five thousand kilometres away from home

Deported Ukrainians were forbidden to return home, but this did not stop Mariya. In just a few weeks she managed to return to her native village and bring her sick brother back. A search on Google Maps shows that the distance they covered is almost five thousand kilometres. The journey back could thus not take less than several weeks. And yet this is not the end of the story. For almost two years, Mariya was hiding in her native village until she was finally found and arrested by the NKVD at her brother's funeral. She was taken to the Gulag labour camp in Dudinka, which is a port in the Arctic Circle. Because of the area's harsh conditions, she spent two years there, instead of three, and was then transferred again to a special settlement in Siberia. From there, she was able to return to her native land only 30 years later.

My grandmother did not often talk about all the difficulties she went through in her life. I now regret that when she was alive, I did not know how to ask her about what she had gone through. And yet now, living in war-torn Ukraine, when every day we have to overcome new war-related challenges, I think about her a lot. I keep thinking that my grandmother Mariya managed to survive all possible hardships and did not give up – even when she found herself somewhere in the middle of those thousands of kilometres between Galicia and Siberia, or during the intense labour in the freezing cold temperatures, somewhere in the Arctic Circle. She did not give up in the coal mines of Kuzbass, giving birth and raising my father and uncle there.

In that case, given her legacy of resilience, do I have a right to give up? For this reason, over the last three years, every time I have been asked "How are you?" I thought of my grandmother. More precisely, I was thinking about the 19-year-old Mariya who was not afraid to endure the five thousand kilometre distance and return home. And later endured everything that fate threw at her. "How did she feel?", I ask myself often. My answer to this is that if she endured all of that and was such an amazing grandma for me and my sister, I also have to resist in the here and now.

Interest in history

I am not alone in thinking about my ancestors these days. Recent sociological studies have shown that Ukrainians have become more interested in their own history over the past ten years. Yet, the biggest jump in interest was recorded in the first year after the full-scale invasion. According to a Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KISS) poll, as many as 69 per cent of Ukrainians said their interest in

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history had increased in 2022–23. This means that people are watching, listening to, and reading more historical content.

When we analyse the most "read" materials on the website of our magazine, *Ukrainskyi Tyzhden* (*Ukrainian Week*), we see that these include texts on historical topics or those that touch on unknown pages of the Ukrainian past. One may suggest that in a time of war, when the aggressor seeks to destroy your identity, this is a normal process. But there is also another aspect. "In difficult stories from the past, in addition to pain, we can find also a lot of strength," one old friend wrote on social media, summarizing a text about the challenges her family faced over the past century.

Along with a greater interest in studying history, many Ukrainians have begun to more actively "excavate" their ancestry. This also helps them with building resilience in their own families today. If our ancestors could do it, so can we, the thinking goes.

Remembering in particular what one's family has endured is definitely one of the components of Ukrainian resilience. Every day at nine in the morning we stop for a minute to remember those who have been killed by Russia in the current war. Cities, and especially small towns where the burden of the war is much felt, freeze for that minute. Then they wake up and run at their usual pace. Memory and the desire to nurture one's identity is what fuels the desire to leave as many traces as possible, to work faster and more efficiently.

Today, more and more bookshops are opening in Ukrainian cities, and book publishers are talking about a boom in the industry. At first glance, this may not make sense to you or fit the picture of a country at war. But if you think again about the aggressor's nature and ultimate goals, it becomes more understandable, as it is indeed an interconnected process. The fear that Russia may take away "Ukrainianness" from Ukrainians, as it has done in the occupied territories, prompts us to create as much as possible of what will become a marker of our identity. Publishing books and promoting culture are important parts of this process. Another element is to look for threads that connect your identity with that of your ancestors, that show their resilience to the problems that they had to deal with. So in reading and digging up the past, Ukrainians find the strength to face the challenges of the present.

Hope

According to the latest survey on the state of Ukrainian society, which has been conducted annually since 1994 by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, "belief in a better future", or in one word, "hope", is what unites the Ukrainian society today the most (52.7 per cent). Comparing the data

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from this survey for 2021 and 2024, this particular item shows the second largest increase (+21.9 per cent) over these three years. Another unifying factor that has shown the greatest growth is the national idea of building a Ukrainian state (25.5 per cent). And it resonates with the desire to dive deeper into and learn more about one's own culture and history. But let us get back to hope.

Hope and anxiety are the two feelings that Ukrainians experience the most during the current war. A survey conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation shows that for 55 per cent of Ukrainians, the strongest feeling that they were experiencing at the end of 2024 was hope. Anxiety came in second (45 per cent). In August 2022, when a similar study was conducted, hope was also in first place. In interpreting these results, psychologists explain that hope serves as a protective factor in times of threatening situations. Thus, in order to remain resilient, people need to keep hope alive. It is thanks to this feeling, which is common among the majority of society, that Ukrainians manage not to give up emotionally in difficult times.

Despite the hardships (or perhaps because of them), hope is a part of everyday life in Ukrainian society, and it is well written in its culture. *Contra spem spero* – "I hope without hope" – a hymn to life "in the midst of adversity" is one of the most famous poems by Lesya Ukrainka, who is recognized as one of the strongest female voices in Ukrainian poetry. Unlike the highly individualistic societies in Western Europe, where hopelessness has become one of the causes of frequently diagnosed depression, Ukrainians mobilize in the face of threat or disaster, and hope is one of the main drivers in this process.

Another aspect that keeps hope afloat is humour. All significant events that have occurred during this war have been also accompanied by a significant number of memes or other humorous content online. In fact, humour also strengthens Ukrainian resilience during this war on various levels. At the informational level, memes and humorous content have proved useful at countering Russian attacks and drawing attention to the situation in Ukraine. In addition, humour unites the community and helps it get through difficult times. Nothing strengthens unity and boosts morale better than ridiculing the enemy. Olha Tokariuk, a journalist and researcher, has aptly been analysing these factors in a study she published on the Reuters Institute website.

Unity in crisis

In recent months, Ukrainians have been rather critical of the actions of their government. Over the three years of war, a whole list of questions to the president

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and the government has been formed. However, the infamous meeting between President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which took place on February 28th 2025 in the Oval Office, generated a completely different reaction in Ukraine. Even some of Zelenskyy's biggest critics expressed public support for the president, and his approval rating rose by more than ten per cent after the incident.

Ukrainians have a remarkable ability to mobilize in the face of impending disaster, but also to quarrel quickly in times of peace. They do not often agree with each other when it comes to creating an effective system of work, and prefer what we call a *Sich*. This is an important historical symbol for Ukrainians. It was the administrative centre of the Zaporizhzhia Cossacks, a territory of freedom, where people felt liberated from the authority of the ruling tsar. The *Sich* had its structure and rules, but its main distinctive feature was freedom.

Some surveys show that more than 90 per cent of Ukrainians admit that they value freedom above all.

The prevailing importance of freedom for Ukrainians can also be seen in opinion polls. On a personal level it is the most important value that Ukrainians cherish. This is true to the point that some surveys show that more than 90 per cent of Ukrainians admit that they value freedom above all. At the same time, Maryna Starodubska, the author of the book titled *How to Understand Ukrainians. A cross-cultural perspective* (*Як зрозуміти українців. Кроскультурний погляд*), which was the first non-fiction book that has attempted to define who Ukrainians are, notes that although freedom is a part of Ukrainian mentality, unlike other nations where it is also present as a part of the mentality (for example in the United States, Poland or France), in the Ukrainian context it has a different meaning. In the United States (at least before Donald Trump started destroying the institutional foundations of this country), freedom had a classic liberal formulation. In other words: my freedoms end where the limits of another person's freedom begin. For Ukrainians, in turn, freedom primarily means an absence of restrictions. "No one can limit my freedom" is somewhat of a life credo for many Ukrainians. This is what probably makes Ukrainians so resistant during these difficult times of war, but also why I have fears regarding how we will get through the first post-war years of peace.

No other choice but to stand

"I try not to read the news," Maksym, the photo editor for *Ukrainian Week*, says while speaking about the current cacophony of statements about negotiations on

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a possible ceasefire or even a temporary truce. Maksym has been on the front line since the first day of the full-scale invasion. There, in the trenches, he says, it is clear that the enemy does not want peace. The Russian troops are advancing and are not going to slow down. Thus, from this perspective, the US-led negotiations seem more like hypocrisy. Maksym misses his family, especially his son, who is growing up abroad without his father at his side, but he is ready to continue the fight. "If we don't do this, the enemy will very quickly be on the border with Poland," he says. Simply put, Ukrainians have no other choice.

Over the past three years, Maksym has had different experiences. His roles have been that of a soldier and a commander. When asked about what surprised him the most at the front line he says it is the people. Once a new recruit, an IT professional who was not looking very young or fit, joined them. Maksym assumed that the man would be useful, because his unit works with FPV drones, but he did not think that the soldier would be particularly resilient. However, a situation occurred when that recruit was the only one assembling and testing drones in a tiny workshop and it turned out that he managed to keep up with more than two weeks of continuous work on his shoulders. "At the front line, we have no other choice, it's either us or them," says Maksym.

In Ukraine, people have different sources and reasons for their wartime resistance. This could be their family or community, lessons of our mutual history or family stories. Some patterns of behaviour are rooted in our collective mentality, but there is one clear thing for all of us: there is no other choice, but to stand.

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Anti-colonial hybrid defence

How Ukraine's resistance fights in the occupied territories

OMAR ASHOUR

Between 2022 and 2025 Ukraine's resistance managed to inflict persistent losses and disruption on Russian forces in the occupied territories. The kinds of operation – from bombs and bullets to spies and sabotage as well as raids and ambushes – show a comprehensive guerrilla strategy aimed at eroding the occupier's control. Ukrainian partisans first blunted the occupation through fear and attrition and later became an integral part of Ukraine's broader hybrid defence strategy to reclaim its territory.

"Join the ranks of Atesh – we call on every conscious person who is ready to help us defeat the occupiers to join our ranks," reads a leaflet from Ukraine's partisan movement. The leaflet was not distributed in Crimea, where Atesh – meaning "Fire" in the Crimean Tatar language – originated. Nor was it distributed in Mariupol, Berdyansk, Donetsk or Luhansk, where Atesh's partisans have struck and continue to strike. It was distributed in Samara, a Russian city on the Volga river, more than 1,200 kilometres from the borders of Ukraine. It was a bold display of the resistance's reach and confidence.

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Over the past eleven years – especially since Putin's full-scale invasion began in February 2022 – Ukraine's partisan movements have evolved from loosely coordinated, under-resourced efforts into an expansive, multi-domain, hybrid defence force that fuses covert action with conventional strength across all five of Ukraine's partially or fully occupied regions, from southern Crimea to northern Luhansk. Partisan operations have also reached deep into the Russian Federation, disrupting rear-area security and exposing vulnerabilities in Moscow's war machine.

Drawing on open-source materials, as well as several fieldtrips and over 20 field interviews, this article compiles a dataset of 150 confirmed partisan operations conducted between February 2022 and February 2025. It is not an exhaustive list of partisan operations, but a demonstrative sample of the diversification of tactics, techniques and procedures; operational endurance; and geographic spread of Ukraine's evolving resistance.

Preparing a resistance

In addition to irregular forces operating under occupation, Ukraine possesses a latent insurgency capacity in the form of hundreds of thousands of trained personnel: battle-hardened and well-equipped soldiers from the Armed Forces, the National Guard, the Main Intelligence Directorate, the Security Service, the State Border Guard and other security institutions. These forces, if compelled by an unjust peace or foreign-imposed capitulation, have both the capability and capacity to wage a high-intensity insurgency run by professional partisans.

Why does this matter now? The answer lies in three words: enforced unjust peace. A hypothetical Putin-Trump settlement that leaves parts of Ukraine under Kremlin control would condemn millions to indefinite occupation, and likely intensify the resistance.

Ukraine possesses a latent insurgency capacity in the form of hundreds of thousands of trained personnel.

The evolving network of partisans, civil resistance activists and special forces continues to expand in Russian-occupied territories, determined to prove that what is occupied is not irretrievably lost. These resistance efforts endure and expand, leveraging civilian-military cooperation to push back against the Russian occupation forces in all five occupied territories of Ukraine: Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea. Despite being "annexed" the first four oblasts (provinces) are partly – but not totally – occupied. The fifth, Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea, was totally occupied and annexed in 2014.

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While the overarching goal is not to "set the occupied parts of Eastern Europe ablaze" – in a Churchillian way – the intent is to challenge the occupier's authority; wear down and infiltrate its forces; undermine its ground and sea lines of communications; and instil fear in the Russian ranks. Like the squads of the Special Operations Executive of the Second World War, Ukrainian partisans have employed guerrilla warfare, targeted killings, various types of improvised explosive devices, sabotage, poison, honeytraps and intelligence gathering and sharing. This is in addition to various forms of unarmed resistance and civil disobedience. Hence, Ukraine's resistance in the Russian-occupied territories is by no means monolithic.

Geographically, the resistance's armed operations span the entire range of the occupied territories from Yalta to Luhansk.

Organizationally, the resistance spans multiple layers of sub-state civil society, non-state and state-sponsored armed movements, and formal (state-affiliated) military units. Geographically, the resistance's armed operations span the entire range of the occupied territories from Yalta, in south Crimea, to Kreminna, in north Luhansk. As for the scale and the scope, the resistance is expanding and evolving in at least four domains of operations: land, sea, air and information (to include intelligence, cyber, electromagnetic and psychological operations). The intensity of the resistance is sustained and not suppressed by time. It endured Russia's countermeasures, which were brutally enforced before and after the full-scale invasion. Overall, despite major challenges, the resistance is resilient, persistent and omnipotent.

Trinity of struggle

As aforementioned, Ukraine's resistance movement can be categorized under three broad categories: 1) unarmed resistance, 2) state-sponsored and sub-state armed resistance, and 3) formal military units that operate in the occupied territories.

Civil Resistance

The Yellow Ribbon and *Zla Mavka* represent examples of Ukraine's civil resistance movements under temporary occupation. The Yellow Ribbon Movement has operated since April 2022. Its activism covers the entire Crimean Peninsula, the occupied parts of Kherson Province, the city of Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Province, the city of Mariupol in Donetsk Province, and the city of Luhansk in Luhansk Province. Activists usually tie yellow ribbons, Ukrainian flags and symbols in public spaces, and distribute leaflets to protest the Russian occupation without resorting to armed action. For example, last February pro-Ukrainian posters and graffiti ap-

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peared overnight in Simferopol, Feodosia, Bakhchysarai and other Crimean cities with slogans like "Crimea is Ukraine."

The second movement, *Zla Mavka*, is an all-female network using creative mockery – such as stamping or defacing rouble notes with Ukrainian symbols – to undermine the occupiers' legitimacy. Unarmed civil resisters employ symbolism, satire and localized activism to sustain morale, challenge the occupation narratives and encourage broader participation in anti-occupation actions.

Armed Resistance

As for the armed resistance, four organizations come to the fore in terms of the scale, scope, intensity and diversity of their tactics, as well as the duration of their armed activism.

The first is Atesh. Founded in September 2022 and based in Crimea, the clandestine organization has operated in all five regions of Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Atesh members are diverse, including Tatar, Russian and Ukrainian-speaking citizens of Ukraine. It also recruits citizens of the Russian Federation. In July 2023 the former leader of the Crimean Tatar Council, Mustafa Dzhemilev, declared that Atesh has the capacity to recruit an additional 1,000 fighters in Crimea – a regiment-sized force – but needs weapons, ammunition and equipment. Since its establishment, Atesh has claimed well over 200 operations including sabotage; infiltration operations often focusing on intelligence; surveillance and reconnaissance to guide high-impact strikes; improvised explosive devices; close-quarter assassinations; and small unit raids and ambushes.

The second movement is the Popular Resistance of Ukraine. This is an umbrella organization that conducts and coordinates guerrilla warfare, the sabotage of logistics, reconnaissance, as well as information and psychological operations across all the occupied territories. Since its establishment in September 2021 in the occupied parts of Donetsk, the organization has claimed dozens of operations.

The third movement is the Berdyansk Partisan Army (BPA). The BPA is specifically active in and around the city of Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Province. It has engaged in sabotage, guerrilla ambushes and raids, IED operations, close-quarter assassinations, and surveillance and reconnaissance operations. The fourth is Mariupol Resistance. While not a centralized entity, Mariupol Resistance comprises of multiple cells – some with codenames like the "Ї" and "Y" groups – working in parallel. They often receive support from larger partisan movements, such as Atesh, as well as exiled city officials and Ukrainian military and security forces who help relay intelligence. Over time, what began as ad-hoc survivalist acts of arson and soldier-poisoning in the summer of 2022 evolved into coordinated sabotage, assassination campaigns and IED warfare by 2025. All four partisan organizations,

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among other local resistance movements, often work autonomously but sometimes with guidance or direct support from the Ukrainian military and security forces.

Special Forces and Conventional Units

The main formal institution tasked with organizing the resistance in the occupied territories is *Rukh Oporu* (RO or, in Ukrainian, Resistance Movement), a corps-sized unit within the Special Operation Forces (SSO). The RO is tasked with organizing, funding, training and coordinating with partisans in the occupied territories, as well as executing direct actions behind the Russian lines. The unit was covertly established in 2014 and then formally announced in 2021. Via the National Resistance Centre, the RO also supports unarmed civil resistance, as part of Ukraine's "hybrid defence" strategy.

In addition to the RO-SSO, the Security Services of Ukraine and the Main Intelligence Directorate are heavily involved in partisan activities. Together, these civil, sub-state and state components form a tapestry of resistance efforts for liberation – ranging from symbolic defiance to sophisticated sabotage and enhanced guerrilla warfare.

Disruption, attrition and enabling manoeuvres

The operations of the Ukrainian resistance in the occupied territories span multiple domains. On the ground, the resistance has used a varied arsenal and diversified types of operations, including static and vehicle-borne explosive devices, assassinations, the sabotage of critical infrastructure, and arson. In the information domain, intelligence operations incorporate human intelligence and signals intelligence to enable precision strikes on high-value targets. Light mortars, MANPADS, and unmanned aerial vehicles enhance the firepower and precision of the tiny units, while cyber and electronic warfare tactics disrupt Russian communications.

On one level, these "info-kinetic" operations – that is a military operation that merges tactics from the information domain, such as intelligence, psychological operations, cyber warfare, and electronic warfare with kinetic (physical) strikes/fires and movements across the battlespace – aim to harass and wear down Russian forces by undermining supply routes, hitting logistical nodes and accelerating the detection and destruction cycles of the occupiers' assets. At the same time, they enable manoeuvre for conventional Ukrainian brigade-sized units, as witnessed in the Kharkiv 2022 counteroffensive.

In a way, this is akin to historical campaigns like the Tet Offensive (1968) and the (much more successful) Grozny Operation (1996), where local infiltrations and

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guerrilla activities set the stage for external, larger military operations and broader political-strategic effects. Still, large-scale, deeper infiltration missions aimed at freeing prisoners, securing communities, reclaiming territories, and ending the war have not yet materialized. For example, in August 1996, during the Battle of Grozny, Chechen (Ichkerian) forces flipped the (pro-Russian) local police's loyalty, defeated Russian federal forces, captured thousands of POWs and negotiated a peace settlement that forced Russia's withdrawal from the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1997. A similar breakthrough operation has yet to occur in Ukraine.

How the resistance fights

To understand how the Ukrainian partisans fight in the occupied territories, I documented a sample of 150 confirmed operations classified by the type of armed action/category of tactic. It covers the period from the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 through to February 2025, as well as the location of the operations. The types of operations coded include indirect fire by partisans (light 60mm mortars); static-covert IEDs; sniping (long-range precision shootings); close-quarter battles; the short-range assassination of targeted individuals; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations supporting the Ukrainian state forces; sabotage; and poisoning operations.

Partisan operations focused on assassinating collaborators and sabotaging transport links to sow chaos in newly occupied zones.

The research relies on open sources (such as Ukrainian and Russian media and military bloggers) as well as claimed data (by partisan organizations, as well as formal military and political institutions). The operation is counted when reported by both Ukrainian and Russian media and/or military bloggers and claimed by a partisan organization or cell. The exact attribution is sometimes complicated by secrecy, overlapping claims and the deliberate blending of partisan cells. The comprehensive numbers of operations are likely to far exceed those identified – deemed as confirmed – given the selection criteria. For example, there are claimed cases of MANPADS (man-portable air defence systems), UAV (unmanned aerial vehicles), ATGM (anti-tank guided missile attacks), and RPG (unguided rocket propelled grenades) employment, but they are not listed due to the selection criteria. Hence, the figures should be treated as indicative trends and demonstrative capabilities, rather than definitive totals.

Looking at its intensity and duration, partisan activity was already significant by mid-to-late 2022 (46 confirmed operations in 2022 and over 100 claimed). The

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2022 partisan operations focused on assassinating collaborators and sabotaging transport links to sow chaos in newly occupied zones. The year 2023 saw a further intensification – the breadth of operations remained high (62 confirmed and over 120 claimed), with a notable increase in coordinated sabotages and higher-profile targets. Many 2023 operations were more sophisticated, indicating an evolving, organized underground. By 2024, as Russian repression and counterintelligence efforts grew, the overall number of confirmed partisan operations has dipped to 32 (but over 100 claimed). However, the quality and impact of the confirmed operations remained high.

The Ukrainian resistance strategy has quickly adapted, endured through innovation and expanded at a geographical level.

Partisans continued assisting Ukrainian strikes and selectively attacking key figures and facilities. Several spectacular operations, such as blowing up a high-ranking police collaborator's car in Berdyansk and destroying a Russian supply train, occurred in 2024. Finally, the first months of 2025 witnessed several high-profile operations as well. This was true as recently as late February 2025, when partisans in Mariupol claimed an attack on a Russian FSB officer.

Overall, from these patterns, we can infer that the Ukrainian resistance strategy has quickly adapted, endured through innovation and expanded at a geographical level. In 2022 it centred on quick hits to destabilize the occupation. As the war progressed, the partisans shifted towards a more strategic role in 2023, acting as a force multiplier for Ukraine's counteroffensives. They put greater effort into sabotaging critical infrastructure and providing intelligence for precision strikes, directly aiding conventional military operations. This is reflected in the rising share of sabotage and ISR-type missions. The intensity of operations in 2023 indicates a robust and expanding underground network, despite brutal crackdowns. Indeed, Russian forces have had to divert substantial resources to rear-area security. By 2024 Ukrainian partisans continued to demonstrate the ability to strike high-value targets (both personnel and infrastructure), albeit with lower frequency.

In sum, between 2022 and 2025 the resistance managed to inflict persistent losses and disruption on Russian forces. The distribution of operation types – from bombs and bullets to spies and sabotage as well as raids and ambushes – shows a comprehensive guerrilla strategy aimed at eroding the occupier's control. Ukrainian partisans first blunted the occupation through fear and attrition and later this became an integral part of Kyiv's broader hybrid defence strategy to reclaim its territory. The data makes a statement: this "shadow army" has forced Russia to fight on a front with no rear. The partisans have kept alive the prospect of liberation in areas under temporary enemy occupation.

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Enduring resolve, expanding resistance

Where swords are forced to yield but fairness remains denied, the will to resist endures. In Ukraine's occupied territories, every covert strike, every painted ribbon and every clandestine broadcast whispers the same truth: there is no true peace and stability without justice. The tapestry of state and sub-state defiance to occupation underscores that any Russian control is not cemented. Operationally, the resistance ties down large Russian units, forces resource reallocation, complicates supply lines, harasses, and enables manoeuvres. In the information domain, the resistance denies any illusions of "welcoming" the occupiers, or of stable Russian "control" in Ukraine's occupied lands. It also amplifies an anti-colonial narrative, attempting to rally both local and international audiences through targeted messaging.

Over the past three years, Ukraine's resistance has grown into a resilient, sophisticated, and multi-layered campaign: one that shows no signs of abating. As speculation mounts around the features of a Putin-Trump "peace settlement", Moscow may seek guarantees that partisan operations will cease. Such assurances will be difficult, if not impossible, for any Ukrainian leader to credibly offer. For Ukraine, resistance is not a tactic, it is a legacy, a duty and a statement to both allies and adversaries that what is occupied is not lost, and that no peace built on injustice can be sustainably upheld.

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Why the Trump-Putin negotiations on Ukraine might bury the Eastern Partnership

TATEVIK HOVHANNISYAN

Since 2009 the main EU instrument of engaging and integrating with the region of Eastern Europe has been the Eastern Partnership programme. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the evolving geopolitical situation have forced the EU to rethink its approach towards the aspiring states in the region. The new administration in the United States has added a new dimension to this complex dynamic. Where do these states stand in their bid for EU membership today?

With Donald Trump's return to the White House, the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the war in Ukraine have undergone significant shifts. Trump's rhetoric emphasizes the necessity of ending the war, whereas Ukraine's priorities are not limited to the cessation of hostilities but also include the terms under which the conflict concludes, i.e. the provision of security guarantees. If we are to follow the logic that the current US administration is pushing, the war may end soon. All directly and indirectly involved parties are attentively following the rapid and unexpected developments of the negotiation process. Among the most concerned parties are the countries of the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, as the destiny of Ukraine will affect the future of those countries in general.

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New geopolitical reality

The EaP had already been facing significant transformations before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While from the beginning the programme was not intended to offer full EU membership to its participant countries, the 2022 Russian aggression has prompted a change in the political landscape. Countries like Poland and the Baltic states have become increasingly vocal in their support for the full EU integration of certain EaP countries, seeing it as both a security measure and a way to counter Russian influence.

In contrast, many EU member states, especially those from outside the region, remain sceptical, fearing the political, economic and security challenges that further enlargement might bring. Today, after the start of the turbulent negotiations in Saudi Arabia, the globally broadcasted Oval Office clash between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Donald Trump/JD Vance duo, and, most importantly, the exclusion of the EU from the peace talks, it is unclear whether the EaP will survive any "unequal peace agreement" between Russia and Ukraine. What is clear, instead, is that the pro-Russian elite of the EaP countries have emerged profoundly strengthened at the expense of civil societies that have arguably never been as weak as they are now, at least in the last decade. Against this backdrop, we look at what impact the three years of the Russian-Ukrainian war has had on individual actors in the EaP states and especially what effects the peace agreement might have.

Belarusian surrender

The Belarusian elite, completely controlled by Russia both politically and economically, has shown unwavering loyalty to Moscow during the three-year invasion of Ukraine. Since 2022, in particular, Belarus has been an asset to Russia not only for political and rhetorical support, but also for assistance in circumventing international sanctions and trading in dual-use products, not to mention offering its own territory as useful terrain for Russian troops to be stationed and resupplied. In addition, on March 13th 2025, Belarus expanded its bilateral agreements with Russia to allow each other's citizens to vote and run in local elections. This move further deepens Moscow's control over Belarusian politics. By surrendering its sovereignty to Vladimir Putin, Alyaksandr Lukashenka in fact seeks to secure greater protection and patronage for himself.

The ongoing US negotiations with Russia and Ukraine, as well as the Trump administration's new political direction, could strengthen Lukashenka's position even more. Indeed, the United States is recalibrating its strategy and at this stage does

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Photo: brajianni / Shutterstock

A Georgian protester drapes themself in an EU flag during one of the anti-government protests last year. Despite widespread resistance, the Georgian Dream remains in power, supported by a significant portion of the population that is influenced by Russian-backed propaganda.

not seem to be interested in supporting democracy and human rights, a choice which eases the pressure on Lukashenka's regime. At the same time, the rift between Belarus and the EU appears almost unbridgeable. Even in light of the evolution of the negotiations, any dialogue between the Minsk regime and the EU seems impossible in the short or medium term. This is not least due to Belarus having withdrawn from the Eastern Partnership and not seeming to be interested in rejoining it. The last hope remains the EU's decision to support Belarusian civil society, whose many members have been imprisoned or are in exile.

Azerbaijan, the biggest winner

The one EaP country which has benefitted the most from the three years of war between Russia and Ukraine, and pretends to take advantage of the ongoing negotiations, is Azerbaijan. The country's political leadership has so far been able to exploit the opportunities offered by the new international geopolitical context. Despite signing a strategic partnership agreement with Moscow on the very eve of the Russian aggression, Azerbaijan was able to position itself as a neutral party. Not only did it abstain from imposing sanctions but it also helped Russia in circumventing them. At the same time, Baku has skilfully managed to strengthen its

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partnership with the EU by becoming a key component of the European economic security strategy aimed at diversifying suppliers of gas. To secure more exports to the EU, Azerbaijan has drastically increased its gas imports from Russia. To date, it remains unclear whether Azerbaijan has re-labelled Russian gas to sell it directly to EU member states or whether it has simply bought it at a bargain price for domestic use and sold its own supplies, presumably at market price.

The result of these activities has been an unquestionable strengthening of the country's economy and status in Europe, with no political price paid for its undemocratic actions. Indeed, Azerbaijan enjoyed even the privilege, despite being a petrostate, of hosting the COP29 Climate Summit in 2024. As if this were not enough, Baku has taken advantage of its position of strength to take the Armenian-inhabited region of Nagorno-Karabakh by force. This was first done by imposing an economic blockade and then by directly attacking the territory and forcing the population to abandon it in an operation that has the characteristics of ethnic cleansing in September 2023, all without having to deal with any international pressure. As of today, The Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev, appears stronger than ever, with his country positioning itself as a medium-sized regional power. This is bolstered by its economic and technological partnership with Israel, brotherhood with Turkey – recently emboldened by the "conquest" of Syria – and the support (at least for now) of Russia.

Azerbaijan's leadership has been able to exploit the opportunities offered by the new international geopolitical context.

Against this background, Aliyev has leveraged the fatal shoot down of an Azerbaijani plane by Russian forces, which took place on December 25th 2024, to further elevate his international standing, attempting to present himself as a counterbalance to Russia's influence and attract western support. However, economic realities speak louder than any diplomatic manipulation. In 2024 trade between Azerbaijan and Russia grew by 10.1 per cent, reaching nearly 4.8 billion US dollars, with Russia continuing to be Azerbaijan's largest buyer of non-oil products, accounting for 34.6 per cent of Azerbaijan's non-oil exports. Russian imports to Azerbaijan also saw a 14.5 per cent increase year on year.

Moldova, the next Ukraine?

While Azerbaijan seems to emerge victorious from its war, Moldova appears to be the country that has suffered the most outside of Ukraine. Its fate appears anything but bright. The country bordering Ukraine, in addition to having been an un-

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willing protagonist of the immense human cost imposed by the Russian invasion with the transit of some 1.8 million refugees, finds itself strongly polarized. It is also economically weakened and threatened by increased Kremlin political pressure, all with the presence of Russian troops in the Transnistrian region.

Politically, in particular, the country has seen an increase in manipulation, with Russia mixing instruments of hybrid warfare over the months to expand its influence in the country. Evidence of this pressure was seen during the recent presidential elections in November 2024, when incumbent President Maia Sandu won in the second round with 55 per cent of the vote. This means that 45 per cent of the population voted for the former prosecutor Alexandr Stoianoglo, who is supported by the pro-Russian Socialist Party. As a result, we can say that Moldova's western orientation has endured, albeit weakened. From an economic point of view, the country has been going through a phase of great difficulty. Namely, Gazprom's decision to cut off its supplies has effectively forced Moldova to tap into the more expensive European markets, which in turn brought high inflation for an already economically struggling population.

Meanwhile, the EU has offered economic aid packages to Chișinău, while Russia has granted subsidies to the breakaway region of Transnistria – a dynamic which perfectly represents elements of the ongoing, unarmed confrontation. In this context, with the EU accession talks seemingly destined to remain in the short term on paper only, the pro-European front risks losing in the parliamentary elections that are scheduled for July 2025.

The negotiations on Ukraine also risk revitalizing pro-Russian factions emboldened by what Moscow will sell to the world as a success, and may intensify their efforts to push Moldova into the Russian orbit and "avoid military hostilities" or – put differently – "a Ukrainian scenario". This is a scenario that has already taken place in Georgia, when the former prime minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, justified his failure to sanction Russia as being part of the greater national interest of the country.

Georgia, again under Russia's tighter grip

As can be observed the Georgian Dream party does not serve the aspirations of Georgian society, namely Euro-Atlantic integration. Instead, it rather prioritizes the interests of the Kremlin, aiming to bring former Soviet states back into Russia's sphere of influence. Once a country that was ahead of Ukraine and Moldova in reform indices, Georgia is now a clear example of democratic backsliding.

From this perspective, Georgia can be regarded as the greatest EaP loser when it comes to the consequences of the war in Ukraine. The Russian invasion and three

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years of Ukraine's fighting have set Georgia back at least 15 years, to the point when the EaP was launched. The suspension of the EU accession process, coupled with Russia's growing hybrid war against the Georgian society, have escalated the country's vulnerability to Russian influence. Economic leverage, combined with indirect military threats – which are quite familiar to people in Georgia – have only strengthened the Kremlin's position.

As a result, Georgia's economic dependency on Russia has deepened over the last three years, reinforcing also its political dependency. This growing dependence is illustrated by the rise in imports from Russia, which increased by six per cent to 1.85 billion US dollars in 2024, while Georgian exports grew by a mere 3.7 per cent. For a developing country, such economic relationships often outweigh a future of European integration, especially when the EU's promises seem unrealistic to some segments of the population.

Despite the widespread resistance from pro-western groups in society, Georgian Dream remains in power, supported by a significant portion of the population that, influenced by Russian-backed propaganda, or even self-belief, views proximity to Russia as beneficial. However, the key takeaway is that Georgian Dream's continued rule signals the retreat of the EU, which was not capable of intervening decisively during the election crisis. The EU's credibility in the region has reached an all-time low and Russia's dominance over Georgia has been solidified, placing the country at a precarious crossroads in which the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration seems increasingly distant.

Armenia, lost and not found

Another country that has suffered from the new geopolitical balance reset, first from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and then the Putin-Trump negotiations, is Armenia. For decades a loyal strategic partner of Russia, Armenia was in fact betrayed by its traditional ally at a critical juncture of its history. Russia did not intervene in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020, when Azerbaijan's military actions led to the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in the unrecognized republic. Even worse, Moscow seemingly sided with Baku, jeopardizing its relations with Yerevan. The lack of Russian support has thus opened a window of opportunity for the EU and the US, which could have entered the game but chose not to interfere for reasons of economic interest and lack of will respectively.

Isolated and lacking international support, Armenia nevertheless gambled on detaching itself from the Russian sphere of influence and by ceding Nagorno-Karabakh, believing it could follow the path of European integration when it was

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already too late. The Armenian turn to the West had a double effect of strengthening the Moscow-Baku axis and was not supported by the EU and the US through necessary security guarantees.

As a result, Azerbaijani military pressure, indirectly supported by Russia, increased, forcing the weak Armenian government to give up on the conditions of any "peace agreement". This dynamic mirrored the Russian attitude which had already been adopted in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, all countries that had tried to align themselves more closely with the EU through the now evaporating EaP, with the results there for all to see.

The Armenian government, therefore, tried to look beyond the Euro-Atlantic bloc, finding partners in Asia, and particularly in India, interested in participating in efforts to diversify its military capacity. The need to look beyond the EU was determined by recent events, above all those in Georgia, a country whose prospect of full membership in the EU did not, however, guarantee any European support to counter Russian pressure. Moreover, the foreign policy line adopted by the Trump administration, apparently interested in respecting the logic of power politics and diverting attention away from actors considered by Moscow to be part of Russia's own sphere of influence, also contributes to aggravating the Armenian situation.

In this context, it seems unlikely that the Armenia-US strategic partnership discussions initiated with the Biden administration will produce tangible results at least in the next four years. The US-Russian negotiations that will define Ukraine's future also seem to leave little hope for countries like Armenia that face direct threats from Russia and beyond. In other words, with little or no hope of external security guarantees, the Armenian leadership finds itself in a difficult situation, caught between pressure from Russia and Azerbaijan.

To date, therefore, the chances of Armenia and other EaP states moving towards EU integration appear close to zero, as evidenced by the recent elections in Georgia. Yerevan, Tbilisi and Chișinău, not to mention Kyiv, are waiting for the EU to decide to act with particular attention to two fundamental issues: the ability to participate in and steer the negotiations on Ukraine and the search for a consensus to integrate, effectively taking into account the respective security needs of those EaP countries that are in favour of EU membership. ❡

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How Central and Eastern Europe perceives the Russian threat

ANDREA PIPINO

The war in Ukraine has brought back debate on possible new aggression from Russia. But for Central and Eastern Europe, the risk of being annexed and erased from the map is centuries old. Without a doubt, the lessons of history are essential for forming judgments about today's events.

According to a pattern that was somewhat predictable, but with a completely unexpected impact, Donald Trump's return to the White House is upsetting the dynamics of international politics, creating insecurity and fuelling instability. It is also bringing back into focus a topic that periodically emerges in European public debate and was already discussed during the first term of Trump's presidency: the need to establish a common European defence.

The topic can clearly be seen from different perspectives and is a kind of litmus test for examining the misunderstandings about security (and not only) that still exist in the relationship between Western Europe and much of what is often referred to as "New Europe". This is namely the former communist countries that joined the EU between 2004 and 2007. In short, these are divergences in the analysis – and public perception – of the military threat posed by Vladimir Putin's Russia. There are therefore different political evaluations (for example, regarding NATO's role, EU membership, sovereignty and national identity) that are the product of these divergences and, above all, their historical and political roots.

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Constant threat

In some way it is inevitable that today the countries in the western part of the EU have a vision of Russian expansionism which is different from that of the Estonians or the Poles, to name just two examples. And ultimately, as Ivan Krastev explains, "the East-West divide has always been quintessential for European self-imagination … In any historical moment since the Enlightenment, Europe has defined itself through its relation to the East. In the 18th century, crossing the border between Prussia and Poland was tantamount to crossing from civilized Europe into barbarian Europe".

In some way it is inevitable that today the countries in the western part of the EU have a vision of Russian expansionism different from that of the Estonians or the Poles.

Yet at times, especially during the political crises involving Russia over the past 20 years, the major Western European countries have gone beyond simply acknowledging these differences. To use the words of *Le Monde*, "blinded by a certain arrogance, the European powers have repeatedly shown a courteous disinterest in the warnings of the Baltic countries about the threats coming from Russia, despite the fact that for historical and geographical reasons these nations are valuable sources of intelligence on Moscow." In western public debate, this fundamental misunderstanding has sometimes fuelled a distorted image of the Baltic republics and Poland (the countries that have most consistently denounced the threat posed by the Putin regime for years), portraying them as warmongering nations, paranoid and obsessed with a fear of their Russian neighbour.

However, one must try to go beyond these clichés and reason in truly European terms, remembering that the eastern borders of the continent are shared with those of Putin's Russia and its vassal state, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Belarus. In short, one must recognize that for the small and medium-sized countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Russian proximity brings the promise of a constant threat. In these realities, Moscow's neo-imperialism is not a political phenomenon occurring thousands of kilometres away but a factor perceived as a risk to the very existence of their national communities.

Today, the war in Ukraine has brought back the debate on possible new aggression, but for these countries, the risk of being annexed or erased from the map is centuries old. Just think of the partitions of Poland, which effectively did not exist as a sovereign entity for about 130 years. It is also possible to look at the fate of other countries (the Baltic republics and Czechoslovakia) that became independent after the end of the First World War only to fall under Soviet control between 1940 and 1948. Nor should one underestimate the historical, political, demograph-

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ic, territorial and institutional fragility of the other nations that joined Europe in the first decade of the 2000s, namely Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania.

Anything but paranoid

This sense of vulnerability is further amplified today by the uncertainty caused by the latest moves of the United States, which seem increasingly less interested in what happens in Europe and primarily focused on not overly obstructing Moscow and the direction of negotiations over a ceasefire in Ukraine. It has been written that populists should be judged by their actions not their proclamations. It's true. But in Donald Trump's case, who first insulted Volodymyr Zelenskyy and blamed Ukraine for the conflict, and then followed this up with concrete steps that distanced himself from supporting Kyiv, this is a logical plan of action. The Eastern European countries' fear of being abandoned by their main military protector in a moment of great international instability thus seems anything but paranoid. As for Moscow, to understand its true objectives, one need not take seriously the delusions of Kremlin propagandists who, at eight o'clock in the evening on Russian TV, explain how many seconds it would take to bomb Warsaw or Berlin. One only needs to recall the ferocity of the Chechen conflict, the 2008 aggression against Georgia, and keep in mind that the attack on Ukraine began on February 24th 2022, two days after Putin reassured the world about the "purely defensive" role of the troops stationed on Ukraine's borders. Looking at the present, one only has to note how even in these latest days of diplomatic meetings, Moscow's missiles and drones have never stopped hitting Ukrainian cities.

Certainly, imagining that after three years of war in Ukraine, which have been extremely costly in economic terms, military resources and human losses, Russia could immediately engage in another conflict is currently dismissed by many analysts. Yet it is hard to rule out that possibility within a few months or years. Things can change quickly, as within the country the militarist rhetoric of regime propaganda continues to push relentlessly in that direction. In this respect, those who tend to downplay the actual Russian threat and scoff at the idea of considering today's Russia a "neo-imperial subject", citing its backwardness and the small size of its economy, should recall that in Aleksandr Dugin's Eurasianist theory "the sovereignty of a state" – and we should add its willingness to project that sovereignty abroad – "depends less on its military power and economic or technological development than on the extension and geographical disposition of its territories". In short, it rests on its existential mission which may be political or even "civilizational", as Putin himself has been claiming for at least a decade.

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Without a doubt, the lessons of history are essential for forming judgments about today's events in much of Central and Eastern Europe. This is evident from the content of local journalism and essays and is especially true in Poland, as confirmed by a recent commentary – one of many examples to be found in the local press – on the developments in US-Russia relations published in mid-March 2025 by the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*: "In 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union were enemies of Poland and had cynically agreed on its invasion and partition, as well as freedom of action in European conflicts. Today, the Trump-Putin axis represents a sudden and radical upheaval of Poland's historical alliances. It is, on the part of the United States, a perfect example of betrayal".

In these countries, certain wounds from the events of the Second World War and their aftermath have not yet healed. This is also due to the lack of adequate public and collective processing, both during the communist era and perhaps even in the transition period. And so they continue to carry significant weight in public debate and the definition of national identity.

Existential fear

This awareness and sensitivity concerns many of the countries that have experienced Russian and Soviet domination in the past and are now exposed to Moscow's threats. Yet they certainly do not grant political or moral high ground. Over the past 20 years, in several of these nations, there has been a rise in ultra-reactionary nationalism, a growing hostility toward the European project, and a refusal to accept a larger degree of political integration. This has happened in Jarosław Kaczyński's sovereigntist Poland (from 2015 to 2023), in part in Robert Fico's Slovakia, and certainly in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, which today serves as a megaphone for Putinist propaganda and obstructs every Brussels initiative that tries to move in favour of Ukraine.

In many countries of the region, Russian hybrid operations have revived a clear awareness of their own vulnerability.

But most reactions have been different. Russia's ongoing hybrid warfare operations, cyberattacks, sabotage, disinformation, election meddling and finally full-scale aggression against Ukraine, have revived in many countries of the region – especially in the Baltic republics – a clear awareness of their own vulnerability and international role. This has consolidated the idea that one must be well prepared, even militarily, to face a possible hostile operation by Moscow. At the same time, it is also finally necessary to intensify collaboration and dialogue at the regional and European levels. There

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has been a significant shift in priorities for these countries, which in the past, before Trump's hostile disengagement from European affairs, had always opposed "a strengthening of European defence, preferring instead to rely on NATO's unity", as the newspaper *Postimees* wrote about Estonia.

All this also translates into numbers. Staying with Estonia, in addition to about 6,000 professional soldiers, the country today has about 30,000 volunteers who are part of the Estonian Defence League. In a nation of about 1.3 million inhabit-

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ants, which regained independence just a generation ago, this commitment can be considered not as an expression of "bellicose fury" but as the result of an awareness of national fragility. This has been amplified by the gradual US disengagement and growing doubts about a possible NATO response in case of external aggression. It is the existential fear for the survival of one's community, a fear shared in Estonia, which in 1940 was swallowed by the Soviet Union under the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as well as in other countries that in the 20th century suffered not only the violence of Nazism but also the abuses of the Soviet and Stalinist totalitarian system: Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, to name the most evident cases.

"If the United States, China and Russia decide to divide the world into spheres of influence," observed former Lithuanian president and EU commissioner Dalia Grybauskaitė in January, "then Lithuania risks becoming prey again". On the other hand, it is also clear that the presence of the Russian threat can be exploited for partisan or power bloc objectives or used as a lever to push through measures clearly at odds with the values that Europe, and these countries, claim to uphold. This was clear in the withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel mines, which was announced on March 18th by Warsaw and the Baltic states. However, even in this case, the more capable the European partners are of understanding the real concerns of these nations, the more they will be able to discourage them from making such reckless and dangerous choices.

Overcoming "westsplaining"

Returning to the broader discussion, one crucial fact remains clear: in this part of Europe, border uncertainty, deportations and occupations have shaped collective identity. As a result, several of these nations today have a view of 20th-century history and an assessment of current urgencies that diverges in part from those of many Western European countries and public opinions. For Poles, Balts, Czechs or Romanians, entry into NATO was not the result of aggressive American expansionism, but an integration process in which they themselves were protagonists. The Alliance has been a fundamental factor of stabilization and modernization, not only militarily. Together with EU integration, it has prevented the possible development of territorial claims and various revanchist outlooks. In short, it is hard to imagine what the degree of security and real independence of Eastern European countries would have been outside the Atlantic Alliance.

All this inevitably also affects the interpretation of the war in Ukraine. If one believes that the entry into NATO of the countries of the former Warsaw Pact (not of the former Soviet countries, because the case of the Baltics is particular, as their

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annexation to the Soviet Union was never internationally recognized) was decided to provide defensive guarantees to the new entrants, then the idea of the conflict as Moscow's reaction to western expansionism falls apart. This Russian idea is, in fact, dear to analysts and commentators specializing in the art of so-called "westsplaining", a word coined in 2017 but popularized around Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The Polish political scientists Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz explain this phenomenon as follows: The "unending stream of western scholars and pundits condescend to explain the situation in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, often in ways that either ignore voices from the region, treating it as an object rather than a subject of history".

These westsplainers are always ready to view Eastern Europe as a pawn in a game whose rules and moves are decided elsewhere, in western capitals or the Kremlin. They are always ready to understand Moscow's reasons and to overlook those of the Eastern Europeans. This is a way of thinking that has recently been embodied in Trump's aggressive and mocking attitude towards the Ukrainian president, who is trying to represent his country and fellow citizens as bearers of demands, ideas and needs.

Once this mental posture is eliminated, which pollutes any attempt to understand what is really happening in Eastern Europe, it becomes immediately clear that NATO was simply an alibi for the war of aggression Moscow declared on Ukraine, with the aim of erasing its existence as a sovereign and independent nation, and on the so-called "collective West", which for Moscow's propagandists has for years been an existential threat to Putin's Russia, its political, economic and social system and the set of traditionalist values that underpins it.

Beyond the Ukrainian case, what emerges from these reflections is above all that Western Europe's "old Europe" often does not understand, perhaps willingly, the historical paradigms and collective psychologies that underlie the common feeling of Central and Eastern European states and obviously contribute to shaping their political choices.

It is not the first time this has happened. But in a Europe that truly seems intent on achieving a common and autonomous foreign and security policy, there should no longer be room for this type of misunderstanding. EE

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A time for unconventional leaders

Croatian assistance to Ukraine

ALEXANDRA KARPPI

With its remarkable post-conflict transformation, Croatia may have something unique to offer Ukraine at this critical juncture for European security. The Croatian government is punching above its weight in terms of humanitarian assistance, but the country will need to overcome serious domestic rifts and manage the failures of its transition to become a true geopolitical leader.

The first months of Donald Trump's second term as US president have already put Ukraine's existence and Europe's prevailing security architecture at great risk. Trump's style of foreign policy, including his undermining of long-held alliances and major international institutions, is creating a vacuum that may have to be filled by leaders in unlikely places. Croatia has the potential to be one of those leaders if Prime Minister Andrej Plenković wins out in a domestic political battle that exposes deep-seeded deficiencies in Croatian democracy. Croatia's longest-running prime minister and the head of the ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), Plenković's pro-Brussels orientation belies a series of nasty corruption scandals in his party in recent years. These scandals have left Croatian citizens dissatisfied with their democracy and enamoured with their populist president, the leader of the opposing Social Democratic Party (SDP), Zoran Milanović, who has been compared to Trump himself. Despite the domestic hurdles, given how the

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country recovered from its own existential conflict 30 years ago, its voice may be more valuable now than ever before.

Two simultaneous battles

The breakup of Yugoslavia ended in the deadliest conflict on European soil since the end of the Second World War. After Croatia declared its independence on June 25th 1991, Yugoslav forces backed by Belgrade invaded Croatia in an attempt to retake it. When that effort failed, ethnic Serb separatists in Croatia's border regions tried to break away from the country with support from the Yugoslav army. This resulted in almost a third of Croatia's territory being occupied throughout the next several years. The conflict that ensued over these lands was devastating for the nascent Croatian state, with thousands of lives lost and half a million people displaced. When the war ended in 1995, Croatia's economy was decimated, with anywhere from a quarter to a fifth of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) lost. While the country ultimately regained the disputed territories, it was not only left with significant infrastructure damage but the collective trauma of war crimes and other atrocities committed by both Serb and Croat forces.

Like Ukraine today, Croatian forces fended off an adversary with a larger army and a nationalist agenda.

The parallels to Ukraine are immediately obvious. Like Ukraine today, Croatian forces fended off an adversary with a larger army and a nationalist agenda, which had launched a full-scale invasion and occupied a significant portion of its territory (in Ukraine's case, roughly twenty per cent), all while supporting the formation of a breakaway state-within-a-state. The economic and infrastructural damage is equally, if not more, catastrophic in Ukraine. Its GDP in 2022 fell by almost 30 per cent, and the total cost of reconstruction and recovery currently stands at over 500 billion euros. Most tragically, we are seeing similar war crimes being perpetrated by Russia as those that were reported in Croatia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia decades ago. Of course, there are real limits to comparing Croatia's war of independence with Russia's war in Ukraine, but a shared history of conflict has been the basis of partnership between the two countries. Government statements have clearly shown this reality.

Some optimistic experts have argued that Croatia's significant transformation – from an embattled country with a derelict economy to a high-income NATO and EU member state – could offer some lessons for Ukraine. What made Croatia's metamorphosis possible was a cross-party, and ultimately whole-of-society, con-

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sensus that membership in international organizations was essential to the country's survival and a precondition for future development. Put differently, and to more accurately capture the paranoia that characterized Croatia's early years, the country's political landscape in its first decade was marked by a fight against international isolation. While Ukrainians are in agreement that the path forward is in Europe, they must fight these two battles simultaneously – not only to regain their sovereign territory, but also to maintain international relevance – under exceptionally different geopolitical conditions than Croatia in the 1990s and 2000s.

Croatia was arguably the last country to fully benefit from the EU's transformative power and the *Pax Americana*.

Croatia was arguably the last country to fully benefit from the EU's transformative power and the *Pax Americana*, enjoying strong European and American support throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Croatia signed its stabilization agreement with the EU in 2002, just two years before the EU's "Big Bang" of Central European enlargement and during the peak of the bloc's optimism. The entrance of a reformist government in 2003 and the revival of private investment from Europe pulled the country out of its deep post-war recession and brought on a flurry of institutional changes, which ultimately resulted in NATO membership in 2009 and EU membership in 2013. Ten years later, on January 1st 2023, Croatia simultaneously joined the eurozone and Schengen area, even bypassing Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU before it. While the country's transformation has certainly not been perfect, its rapid pace remains impressive and would not have been possible without unwavering commitment – and unity – from Europe and the US – a luxury that Ukraine does not have.

Put simply, Croatia's trajectory towards integration would be hard to replicate today, with much of Europe abdicating its regional security responsibilities and Donald Trump's second administration seemingly hell-bent on undermining Ukrainian defence. Europe's traditional "big players" are consumed with their own internal crises, from migration concerns to economic woes, and even the collapse of previously stable governments. While this has generated global instability and put the fundamental assumptions of the post-Second World War neoliberal order in question, it has also forced smaller-sized states to step up to the plate. Take Lithuania, which has become a champion not only of Ukrainian defence but of European defence cooperation writ large. Having already surpassed its NATO spending requirements, a new government hopes to allocate more than three per cent of its GDP to defence this year, as it continues to take strong stances in favour of EU enlargement and against Chinese economic coercion. The problem is that Ukraine needs more allies like Lithuania than it has right now.

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A leader in humanitarian assistance

Croatia has the potential to join the likes of Lithuania as one of Europe's principled geopolitical leaders, and, by some metrics, it is already over performing when it comes to support for Ukraine. For Croatia's total allocations to Ukraine, it ranks 11th globally in terms of GDP percentage – not bad for a country of under four million people. This includes 12 military assistance packages as of January 2025, totalling at least 200 million euros and consisting of small arms, ammunition, protective equipment, and all of the country's Mi-8 helicopters. And, in a clever arrangement from October 2024, Croatia and Germany signed an agreement allowing Croatia to provide tanks and armoured vehicles to Ukraine in exchange for new Leopard 2A8 tanks from Germany at a reduced price. Keeping in mind that Croatia has had to build its defence industry from scratch over the last 30 years, all of this is no small achievement. Prime Minister Andrej Plenković has just recently stressed that Zagreb has increased its defence budget fivefold in the last decade. Ukraine has been one of the main beneficiaries of this expanding defence industry. Croatia has also already met its annual NATO defence pledges and intends to raise those pledges in the coming years to be better positioned for today's security realities.

But where Croatia is really trying to position itself as a leader is humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, given its own experience in post-conflict reconstruction. In fact, it ranks fifth in the world for humanitarian allocations relative to its GDP, in good company behind Lithuania, Austria, Estonia and Norway.

Croatia is positioning itself as a leader in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, given its own experience in post-conflict reconstruction.

In October 2024, Plenković signed a ten-year cooperation agreement with Ukraine, which emphasized several areas where Croatia has a comparative advantage: humanitarian demining, veteran support services, and the prosecution of war crimes. Croatia has made humanitarian demining an assistance priority, offering its technology, experience and financial support. It is due to complete its own demining in 2026, and is one of the few places that produces the necessary equipment. Like in its tank deal with Germany, Croatia is making up for its relatively small coffers by facilitating support from larger economies through multilateral and international venues. The government has hosted several humanitarian conferences on Ukraine, with a major one on humanitarian demining resulting in over 500 million euros in donor pledges to Ukraine. Another conference on veteran support is also in the works. Croatia has rehabilitated a large number of Ukrainian veterans in its hospitals and existing veterans' centres, and it has pledged to share experience in

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rehabilitation, social reintegration and psychological support as part of its long-term agreement with Ukraine.

Beyond assistance, the Croatian government has been a proponent of Ukrainian membership in NATO and the EU. This is especially true regarding Plenković, who has also acknowledged that criteria for membership in this "inner circle" should be relaxed. As of late, Plenković has responded to Trump's attempts to strong-arm Ukraine into a "peace deal" with Russia by reiterating that negotiations cannot be held without Kyiv and that a final deal must not be reached without the EU present. As Plenković himself has acknowledged, however, Croatia is still a net beneficiary rather than a net contributor to the EU. Its sway in Brussels is therefore more muted. On the other hand, every vote for Ukraine counts. While the size of Croatia's economy is an obvious barrier to upping its assistance, this kind of lobbying and the apparent intention to link Zagreb's future development to a Ukrainian victory is a strong starting point that other small states should follow. In the meantime, Croatia's leveraging of different international and multilateral venues will help it maximize its impact in areas where it is not as well positioned as it is in areas like the humanitarian dimension. The recent signing of a pact with Albania and Kosovo may be another good start at defence cooperation.

Rivalry

Unfortunately, it is not just Croatia's small size that holds it back from its full potential on the international stage. Like everywhere, domestic rifts have undermined the government's ability to deploy aid. Clashes between Plenković, who heads the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and the president, Zoran Milanović of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), have been a regular feature of Croatian politics since 2020. This is especially true when it comes to foreign policy. The perennial tensions were on full display in October 2024, when Milanović refused to allow Croatian soldiers to participate in a NATO mission to Ukraine, making Croatia one of the two NATO members (the other being Hungary) that did not participate. Plenković expressed horror at the decision by the country's commander in chief, calling it a "manipulation" and a blow to Croatia's international standing.

It is not just Croatia's small size that holds it back from its full potential on the international stage.

Milanović has been called a pro-Russian populist, and for good reason. He has consistently opposed involving Croatian troops in any aid efforts, which, in alignment with Russian propaganda, he has claimed could see the spread of the

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conflict. In 2022, for example, he refused to allow Ukrainian soldiers to be trained in Croatia. He has also repeatedly said that he does not support western sanctions on Russia because they "do not really work". Unlike Plenković, he has also not been supportive of Ukrainian membership in NATO or the EU, going as far as calling Euromaidan a coup. Plenković's obvious anger at Milanović's rhetoric is not only a matter of principle. Plenković has remained Croatia's longest serving prime minister, in large part, by portraying himself as part of the Brussels "in crowd". Milanović's antics naturally threaten to undermine this long-standing strategy.

Persistent corruption and cronyism challenge Croatia's economic development, political stability and democratic consolidation.

Croatia's last elections have set the two up for continued sparring. In a January 2025 run-off, Milanović easily won re-election over HDZ's candidate for president, earning 74 per cent of the vote. Plenković and his party were able to remain in power after the April 2024 parliamentary elections, though they were forced to partner with the far-right Homeland Movement party. While the inclusion of the Homeland Movement in the new cabinet is a relatively minor change in Croatia's political landscape – which remains dominated by HDZ as it has for decades – the party's ambiguous stance on aiding Ukrainian defence could undercut Plenković's lobbying and put wind in the sails of Milanović's camp, which evidently has support among Croatian citizens. Indeed, this is the story throughout Central and South-Eastern Europe, where populist candidates friendly to Russia seem to be making in-roads and where formerly extremist parties are increasingly gaining ground in parliaments. Călin Georgescu's meteoric rise in Romania's presidential race and the Revival party's newfound influence in Bulgarian policymaking are cases in point.

And just like Romania or Bulgaria, the rivalry between Croatia's president and prime minister is really a symptom of the structural challenges that pose the most significant obstacle to Croatian leadership on Ukraine. Persistent corruption and cronyism – what some civic groups have even classified as state capture – continue to challenge Croatia's economic development, political stability and democratic consolidation. Yet another massive corruption scandal rocked the country last year, this one involving the health minister and other HDZ officials who were siphoning off funds from the health sector (the very same health sector treating Ukrainian defenders, it should be said). HDZ's hold over the political system, and an endemic lack of political pluralism in the country, has meant that these scandals have largely gone unpunished and their repercussions unmanaged. As of late, HDZ has attempted to remove other levers of public accountability, leading to setbacks in the rule of law and media freedom. These democratic deficiencies not only stymy

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Croatia's potential to send assistance abroad but also place its credibility as an international partner under serious question.

If challenges are overcome

Although the Croatian government and some hopeful observers see parallels between Croatia's national story and Ukraine's ongoing fight, a shared history of conflict is not enough for Ukraine to secure its much-needed assistance given the exceptional geopolitical moment we find ourselves in. Croatia has so far found a niche for itself in terms of humanitarian assistance and has deftly used international and multilateral venues to perform well in this regard.

However, challenges to expanding its support to Ukraine, especially defensively, come from Croatia's home front. Like much of the rest of Europe, a polarized political scene and endemic governance challenges are compromising the country's ability to be the principled geopolitical leader it is capable of being. However, there is no such thing as a perfect leader, especially in times of deep crisis. If Croatia can overcome these domestic challenges and revamp its role internationally, this would not only pay dividends for Ukraine. Indeed, it could also influence Croatia's future within a new European security architecture very much needed in this moment. Building on its cooperation with Germany on military assistance to Ukraine, as well as a recent agreement with Albania and Kosovo, Croatia may soon show its chops as a defence partner. ЕЕ

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North Macedonia's US pivot raises questions about its EU ambitions

BOJAN STOJKOVSKI

North Macedonia has emerged as one of NATO's most committed supporters of Ukraine, consistently ranking among the top military contributors. However, recent shifts in its foreign policy suggest a recalibration of its strategic priorities.

For the past three years North Macedonia has ranked among the top four NATO countries in military assistance to Ukraine. Despite its small size and a population of fewer than two million, this country has remained one of Kyiv's top military contributors, supplying tanks, helicopters, attack aircraft, ammunition and other critical equipment. Its unwavering support has solidified its role as a key ally in Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression. However, recent shifts in North Macedonia's foreign policy raise significant concerns about its future strategic direction and its alignment within the broader international framework. This is especially true when it comes to its role in the Euro-Atlantic community and its continued support for Ukraine.

Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, whose conservative VMRO-DPMNE party took power in June last year, has made diplomatic moves suggesting that Skopje is reassessing its foreign policy priorities. His two visits to Washington DC in less than a month, along with his embrace of what he refers to as the "new normal" championed by the Donald Trump administration, signal a potential shift toward a closer alignment with the United States. Mickoski has reiterated strong support

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for the new American stance on Ukraine, while his deepening ties with the new US administration suggest a potential divergence from North Macedonia's traditional alignment with the European Union.

This shift comes at a time when the EU is solidifying its stance against Russia. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has emphasized that Ukraine's fate is tied to Europe's security. Now, North Macedonia's perceived drift from the EU raises concerns about its long-term role within the European sphere, as well as its ability to maintain influence in Brussels while pursuing closer ties with Washington.

Breaking from the European consensus on Ukraine

A defining moment in this shift came with North Macedonia's decision to co-sponsor a US-backed UN resolution on Ukraine that notably omitted direct references to Russia's invasion. Additionally, North Macedonia and Armenia were the only European countries to abstain from voting on Ukraine's own competing resolution. By doing so, Skopje managed to distance itself from the broader European consensus, which has taken a firmer stance against Moscow. When asked about the country's decision, the foreign minister, Timcho Mucunski, explained that "North Macedonia remains a consistent partner of the EU, fully aligned with its common foreign and security policy."

However, the move further fuelled speculation that North Macedonia is becoming dissatisfied with the EU and is instead strengthening its ties with Washington. This decision raises some critical questions. Was a move to appease the US and secure stronger bilateral ties strategic? Or is it a signal of a deeper shift in North Macedonia's approach to global diplomacy? While some argue that the decision reflects pragmatic diplomacy, others worry that it could undermine Skopje's credibility in Brussels and complicate its EU accession efforts.

Although Mickoski has maintained that North Macedonia remains committed to its EU aspirations, his rhetoric increasingly reflects frustration with the bloc, particularly with the long-standing dispute over historical and language issues with Bulgaria that has stalled accession talks for several years now. While he has not explicitly called for US intervention in resolving this issue, his actions suggest that North Macedonia is now exploring alternative diplomatic paths to break the deadlock.

This approach carries significant risks. The EU remains North Macedonia's primary economic and political partner. Skopje heavily relies on the bloc to pursue its development and integration programmes. If the current government is per-

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ceived as prioritizing its relationship with the US over its European aspirations, it could face considerable backlash from EU leaders, potentially derailing or further delaying the much-anticipated accession talks.

The shift in focus could strain relations with key European partners who view North Macedonia's EU membership as vital to regional stability and security. At the same time, Mickoski's deepening ties with the Trump administration may not only be a strategic pivot but a calculated move to harness US influence. Mickoski's intention might be to leverage American diplomatic pressure on Bulgaria in order to obtain a more favourable, from North Macedonia's perspective, solution to the contentious issues.

Growing disillusionment with the EU

North Macedonia's scepticism towards the EU is rooted in a long history of frustration with the accession process. A candidate country for more than 18 years now, it has suffered through a slow and often disheartening path, marked by repeated obstacles imposed by member states, first Greece and later Bulgaria. These roadblocks have left many in the country feeling disillusioned with the EU, especially as they have repeatedly aligned themselves with EU foreign policy positions, only to see little tangible progress toward membership. The promises of integration have often felt distant, as the EU's demands and delays have often created a sense of political and economic stagnation.

North Macedonia's scepticism towards the EU is rooted in a long history of frustration with the accession process.

Despite these setbacks, North Macedonia did manage to remain committed to European values, but the prolonged uncertainty has only deepened the sense of disappointment among the population and political leadership alike. Recent opinion polls indicate a growing frustration among Macedonians regarding the EU accession process. Many citizens feel that despite fulfilling numerous EU requirements, including a name change, their country remains stuck in a perpetual waiting room. This sentiment has provided Mickoski with an opportunity to explore alternative foreign policy strategies, including a stronger reliance on the US.

The Macedonian leader experienced a warm reception in Washington. His increasing support for the Trump administration's priorities also now suggests a pivot towards a more transactional diplomatic approach – one driven by immediate national interests rather than long-term commitments to Europe. After his meetings in Washington, Mickoski outright stated that he was there to lobby for

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the country's interests on key issues. In line with this, the top diplomat Mucunski expressed the intent to strengthen ties with the new Trump administration, aiming for "more robust engagement" in the years ahead.

Mickoski's meeting with Richard Grenell, the former head of the National Intelligence Service, who now serves as a presidential envoy for special missions and policy in the new Trump administration, was a clear demonstration of this shift. The discussions touched on the challenges facing North Macedonia, particularly in terms of achieving strategic objectives tied to EU membership.

Further fuelling this pivot was Mickoski's productive meeting in Washington DC with Chris Pavlovski, the owner of Rumble, an online video-sharing platform popular among conservative and right-wing social media users in the US.

Pavlovski's network includes influential figures such as Howard Lutnick, the new US Secretary of Commerce, and Vice President JD Vance. These connections place Pavlovski, a Canadian of Macedonian background, at the centre of political and economic power, creating an invaluable channel for Skopje to build stronger ties with key American stakeholders. Pavlovski's worth, estimated at 1.3 billion US dollars by *Forbes* magazine, adds significant weight to his influence, further aligning the Macedonian political leadership with powerful stakeholders in the US.

Realistic or risky gains

The key question at stake is whether this closer alignment with the US will yield concrete benefits for North Macedonia. As Prime Minister Mickoski seeks to strengthen ties with the Trump administration, one of the most pressing concerns is whether this administration is actually willing to offer meaningful support in achieving North Macedonia's strategic goals.

The real challenge lies in determining whether the US will prioritize North Macedonia and deliver tangible support.

However, the real challenge lies in determining whether the US will prioritize North Macedonia or any of the Western Balkan countries and deliver tangible support. Or will we simply see political rhetoric with little real-life impact? Given that the EU remains North Macedonia's primary economic and political partner, any move away from this trajectory carries considerable risks. Mickoski's government appears to be testing the waters, leveraging ties with the US. Thus, if this shift deepens, North Macedonia could find itself in a precarious position. It could get caught between an EU wary of its newfound closeness to Washington and a US administration whose long-term commitment to the Balkans remains uncertain.

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This dynamic mirrors past instances where Skopje placed excessive hope in the backing of major powers, only to face disappointment. In 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, 25 member states failed to persuade Greece and North Macedonia to reach a compromise on the countries' name dispute. As a result, only Croatia and Albania were invited to join the Alliance, while Skopje was left out. US President George W. Bush, despite his influence, was unable to sway Greece's position.

The government has also now remained somewhat silent on some of the country's most significant diplomatic milestones. When the previous Defence Minister Radmila Sekerinska, a former high official at the opposing Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), was appointed a top NATO position late last year, the government only briefly mentioned the achievement. The party had quietly supported Sekerinska's candidacy for the post, an act of political maturity that should not go unnoticed.

By backing Sekerinska behind the scenes, the party demonstrated a pragmatic approach, recognizing her capabilities and potential to represent North Macedonia effectively on the global stage. However, the significance of NATO's announcement warrants a larger, more public endorsement. Given that Sekerinska now holds the position of North Macedonia's most influential representative on the international stage, a more vocal and unified show of support from the ruling party would have underscored the importance of her role, both domestically and abroad.

A tough balancing act

For over 30 years, North Macedonia has maintained strong and consistent relations with the US. This partnership has been largely shaped by America's strategic interests in preserving stability in the Balkans. We can thus say that US-Macedonian relations have been driven by geopolitical considerations rather than personal or ideological ties. Overall, US foreign policy has focused on broader regional security and diplomatic goals rather than favouring any particular prime minister or political faction.

Even more, the Western Balkans region is already known for its complex alliances. Serbia maintains strong ties with Russia, while regional NATO members, such as Albania and North Macedonia, remain among some of Ukraine's most vocal supporters. Thus, the current shift in North Macedonia's foreign policy could disrupt this delicate regional balance and create new diplomatic frictions.

The broader regional context adds another layer of complexity to North Macedonia's foreign policy shift. Tensions remain high in Kosovo as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnic divisions and unresolved political clashes continue to

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fuel instability. Kosovo's ongoing disputes with Serbia, including periodic flare-ups in northern municipalities, pose a direct security challenge to the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, political deadlock and nationalist rhetoric threaten the fragile peace established by the Dayton Agreement.

Positioned at the crossroads of these tensions, North Macedonia cannot afford to ignore regional developments. Also, any significant foreign policy shift, particularly one that distances Skopje from the EU, could have unintended consequences for regional stability. As a NATO member, it has a vested interest in upholding security in the Balkans. Its role in peacekeeping initiatives, diplomatic mediation and enhancing economic cooperation among the states makes it a key player in shaping the region's future. While Mickoski's government explores new diplomatic alignments, it has to make sure that these moves do not undermine North Macedonia's standing as a stabilizing force.

Thus, a responsible political approach would acknowledge that it is dangerous to create false expectations that North Macedonia can rely solely on the US or that American investments alone will bring prosperity without EU membership. The government's new strategy reflects its frustration over failing to sway Brussels on Bulgaria's position, but it could also backfire if North Macedonia misses the next EU enlargement wave, which might eventually happen for only a few Western Balkans countries by 2030.

In the coming months, the government's approach to foreign policy will be under close scrutiny. While Mickoski insists that North Macedonia's ultimate goal remains EU membership, his government's latest foreign policy decisions suggest a willingness to adopt a more flexible and transactional diplomatic approach. Whether this will enhance North Macedonia's strategic position or create new diplomatic challenges remains to be seen. However, one thing is clear: Skopje's foreign policy is entering a new and unpredictable phase, with significant consequences for its future standing on the international stage. EE

Bojan Stojkovski is a freelance journalist based in North Macedonia. He covers foreign policy, technology and science. His work has been published in *Foreign Policy*, *ZDNet*, *Haaretz* and various regional publications in the Western Balkans.

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Fire in a Macedonian nightclub

A tragedy forged in corruption

JOVAN GJORGOVSKI

On March 16th in the small town of Kočani in North Macedonia, a massive fire erupted in a well-known nightclub, killing 59 and injuring 196 young people. Soon it became clear that the fire at the club was a disaster waiting to happen. The nightclub had a forged licence and there were no alarms, no sprinklers, and no emergency exits – it was a death trap that had been allowed to exist. The deadly fire became not only a national tragedy, mourned by the whole of Macedonian society, but a rallying point for answers, similar to what is happening next door in Serbia.

The fire at the Pulse nightclub in the city of Kočani in North Macedonia did not begin with a spark. It began long before, in the quiet exchanges of power and with the ink of fraudulent permits. It began in the silence of bribed officials and the indifference of those who were meant to be protected. It was nurtured by a system where sometimes backroom deals carry more weight than laws, where safety can be just an afterthought, and where lives are measured against profit. On the night of March 16th 2025, the lives of 59 young people were swallowed by the flames of this corruption that had been growing for years.

The nightclub that was meant to be a haven for music and youth, became a tomb. The walls, which had never been inspected; the ceiling lined with flammable ma-

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terials; the single narrow exit – every detail of the place had been a warning. But in a country where accountability is sometimes as fleeting as justice, those warnings were ignored for years. And so the fire came.

A night of horror

It was meant to be a night of celebration, an escape from the struggles of everyday life. The eastern part of North Macedonia, home to tight-knit communities where everyone knows each other or shares family ties, has long been feeling the weight of young people leaving their hometowns, which with time were slowly emptying. Thus, unsurprisingly, the performance of DNK – a band that was quite popular in the country – was exciting news for many. The venue was already familiar to everybody in Kočani and the surrounding cities, mostly because it brought many well-known bands and singers from the region. The club was supposed to house up to 300 people, but as the investigation later showed, the DNK concert had more than doubled its capacity.

That fateful night, around half past two in the morning, as the crowd roared in excitement, a stray spark from the pyrotechnics inside shot upwards, sparking a fire that raced along the ceiling. The singers on the stage quickly appealed to the partygoers to leave the venue immediately. Some did, while others, as the footage of the tragedy showed, looked like they were still in disbelief, which led to desperation moments later. The fire in the meantime fed greedily on the club's flammable interior as hundreds of people surged towards the only possible exit. Some of them made it, 59 did not. Among them was almost the whole band that played that night. The singer Andrej Gjorgjievski, by all accounts made it outside, only to turn back to help when he heard the cries of those still trapped. He never came out again. His story is similar to Andrej Lazarov, a 25-year-old professional football player who ran back into the smoke to help people, only to disappear into the chaos. The night was full of heroes like that. Young people like Jovan Kostadinov, who managed to save around 20 people from the inferno, only to end up in the hospital with severe injuries.

By the time the firefighters arrived, the club was an unrecognizable ruin. The local hospital was overwhelmed with victims who had their lungs scorched from inhaling toxic fumes; others burned so severely that they could not be identified. Some were driven in private cars to hospitals in neighbouring towns as the emergency medical services grappled with the tragedy. One of the ambulance drivers, Ile Gocevski, died of exhaustion after driving 11 times from Kočani to the capital Skopje and back, a total of more than 2,000 kilometres in several hours.

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Such was the extent of the tragedy and the horror that people witnessed that night. As the hours went by, the true scale of the tragedy became even more apparent. The total number of injuries rose from hour to hour till it reached 196, mostly young people. Neighbouring countries sent immediate help, and the EU activated its emergency mechanisms. Then, the truth emerged – the Pulse nightclub had been operating with a forged licence. There were no alarms, no sprinklers, and no emergency exits – it was a death trap that had been allowed to exist. Additionally, it had no permit to operate after midnight, even though it did so regularly.

The country's prime minister, Hristijan Mickoski, condemned the tragedy. "This was not an accident," he said in an address from the government. "This was the result of years of negligence and corruption, and those responsible will face justice." More than 30 individuals have been arrested in connection with the nightclub fire, including former minister of economy, Kreshnik Bekteshi; as well as Razmena Cekic Durovic, a state secretary at the same ministry; several police chiefs; club owners; and both former and current mayors of Kočani. Some of the suspects had been placed in 30-day detention by the courts.

The nightclub, which was originally a textile factory before being repurposed as a warehouse and later an entertainment venue, was never intended for such use. According to the transport minister, Aleksandar Nikoloski, the problems began in 2011 when the venue inexplicably received a permit to operate as a nightclub despite its unsuitability. Internal renovations were carried out without the necessary licences or permits, setting the stage for disaster. Throughout its operation the club had only received two official licences, the last of which expired a year before the fire – meaning it had been functioning completely illegally. Investigators suspect that the former minister and state secretary facilitated the nightclub's licencing in exchange for bribes, as their signatures appear on key documents. Meanwhile, the mayors are accused of knowingly allowing the nightclub to operate illegally, and the police chiefs are suspected of failing to enforce the law despite being aware that the venue lacked the proper permits.

Parallels of corruption: from Kočani to Novi Sad

The protests started the day after the tragedy. Of the 59 victims and almost 200 injured, the majority were from Kočani, a town where basically everyone knows everyone. The demonstrators, mostly young, still in shock and grieving for their friends and relatives, gathered almost spontaneously at the city square and started demolishing the local coffee shop that had the same owner as the nightclub, destroying several parked cars in the process. The police were there but dared not

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to intervene. The growing number of people continued towards the municipality building, and then to the house of the mayor who had not been seen in public and had not yet even sent his condolences. They pelted his house with stones and eggs, demanding that he appear in front of the crowd to explain his silence.

The protesters were not stopped by the police, but by the intervention of a priest who pleaded with them to go home. He climbed on the small stone fence in front of the house and addressed them, "In the name of God, let us bury the children in peace. Now is the time for prayer, not violence. We have lost the best and the smartest of us. Go home and let's grieve together." The anger and the tension gave way to cries from the people. The priest's speech, although short, calmed them down from further escalation. Their anger was understandable to everyone, even to the police. In a small town like that, losing so many young people, can be compared to a genocide.

The mayor resigned that day via a Facebook post. He dared not show his face to the people who elected him. The protests continued the next day, but not with the same intensity. Thousands of people poured into the streets of Skopje and cities across North Macedonia in solemn, peaceful protest. Standing in silence to honour the victims, their message was unmistakable: a call to end corruption and impunity.

The fire in Kočani erupted just one day after huge mass anti-corruption protests took place in Belgrade, where thousands had gathered to demand, among other things, justice for the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad – a disaster that claimed 16 lives, including that of a Macedonian citizen. While the tragedy in Novi Sad was the immediate catalyst, Serbia has been gripped by months of unrest over government corruption and mismanagement. The roots of this movement stretch back even further, to the twin mass shootings of May 2023, which shattered the country and laid bare the failures of those in power. What began as outrage over unchecked crime and state complicity grew into the "Serbia against violence" protests – a movement demanding justice, accountability and the end of lawlessness.

Thousands poured into the streets of Skopje and cities across North Macedonia in solemn, peaceful protest.

Now, in the wake of the nightclub fire in Kočani, those same demands have found a new voice in North Macedonia. The flames that engulfed the Pulse nightclub did more than consume a building, they ignited a movement. In Belgrade, demonstrators marched towards government buildings, their banners condemning a system that had let organized crime and corruption thrive. In Skopje, thousands stood outside the parliament and the government buildings, demanding transparency and full investigations.

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A makeshift tribute to the victims of the Kočani fire in North Macedonia.

An attempt to hijack the protests

The similarities with Serbia, however, end there. The Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, towards whom most of the protests were designated, has been in power for more than a decade with full control of the state apparatus. In North Macedonia, the current government was sworn into power almost a year ago after winning a landslide victory. The current government has more space to manoeuvre and essentially places the burden of the blame on the previous ruling coalition. The prime minister, Mickoski, announced swift justice. And unlike in Serbia, there have been arrests since day one, with some of the people that are in custody being members of his own political party. Mickoski and the government are aware that if the protests continue in the long run, it might cost him his premiership and bring down the whole government.

As in Serbia, there has been an attempt in North Macedonia for students to organize protests with similar demands for justice and accountability. However, unlike in Serbia, where the student movement has largely remained independent, in North Macedonia the protests quickly became entangled in political interference – particularly from the far-left party Levica, known for its anti-NATO and pro-Russian stance. It was soon revealed that members of Levica were actively involved in organizing at least some of the demonstrations.

A leaked video, recorded during the seven-day mourning period, showed student activists affiliated with Levica in a Zoom meeting with individuals from Serbia, discussing how to leverage the tragedy for political purposes. In the video, one

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participant who openly stated that they are a member of the party said that they must "use the tragedy as much as possible" in their fight against the government. Levica neither confirmed nor denied whether the participants in the meeting were official members of the party, but the revelation sparked public outrage, casting doubt on the true motives behind the protests. The party's leader, Dimitar Apasiev, known for his outspoken and provocative social media presence, has consistently supported the student movement, framing it as a legitimate call for the government's resignation.

However, suspicions deepened when a rally organized one week after the nightclub fire at North Macedonia's largest university, the Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, was closed off to journalists. Reporters attempting to cover the event were met with hostility and labelled "traitors" and "mercenaries" by students, many of whom were later identified as Levica members. What began as an attempt to echo Serbia's student-led demonstrations has, in North Macedonia to a certain degree, become a political battleground, leaving many questioning whether the movement is truly about justice, or simply another tool for partisan politics.

A test for democracy

The coming weeks and months will be critical in determining whether the protests, at least the ones organized by the people themselves, will lead to substantive change or fade into history as yet another episode of public frustration. In North Macedonia, much depends on whether the government follows through with meaningful reforms or merely uses high-profile arrests as a smokescreen. In Serbia, the protests have already weakened Vučić's hold on power, but whether they result in tangible political change remains uncertain.

What is clear, however, is that both countries are at a crossroads. The ongoing protests are a reflection of a wider reckoning with corruption, governance and democracy in the Balkans. Whether the momentum leads to institutional transformation or is met with suppression will determine the region's political trajectory for years to come.

The fire at the Pulse nightclub may have been extinguished, but the flames of public outrage are still burning. For North Macedonia as a whole, the fire may be the last chance to forge a future rooted in justice, accountability and the European values it aspires to uphold. EE

Jovan Gjorgovski is a journalist based in North Macedonia and an editor with the Kanal 5 television station.

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GDAŃSK SUPPORTS UKRAINE, MOLDOVA AND GEORGIA ON THEIR EU PATH

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

On April 2nd 2025 the European Committee of the Regions (ECR) held a plenary session in the European Parliament in Brussels. The main focus of the event, which gathered 329 local government officials from the European Union, was the potential next EU enlargement. It is envisioned to include Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, as well as the countries of the Western Balkans. The Mayor of Gdańsk, Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, acted as the rapporteur and presented the opinion which, at the request of the European Committee of the Regions, had been prepared in Gdańsk. The presented document, titled "Enlargement Package – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia", was unanimously endorsed during the session in Brussels and will now serve as guidelines for key EU institutions.

When presenting the opinion, Mayor Dulkiewicz referred to the wider historical and international context of the current enlargement discussion. She said: "the Second World War, which began in Gdańsk and was brought to an end 80 years ago, has not ended for all countries. They remained on the wrong side of the wall. Now, we can finally end this war. The accession of these three countries to the EU means security, peace, stability and development, not only for the candidates, but also for the countries that already form the EU."

Mayor Dulkiewicz continued her speech, arguing that today, more than ever, the EU is obliged to engage in the activities that make Europe safer, stronger and more prosperous. This is especially needed

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due to the destructive and destabilising role of the Russian Federation, which violates all norms of the international order, most notably in Ukraine, but also in Moldova and Georgia. In the case of the latter, as Dulkiewicz also pointed out in her speech, Russia occupies as much as 20 per cent of the country's territory.

Maciej Buczkowski, head of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Gdańsk City Hall, who acted as an expert supporting the Mayor of Gdańsk, explained the involvement of the city authorities in the EU enlargement process in the following way: "The EU enlargement is one of the most important tools for strengthening security in our part of the world. We are talking about expanding Europe's sphere of influence, not so much in the context of territorial expansion, but more about expanding the family of countries that profess and respect European values." Both the summary of the opinion and an interview with Buczkowski are available on Gdansk.pl – a portal devoted to Gdańsk-related affairs. In the interview, Buczkowski stressed the uncertainty that arises from the political changes that have taken place in the United States and which also have an effect on the region of Central and Eastern Europe.

Earlier in March, when Mayor Dulkiewicz presented the opinion in Brussels to the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs, she also pointed to the uncertainty about the future role of the US as a guarantor of global security and the guardian of our values which naturally places an even greater responsibility on the EU. When discussing that she said: "We are not the only important player. In addition to the Russian Federation, we also have to reckon with the competition from the BRICS countries, for example. This makes the challenge facing EU institutions and organisations all the greater."

While the entire text of the opinion is available on the website of the Committee of the Regions, below we present the brief summary of the opinion.

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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)

- reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European Union enlargement process and its strong commitment to continue providing support to regions and cities of the enlargement countries based on the shared conviction (...) that EU accession remains a key driver of long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity in Europe
- stresses the destructive and destabilising role of the Russian Federation which (...) has been trampling over the most basic norms of the international order, starting with the principle of respect for independent states' sovereignty and territorial integrity
- stresses that despite serious challenges, the Enlargement process gained new momentum (...) and agrees with the European Commission that enlargement should remain a merit-based process
- welcomes that accession negotiations were opened with Ukraine and Moldova in June 2024 and regrets that Georgia has moved away from the standards of rule of law and democracy
- urges (...) to progress on the Ukrainian and Moldovan requests to establish a Joint Consultative Committee (...)
- emphasises the fundamental role of the decentralisation process, including fiscal decentralisation, as a condition for a successful enlargement
- recalls that local and regional authorities (LRAs) (...) are responsible for the implementation of up to 70% of EU legislation; therefore stresses the importance of involving them in future negotiations on key chapters as well as in consultations on the alignment of national legislation with the EU acquis
- underlines the indispensable functions which LRAs need to play for the effectiveness of the EU's pre-accession funding on the ground (...)
- calls on the European Commission to recognise the potential of LRAs in the enlargement process, make use of them, and strengthen programme and financial support to such projects and programmes at the local and regional level (...)

Acknowledgments

Words of sincere gratitude are owed to all who have contributed to the creation of the documents, beginning with the employees of the CIVEX Commission secretariat, through those who have decided to participate in the specially prepared, 12-point survey, and up to the participants in the online consultations. The suggested corrections were extremely helpful in the development of the final version of the opinion and most were incorporated into the final text of the document.

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One can sum up without any exaggeration that the opinion is the effect of joint work of all those who have the success of enlargement in their hearts.

Online consultations:

- Representatives of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
- Representatives of the DG NEAR.E (Ukraine service)
- Representatives of the DG ENEST
- Ambassador of Moldova
- The Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine
- The College of Eastern Europe
- The editorial team of the New Eastern Europe

The partners participating in the survey:

- The All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities
- The 'Energy Efficient Cities of Ukraine' Association
- Eurocities
- The Assembly of European Regions
- The city of Sindelfingen
- ALDA
- The Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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

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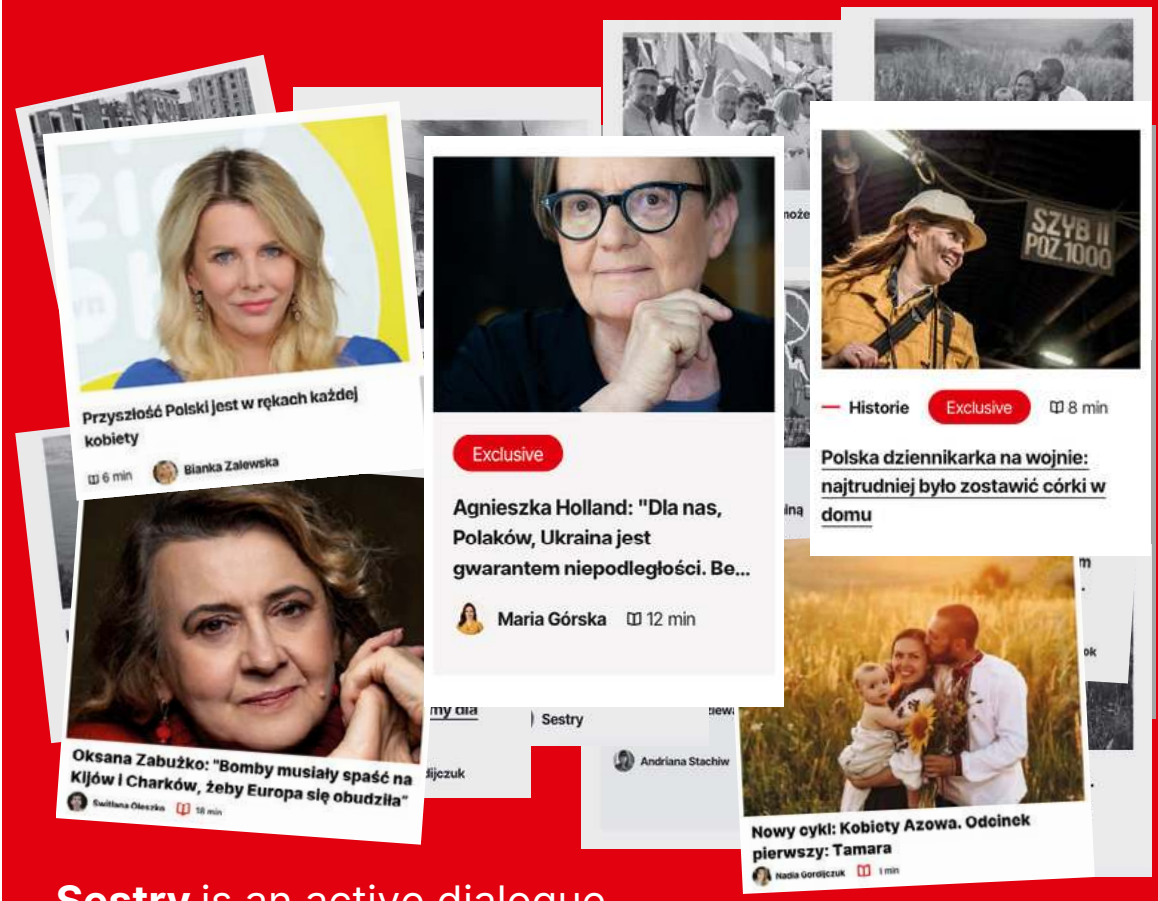

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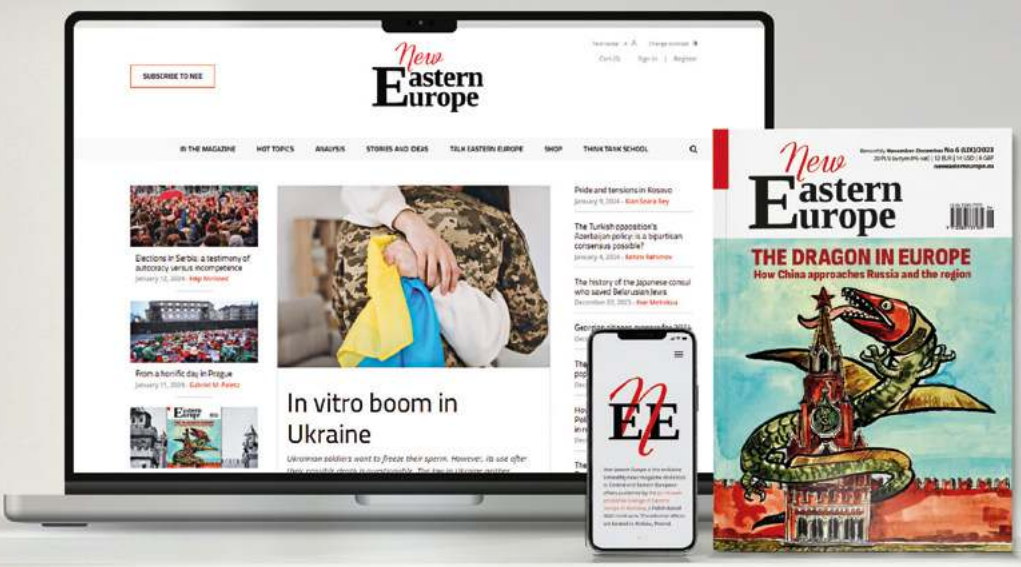

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Rediscovering democracy in Serbia

ANDREJ ŠEVO

Even if not acting recognizably political or within the frame of party politics in Serbia, the student movement is slowly and substantially changing the political culture. Students have helped people regain courage and optimism. Although they missed their lectures, they lectured the nation in democracy, solidarity and social responsibility.

Spring has arrived early in Serbia this year, but justice for the victims of the canopy collapse at the train station in Novi Sad still seems far away. The tragic event that took the lives of 16 people and severely injured one on November 1st, 2024 stunned the nation and soon came to symbolize the corruption of the country's public officials. The initial grief was followed by reflective dismay. How can this seemingly ultramodern building, reconstructed (and dubiously overfunded) to great fanfare just a year ago, be so rotten? Can we trust our politicians about anything?

Before the tragedy, many Serbs lethargically accepted that incompetence and embezzlement are a part of our reality, but their impact and consequences were never so explicit and close to home. No one is safe anymore. When the dismay passed, the feelings evolved into outrage that sparked large protests around the country that have entered their sixth month.

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Plenums

Current protests may be the largest and most enduring in modern Serbian history, with university students as the main protagonists. Serbian students have been the initiators and driving force of the resistance and an inspiration for many others, who have decided to steel themselves and defeat their fear through various acts of defiance. The students were not just the big heart of the protest but also its creative mind. With incredible tact, sharp wit and good public communication, they have inspired and kept the fire of resistance burning even during the coldest and darkest winter days. Carefully distanced from both the ruling and opposition parties and disciplined in their public conduct, the students acquired public trust to the point of being the most authoritative social actors in Serbia.

The question now is how did they do this and how have they gained such trust? Unlike opposition politicians or any defiant individual, students are a large social group that is not easily labelled as traitors or foreign agents, which is a common and effective targeting trick employed by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party that controls most of the traditional media.

Protesting students are numerous, cohesive, leaderless and represent the flower of Serbian youth: the sons, daughters, cousins and grandchildren whose excellence and achievements are a source of family pride and happiness. Their judgment matters. Good luck trying to persuade people from the top of your ivory tower that you know their cherished children better than they do.

But sentimentality is just half of the trick. Students have developed a complex and yet very constructive deliberative decision-making procedure. The faculties of Serbia's universities, blocked by the students, now serve as assemblies where they democratically decide on what actions to take. Plenums are deliberative bodies where all students of the specific faculty have the right to speak, vote and propose. Decisions are made based on the majority vote, following a deliberation that continues as long as there are points to be discussed.

Serbian students have been the initiators and driving force of the resistance and an inspiration for many others.

Students are separated into working groups (similar to parliamentary committees) dedicated to particular topics such as strategy, communication, security, etc. Their representatives report to the plenum and are regularly rotating, just like the plenum moderators. Frequent rotations serve as a check that no leaders or prominent figures emerge among the students based on accumulated experience and influence. By opposing individual leadership, the students affirm their collective agency and democratic spirit, which shield them from the onslaught of the pro-government media spin machinery that

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has a hard time tainting the students as a whole. What is a practice at the individual faculties also applies at the university level, where students are delegated to represent their institution and vote in its name at university plenums.

Distant from the opposition

Direct democratic deliberation has resonated well with much of the Serbian public. In a country where political power is centralized in the president and representative institutions remain in crisis, the personalization of power permeates society, embedding itself into its structure and producing countless small autocrats and subordinate citizens. The plenum deliberation used by the students provides a diametrically different model of political engagement that emancipates the participants and deconstructs the authoritarian blueprint.

However, the student movement's potency has been a topic of debate among supporters. During the last few months, students have persisted in keeping the focus of their struggle on four initial demands, which were formulated and developed at the end of last year. The demands can be summarized as follows: publish all the relevant documentation related to the reconstruction of Novi Sad railway station; identify the thugs who attacked the students and start criminal proceedings; drop criminal charges against the detained students; and increase the budget for higher education. In the meantime, a new demand was added concerning the investigation of the alleged sonic weapon use against the peaceful protestors on March 15th, while more demands are being considered by plenums while this text is being written. So far, the students have been careful to avoid synthesis with any other political movement, and the institutional fulfilment of their demands remains their primary goal.

This is how a question emerged regarding the scope of the political ambition of the student struggle. Even though the students only demand the functionality of current institutions, their restart after years of inert tolerance of corruption endangers the very foundations of the current regime, which has gotten used to being responsible to no one. To some people, this implies that the student struggle is inseparable from the political goal of toppling the current regime and that the students, as a trusted social group, have enormous responsibility in its realization. They propose that students either enter politics with their own political party, together with their professors, or explicitly support the opposition and join forces with them to win the next election. Plenums, in their view, although representative of the student will, do not have the mandate or the capacity to take the fight to the next level and bring down the regime.

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This is a common argument that I have mixed feelings about. Against such a proposal, I would claim that one of the important reasons why students are being trusted is precisely their distance from the existing opposition parties and party politics that have largely lost credibility. It is indeed true that part of the reason for the distrust in the opposition lies in the constant negative media campaign and the fact that opposition politicians work in a hostile and violent environment. However, most of the opposition parties suffer from the exact democratic deficit that plenums are made to remedy.

Leader-based opposition parties, with a conservative approach to changes and rotations, especially in the upper echelons, stand in contrast to the inclusivity and egalitarianism of the university plenums. Students recognize this difference and fear that their achievement can only be watered down by merging with the existing political parties operating on an old, different frequency. Their vision of change is different, a bottom-up and exemplary reinstitution of democracy into Serbian society.

Organize like we do!

Svi u plenume! (Everyone into plenums!) is a chant that can often be heard on Serbian streets. Students are sending a message to other social actors – organize like we do! You cannot be fired from your job, scared or pressured if you are just one of the faces among many, armed with legitimacy and protected by solidarity. Even if not acting recognizably political or within the frame of party politics in Serbia, the student movement is slowly and substantially changing the political culture.

The plenums have since been organized in high schools and cultural and scientific institutions under strike, while protesting citizens organized citizen plenums (known as *zbor*) throughout Serbia. Here, they have discussed and voted on their future acts of protest, as well as their communal problems. The idea pushed by the students is to rediscover democracy by exporting plenums from universities into wider society. So far, there has been some success in mobilizing the public, but the true effect of the student call remains to be seen.

It would be pretentious to claim that plenum deliberation is a *Deus ex Machina* solution to all Serbian problems, or a substitute to the model of representative democracy. However, when representation is in crisis, plenums can serve as an effective first-step pushback against the usurpers of popular sovereignty and their henchmen. They provide a model of reinstituting citizens' political agency in hybrid systems with eroding democracy, all while simultaneously sheltering them from public shaming or violent attacks. To illustrate, thugs who frequently attacked

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The current protests taking place are the largest and most enduring in modern Serbian history, with university students as the main protagonists. The students were not just the big heart of the protest but also its creative mind.

students in the early days of the protests have backed down, although the danger of their violence still lurks and occasionally erupts.

Increasing repression and what next?

It is still unclear and difficult to forecast what will happen in Serbia. Aleksandar Vučić, as the president and sole bearer of the regime's power, is shaken, and his latest answer seems to be more repression. The spear is pointed towards those parts of society whose support for the student struggle is of crucial importance, mainly the universities. Faculty professors and staff are being pressured to turn against students by cutting off their salaries, vicious media spins against the academic community, and various acts of intimidation and violence. The student–professor split, which might justify the police intervention at the universities seems to be the endgame in the eyes of the regime, and we will probably know how fruitful this strategy is before the summer.

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The protests have already achieved more than anyone could have anticipated five months ago. The gloomy atmosphere of hopelessness that any kind of social and political change is possible has ceased, and the government was forced to make some early concessions, including the prime minister's resignation. However, the regime has managed to overcome the initial shock and the repression against the universities and other social figures who support the students indicates that we are entering its new, nakedly authoritarian phase.

In such circumstances, the argument of the students somehow joining forces with other social actors, including university professors, trade unions or even opposition parties, to topple the regime becomes more attractive. Even the idea of a student or student–professor political party that will challenge Vučić in the elections, which seemed frivolous at first, is now optional. The future of the student movement probably depends on whether they will be able to evolve and adapt to the new rules of the game, build wider political coalitions, while keeping the direct democratic ideals substantive for their identity and practice, and inspirational to the public. Such a symbiosis will not be easy, but it never is, and I won't pretend to have an answer on how to do it. But if anyone is the engine, the students are. ❡

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With US support gone, Belarusian democratic organizations struggle to survive

HLEB LIAPEIKA

US funds have suddenly vanished for exiled Belarusian civil society groups, throwing them into a fight for survival. Youth initiatives, media outlets and human rights defenders are cutting down on their staff and programmes, creating dangerous gaps that state propaganda is now rushing to fill. Belarusian activists show stubborn determination in the face of this financial earthquake, but without new support, the democratic resistance to Lukashenka's regime stands on increasingly shaky ground.

Belarusian civil society has always shown remarkable resilience under pressure. After the contested 2020 presidential elections and the wave of protests that followed, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime ramped up its crackdown on dissent. Independent media, human rights groups, cultural initiatives, and educational organizations faced brutal repression, with activists imprisoned, groups shut down, and many forced to flee. Today, most Belarusian civil society organizations and independent media groups operate from exile, primarily in Lithuania and Poland.

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Unable to generate sufficient local funding and risking the dreaded "extremist" label that scares away business support, these exiled groups have come to depend heavily on external funding. While individual donations help, they rarely cover large-scale campaigns and ongoing operational costs. International grants emerged as a lifeline support, keeping these organizations afloat. Among the supporters, the United States played the most crucial role, making its recent withdrawal of funds a devastating blow.

A difficult situation

Before this shift, Belarusian civil society groups provided essential services to their communities. They worked to preserve Belarusian national identity and cultural heritage; foster education beyond government-controlled channels; champion human rights; and cultivate democratic principles. Katsiaryna Bunina, who heads the Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA", explains that the cut-off of American funding has profoundly crippled youth organizations' capacity to execute their missions. This has jeopardized countless projects dedicated to promoting Belarusian identity, culture, informal education and human rights.

The freeze on US funding caught most Belarusian civil society organizations off guard.

Such initiatives proved vital in a landscape flooded with state propaganda and where independent voices endure methodical suppression. Civic education programmes played a decisive role in nurturing critical thinking abilities and democratic involvement, helping build a more knowledgeable citizenry. Fundamentally, civil society operated as a shield against authoritarian rule, working to keep Belarus connected to Europe's influence by spreading unfiltered information and encouraging scrutiny of the regime and its Russian ties.

The freeze on US funding caught most organizations off guard. Many groups had their major projects financed by American institutions such as USAID, which disappeared virtually overnight. For Belarusian civil society leaders, the sudden funding cuts prompted immediate concerns about sustainability. Organizations found themselves facing a difficult choice: scaling back operations, letting staff go, or even shutting down entirely. Many groups lacked contingency plans for such a dramatic shift, having never anticipated that such reliable funding would suddenly evaporate. The timing was particularly challenging, as many organizations were already struggling with the complexities of operating in exile while trying to serve their communities back home.

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The consequences of this funding freeze have reached far and wide, affecting organizations across the sectors. Many groups that depended heavily on US grants now face precarious financial situations. Alyaksandr Lapko, the CEO of the Belarusian Youth Hub Foundation, explains: "Many have found themselves in a difficult situation, especially those who had only one or two projects and relied solely on US funding. The situation is unprecedented, so few were prepared for it." The immediate impact forced a widespread reassessment of ongoing projects and operational capacities.

Katsiaryna Bunina provided *New Eastern Europe* with some results of the February survey of 25 youth organizations. The numbers provide a stark illustration of the crisis:

- 80 per cent have cancelled events or projects, immediately curtailing their planned activities.
- 56 per cent are delaying project implementation, highlighting the uncertainty surrounding their future work.
- 48 per cent are reducing staff, losing valuable expertise with fears that highly skilled professionals may leave the youth sector entirely.
- 44 per cent can no longer provide services to beneficiaries, directly impacting individuals and communities who relied on their support.
- 4 per cent have shut down completely, representing a critical loss to the sector.

A gift to the Belarusian authorities

Independent media outlets have been hit particularly hard. Barys Haretski, the deputy chairman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), explains that financial cuts have resulted in a severe blow to Belarusian media, where funding had already been decreasing recently. With US support completely disappearing – funding that likely made up nearly half of the total support for the entire non-state media sector – numerous projects have faced significant setbacks, with some left entirely without resources.

The consequences for media organizations are already visible. "Unfortunately, we have already been observing this process for several months now. It is the second month in which editorial offices have been forced to lay off colleagues or place them on unpaid leave. Unfortunately, this trend is not slowing down," Haretski notes. Even BAJ itself has had to eliminate several positions, recognizing that they cannot maintain staff even with reduced budgets. Haretski warns that reduced funding will lead to less diverse content and formats: "Unfortunately, in some sense, this is a gift to the Belarusian authorities and a blow to the people." The downsizing or

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shuttering of key media platforms such as Radio Svaboda (RFE/RL's Belarusian Service) further underscores the severity of the crisis, potentially depriving audiences of trusted information channels and leaving them increasingly exposed to state and Russian propaganda narratives.

Beyond workforce reductions and abandoned initiatives, several organizations have faced difficult decisions regarding their physical operations and workspace arrangements. Palina Brodik, the chairperson of the Free Belarus Center, explains that her group was forced to close their Warsaw coworking space and transition to an online format. While they continue offering core services such as legal and psychological consultations online, the physical space no longer operates.

Aleksander Lapko adds that some colleagues are now seeking new partnerships or joint funding applications while reaching out for support, such as using the hub's coworking space after giving up their own offices. This creates a ripple effect where organizations without their own premises seek help from those still maintaining space, further straining the already limited resources.

How to adapt?

Facing this crisis, Belarusian civil society is actively seeking ways to adapt and survive. Diversifying funding sources has become a top priority. Lapko mentions that while the Belarusian Youth Hub Foundation has already diversified its funding, their financial cushion will not last forever: "So far, we haven't had to close anything, but in the long term, [this situation] will definitely have an impact on us, because we had to use reserves that were originally planned for other purposes." Katsiaryna Bunina emphasizes the growing importance of international cooperation, believing that partnerships are now more crucial than ever.

European funds cannot fully replace the lost US support, and competition for European funding will become even fiercer.

Organizations are exploring increased support from European countries, but this comes with its own challenges. Haretski points out that there is no simple solution, especially since other Belarusian and non-Belarusian media outlets that lost US funding are also desperately seeking European support. He also points out that "If Radio Svaboda enters this competitive space, which would be understandable, it would mean even fewer resources available for the sector as a whole." Haretski believes that European funds alone cannot fully replace the support previously provided by the United States, and competition for European funding will become even fiercer. Brodik agrees, noting that while some

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Belarusians hold banners and shout slogans as they wait for Belarus's exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in June 2021 in Warsaw.

European donors have provided emergency support, "these are mostly short-term funds meant for crisis relief rather than sustainable solutions."

Despite overwhelming challenges, some hopeful signs have emerged. Brodik mentions that a few organizations have received information about their projects being unfrozen. Though they represent a minority, they offer a positive signal. She also points to successful legal action by major groups like the National Endowment for Democracy to secure returned funding, although this does not guarantee long-term stability. The crisis might potentially lead to stronger cooperation between various organizations, coalition-building for joint projects, and optimizing administrative costs. Brodik also highlights crowdfunding potential, citing successful examples from Poland where civil society organizations have engaged their audiences for financial support.

The US aid freeze impacts more than just organizational finances. A weakened Belarusian civil society has broader implications for the country's future and its relationship with Europe. As Haretski argues, "independent Belarusian media is crucial. If they collapse, people inside Belarus will be left without uncensored information. With fewer independent sources, Belarusians will be more exposed

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to Russian propaganda. When independent media outlets disappear, propaganda outlets will rush to fill the void, as we have already seen. They are actively competing for the audience's attention."

Resilience

All said, the US aid freeze has struck a heavy blow to Belarusian civil society, which has already been struggling and under immense pressure. Numerous organizations have had no choice but to axe projects, lay off staff, and implement severe operational adjustments. While the full long-term ramifications remain unclear, the immediate consequences have already undermined these vital actors' capacity to champion democratic principles, safeguard human rights, and deliver unbiased information.

Despite these hardships, Belarusian civil society exhibits extraordinary tenacity, with groups actively hunting for alternative funding sources and forging fresh partnerships. Nevertheless, the substantial funding shortfall and heightened competition for scarce resources pose daunting obstacles. The prospect of a democratic Belarus hinges on the continued existence and vitality of its civil society, making international backing, whatever form it takes, absolutely essential during this critical period.

The prospect of a democratic Belarus hinges on the continued existence and vitality of its civil society.

Looking ahead, should US support remain suspended and European funders prove unable to bridge the gap, we could witness a dramatic shrinking of Belarus's civil society landscape. Smaller organizations risk extinction, while even the larger ones might endure only with severely diminished capabilities. The sector would likely face painful restructuring, forcing groups to either consolidate through mergers or drastically narrow their operational scope. In this scenario, we would also see hundreds of people leaving the sector and looking for jobs in more "stable" spheres, such as IT. As a result, human rights activism and documentation might become less systematic, potentially compromising future accountability efforts.

A more optimistic scenario involves a partial restoration of funding through multiple channels. This might include unfreezing some of the US grants that have not been cancelled yet, increased European support, successful crowdfunding initiatives, and emerging private donations. Under this scenario, Belarusian civil society would survive, but in a transformed state. Organizations that successfully diversify their funding base would gain resilience against future shocks. We would

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likely see more collaborative initiatives, shared infrastructure, and strategic partnerships to maximize impact with limited resources.

The most optimistic scenario, though the least realistic at the moment, involves a restoration of most of the US funding alongside increased European support, perhaps triggered by geopolitical shifts or policy reassessments. This would not only preserve existing organizations but potentially spark innovation in the sector. Groups would likely maintain more diverse funding portfolios even after the return of US support. The experience might also foster deeper solidarity networks among civil society actors and strengthen connections with European institutions.

As usual, reality will probably fall somewhere between these scenarios, with uneven impacts across the sector. Some organizations will adapt and survive, others will disappear, and new initiatives may emerge to fill critical gaps. The democratic movement's resilience will depend on maintaining core functions, especially independent journalism, human rights monitoring, and cultural preservation, even if institutional structures evolve. What remains certain is that Belarusian civil society, having survived unprecedented repression for five years straight, will continue to demonstrate remarkable adaptability in the face of financial challenges from abroad. EE

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Fico's precarious balancing act in Slovakia

JAKUB FERENCIK

Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico, is now in a precarious position. He cannot overly offend his country's partners and Brussels as he depends on European funding. At the same time, he has promised his electorate a hard-line approach to Ukraine and a more confrontational approach to the West. As he floods the media space with misinformation to distract the society, he may find in the end that this balancing act is more difficult to maintain than he realizes.

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico has had a tough time balancing his efforts to keep his hold on power, all while grappling with contradictions in his policies: sending military assistance to Ukraine, despite campaigning on the promise to "not send another bullet"; travelling to Moscow to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin; keeping his nationalist coalition allies satisfied; and managing his pro-EU image in Brussels.

In order to stay in power, Fico knows that he must keep all these things in check. He must appear pro-EU and pro-Ukraine enough to his colleagues in Brussels in order to not lose precious EU subsidies. He must look like he cares about his voters enough to keep their vote, so he gives them larger pensions while ignoring the rapid brain drain the country faces due, in large part, to his mismanagement of the country. He must participate in culture war issues enough to prevent the media and population the mental space, energy and capacity to focus on his changes to the judiciary that make it more difficult to put his cronies behind bars. In all of this, Fico looks to his Hungarian counterpart to the south for inspiration and guidance.

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A softer Orbán

Indeed, it is easier to understand Fico's plan for staying in power when we consider the overlaps between his regime and reforms and those of Hungary. Whether this is in restructuring the state-funded broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia; dissolving the Office of the Special Prosecutor to halt corruption investigations; enriching his closest political allies; or threatening media, journalists and NGOs, Fico has made it clear that he is willing to risk losing credibility on the international stage to hold onto power. Without changing the country's corruption laws, disbanding the prosecution offices that hold him and his allies accountable, or relying on parliamentary immunity, he knows he can still be held accountable.

Fico returned as prime minister of Slovakia with his SMER-SD party in 2023, after being forced out in 2018 through some of the largest protests seen in Slovakia since the 1989 Velvet Revolution. The widespread unrest in the country broke out over the killing of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnirová. At the time, Fico's mistake was to not have more of the government and its institutions under his control. He quickly learned from these mistakes and from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's series of authoritarian reforms that scholars have dubbed "Orbánization".

As mentioned above, the Slovak prime minister has had to walk a tightrope, balancing a pro-EU image in Brussels with appealing to his voters and authoritarian friends. For example, Fico is not contesting Slovakia's membership in the EU since he sees the enormous value in membership. Similarly, Fico has not taken the same hard-line approach as Orbán against Ukraine. Despite threatening "not to send another bullet" to Ukraine in 2022, the Slovak government has continued dialogue and even provided military support to their Ukrainian neighbours. Similarly, when it came to Slovakia's veto power in the EU, especially as it pertains to unified support for Ukraine, Fico has not entirely followed the Hungarian playbook. Slovakia is more reliant on EU subsidies due to financial mismanagement during the pandemic, among other reasons. Thus, Fico has treated his opposition to the EU and its foreign policy direction lightly.

Gas troubles

Nevertheless, Fico has had to appeal to his voters and his own political sensibilities. He demonstrated this during his "secret trip" to Moscow, where he met with the Russian dictator. Subsequently, he threatened to halt electricity exports to Ukraine. He did all of this on false economic pretences. He defended the trip

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Photo: Gage Skidmore (CC) www.flickr.com

Robert Fico speaking at the 2025 CPAC Conference in the United States. Similar to his far-right peers, Fico uses disinformation in the rapidly changing media landscape to distract Slovakia's population from his kleptocratic ambitions and changes to the legal system.

to Russia, stating that Ukraine's decision to stop the transit of Russian natural gas "emphatically financially hurts Slovakia and the EU". Most analysts, however, argue that not renewing the Gazprom contract would not harm the EU or the gas storage of landlocked EU countries that depended on it before. According to data from Gas Infrastructure Europe, Slovakia's reserves were over 75 per cent full, exceeding the seasonal average, while Hungary's reserves were at approximately 68 per cent.

It is true that Slovakia will lose tens of millions in transit fees, which will cause some economic loss since it profits from and relies on these fees. But the loss is neither disastrous nor unexpected. In fact, according to Vladimír Vaňo, an economist, Slovakia has been preparing for this situation since the Russian invasion began. Ukraine has given Slovakia ample time and opportunity to gain its energy resources from other neighbouring nations. Volodymyr Zelenskyy even offered to compensate Fico for his losses at several junctures.

Indeed, the EU has made it abundantly clear that it is ready to help Austria, Hungary and Slovakia – three countries which have been more vocally opposed to Ukraine's move – in the months and years to come as the bloc transitions from Russian energy supplies. For example, Germany agreed to waive transit fees for

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neighbouring landlocked countries. Similarly, the Czech minister of industry and trade, Lukáš Vlček, offered to help overcome any difficulties that might arise, declaring: "If Slovakia needs assistance, Czechia, with its gas infrastructure, is ready to help." Yet, Fico is looking to profit wherever he can, and he chooses to do so while gaining political points from his allies.

The next balancing act briefly worth considering is the nationalist sentiment in Fico's coalition. In this group is Slovakia's far-right minister of culture, Martina Šimkovičová, whose SNS party is known for its nationalist statements that pit minorities against an imagined "pure" Slovakian majority. Šimkovičová's goal, and to some extent Fico's, is to win an ideological war in which the far right can freely shape Slovak cultural institutions to preserve an imagined history. They have done this, for example, by disbanding the elite anti-corruption National Criminal Agency (*Národná kriminálna agentúra* or NAKA) officially in August 2024. NAKA's purpose was to investigate high-profile corruption in Slovakia, including the *Očistec* ("Purgatory") case, which involved several SMER-SD party officials. These changes have not gone unnoticed in the EU. The European Commission expressed concerns over adjustments to the Slovak judiciary, including the disbanding of the Special Prosecutor's Office and changes to punishments for financial crimes, among other things.

The European Commission has expressed concerns over the disbanding of Slovakia's Special Prosecutor's Office.

Fico's ideological strategy

While balancing all this criticism of the EU and cosying up to Russia, Fico still needs to keep the democratic bloc on his side. On January 1st 2025, the EU announced its decision to withhold one billion euros in structural funds for Hungary "due to rule of law breaches". This is the first time the EU has enforced such strong measures. With its economic woes, Slovakia cannot afford to make the same mistakes as its Visegrád neighbour. And that is precisely why Fico has not been as pro-Russian as he promised his voters.

It is not surprising that Fico has received criticism for not delivering on his campaign promises. In order to play this off, Fico has used a messaging strategy similar to Putin's, namely the "firehose of falsehoods". This methodology does not directly present false claims as true but rather floods the media with enough misinformation and disinformation to blur the lines between what is true and what is false. This has particularly helped Putin, who is able to dismiss/deny, distort, dis-

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tract and dismay when it comes to facts (dubbed the "four Ds" of disinformation). This makes it very difficult to discern truth from falsehood.

As with disinformation, Fico uses the rapidly changing media landscape to distract Slovakia's population from his kleptocratic ambitions and changes to the legal system. He has used similar tactics to distract voters with culture war issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights in Slovakia and questions surrounding the legitimacy of Zuzana Čaputová, the previous president. At the time of her presidency, Fico frequently referred to her as being a "foreign agent", even as he became prime minister in 2023 and his rule briefly overlapped with Čaputová as president before Peter Pellegrini's electoral victory. Similarly, in January 2025, Fico attempted to distract audiences by saying that protests in Slovakia are funded and supported through foreign influence, and especially NGOs, allegedly. The NGOs in question denied these accusations and emphasized that their activities are entirely legitimate and legal.

All of this balancing between appealing to his voters and keeping the EU close has resulted in deep instability in the country. More recently, more than 600 mental health professionals signed an open letter to Fico to voice their opposition to the deterioration of the rule of law and political culture. The signatories of the letter appealed to Fico to amend his approach to politics or step down as prime minister. "Your political conduct is marked by a power-driven authoritarian style, manipulation of facts, lying, denigrating others, and attacking political opponents, journalists, and ordinary citizens who voice dissent," the letter reads.

Fico denied the legitimacy of the letter, arguing that it is "recycled nonsense" and that the initiators are using it for political purposes. As he has done in the past, Fico argued that if any changes were to occur in the government, they should be taken through democratic means. But will such dismissals, distortions, distractions and dismay continue to work?

Losing balance?

Although Fico chose not to veto the latest European sanctions on Russia in Brussels in the last moments of the European Council meeting, his nationalist-populist government is still far from re-aligning with a pro-European stance. Erik Kaliňák, a Slovak MEP from the SMER-SD party and head of the prime minister's advisory team, told Interez earlier in March this year that if Russia were to reach Ukraine's western border, Slovakia would finally have "a reliable neighbour". More recently, Fico claimed that Slovakia would consider vetoing future EU sanctions against Russia if they threatened the peace process. At the same time, he expressed support for Ukraine's EU membership, given that it meets the necessary conditions.

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Domestically, meanwhile, Fico's coalition continues to raise pensions, including the prime minister's own, while reducing tax benefits for parents with young children. Single parents and those with three or more children are among the groups most at risk of poverty in Slovakia. Fico realizes that his power hinges on his base, 56 per cent of whom are aged 60 and above. While appealing to this base, which comprises Russophiles, nationalists and those with socially conservative views, Fico will have to remember about the sizable pro-EU fraction of Slovakian society. Indeed, according to a POLITICO poll conducted on March 14th 2025, Progressive Slovakia (the centre-left opposition party) is leading with 23 per cent to Fico's SMER-SD with 22 per cent.

This all comes at a time when the Slovak public has been protesting across the country. In Bratislava, crowds of tens of thousands have repeatedly gathered at Freedom Square, for example, to contest the direction in which Fico has been taking the country. There is a sizable pro-democratic part of the country that takes deep issues with rule of law violations and will continue protesting against Fico's government unless minority rights, judicial independence, the freedom of press and other democratic necessities are upheld. For Fico, it might be impossible to balance all his political interests at once. Sooner or later, his "allies", whether in his coalition or abroad, will reveal that they too have balancing acts to consider. EE

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The 2024 Georgian elections and their geopolitical implications

VAKHTANG MAISAIA

In addition to the concept of the power vertical, Georgia now appears to be developing a Eurasian-style "comprador" system, characterized by the rise of powerful tycoons who dominate political and economic life – similar to what happened in Russia between 1996 and 2000. In Georgia's current case, three influential figures have emerged who are shaping the national political landscape and shifting the country's geopolitical priorities.

After the October 26th 2024 parliamentary elections, which ended with the victory of the Georgian Dream party following rigged results, the landscape inside the ruling party and the newly elected parliament began to reveal a new orientation for the country's foreign policy. This has resulted in a drastic turn from a Euro-Atlantic bent towards a Eurasian direction. The election process itself was evaluated by such international organizations as the OSCE, which published its final report on December 20th 2024. The document sharply criticized the elections process, emphasizing undemocratic governance during the election and the counting process.

"In most cases, voting was assessed as procedurally well-organized," the report reads. "However, in six per cent of the 1,924 observations, which is a significant number, the process was assessed negatively, mainly due to indications of voter pressure and intimidation, sometimes accompanied by tension, unrest and overcrowding. While not against the law, party representatives, mostly from the ruling party,

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video-recorded the voting process at most polling stations. This, as observed, had an intimidating effect … [and] unknown individuals were observed tracking voters outside polling premises (10 per cent), frequently within the prohibited 100-metre perimeter … Of course, this widespread perception of voter intimidation conflicts with OSCE commitments and other international standards."

Maintaining "dignity"

The situation in Georgia has been deteriorating since November 28th 2024, when the prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, abruptly announced the ruling Georgian Dream party's decision to abort efforts to start accession negotiations with the European Union "until 2028". He also stated that the cabinet would refuse all EU budget support. Kobakhidze announced the decision following a party consultation at a special briefing. He indicated the official party line was that while EU membership remained the priority for 2030, this would happen only on Georgia's terms of maintaining "dignity".

This manipulated argumentation flips the logic of EU accession – in which the EU Copenhagen Criteria for a functioning democracy and free market, the common regulatory framework, and the EU Council, ultimately dictate accession conditions. Moreover, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognized the October 26th 2024 parliamentary elections as illegal, fraudulent and falsified. It refused to recognize the legitimacy of the incumbent government and elected parliament. This means that Georgia could be excluded from membership in the Council of Europe, as is the case with Russia and Belarus. The European Parliament also adopted a resolution that condemned Georgia's parliamentary vote as neither free nor fair, representing yet another manifestation of the continued democratic backsliding for which the ruling Georgian Dream party is fully responsible.

EU lawmakers have urged a rerun of Georgia's parliamentary vote within a year under international supervision.

EU lawmakers urged a rerun of the parliamentary vote within a year under international supervision and by an independent election administration. They also called on the EU to impose sanctions and limit formal contacts with the Georgian government. European election observers said the balloting took place in a divisive atmosphere marked by instances of bribery, plural voting and physical violence. The EU suspended Georgia's membership application process indefinitely in June 2024, after the parliament passed a law requiring organizations that receive more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad to

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register as organizations "pursuing the interest of a foreign power" – similar to a Russian law used to discredit NGOs critical of the government.

As a result, the political crisis grew, with massive protest rallies organized by the majority of Georgian civil society. In response, the ruling party effectively adopted a Soviet-style leadership and governance model, which bears a resemblance to the "political vertical system" observed in the Russian Federation. These steady regime changes, together with a constitutional coup d'état, have created a new type of autocratic political system in Georgia, largely based on concrete political clans and group competition, as well as struggles inside the ruling party.

Georgia's ruling clans

The above-mentioned political system is very peculiar yet in some senses similar to the Bolshevik Party of the 1920s and 30s. This was before Stalin seized power in the party unilaterally and renamed the Bolshevik Party the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In this regard, there are key factions which make up the ruling party, all with various influences and interests. These factions can be called "clans" and can generally be clustered into five different groupings, as described below.

Steady regime changes have created a new type of autocratic political system in Georgia.

The first group can be called the "Kakhetian Clan". This group is chaired by the incumbent chairman of the ruling party – Irakli Garibashvili. This group holds strong positions in the eastern part of Georgia, Kakheti, and in the southeast part of the country in the Kvemo Kartli regions. The clan owns solid businesses in the fields of oil and medicine and has financial means, with foreign linkages to China and Azerbaijan. This clan often competes and clashes with rival groups such as the New Pioneers and Kaladze-Italians. According to some sources, this clan had sought to develop very close ties with ultra-radical political groupings and neo-conservative movements. As soon as Garibashvili was replaced as prime minister in early 2024, the state security service organized special raids and arrests of members of this group, including Beka Vardosanidze, a member of the clan and key ally of Garibashvili.

The second group is referred to as the "New Pioneers". This group is chaired by the incumbent prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, and includes younger politicians like Archil Talakvadze and Mamuka Mdinaradze. During the authoritarian period under Mikhail Saakashvili's regime, members of this group were low-level bureaucrats supported by the billionaire (and de facto head of the party) Bidzina

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Ivanishvili. The clan completely controls the ruling party apparatus, as well as its regional branches and around 30 members of parliament and their staff. The clan promotes so-called "neutrality" in foreign policy and also controls the judicial system.

The third group is the "Technocrats" clan – chaired by the first deputy speaker of the parliament, George Volski. The group contains former Communist Party members and is involved in party and government bureaucracy. It appears that this clan is also closely linked with a strategic ally of the ruling party – the People's Power movement – which has its own television channel, POST-TV, as well as several regional business and community networks.

The "Kaladze-Italian" clan is chaired by Kakha Kaladze – the mayor of Tbilisi and the deputy chair of the ruling party. It controls some committees and it has about 20 members of parliament. The clan completely controls the capital city of Tbilisi and its surrounding areas, including several regions of western Georgia. The clan has its own independent financial assets and analytical capacity, with the ability to possibly break away from the ruling party and develop its own political agenda. On several occasions, Kaladze was promised a promotion to a higher position, such as prime minister, but this has never been fulfilled. The clan promotes ties with radical-right political movements in several EU countries.

The "Personal Guard" clan is a group that is directly run by Ivanishvili. It fully controls the party leadership and entire law enforcement agency network. The clan certainly has very solid political and financial assets considering Ivanishvili's wealth. It also has wide linkages to the Eurasian geopolitical space, in particular Russia, but also several EU countries.

This outline of the clans indicates that the Georgian Dream does not have much of a solid and credible political basis. This means its core base is actually something closer to 35 per cent of the electorate, with more than 50 per cent against the ruling party or disappointed with its policies. Georgian Dream's victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections would be dependent on very low turnout.

Ivanishvili returns

In addition to the concept of the "political vertical", Georgia appears to be developing a Eurasian-style "comprador" system, characterized by the rise of powerful tycoons who dominate political and economic life – similar to what happened in Russia between 1996 and 2000, when seven oligarchs held significant control over the country's governance. In Georgia's current case, three influential figures have emerged who are shaping the national political landscape: Bidzina Ivanishvili, with an estimated fortune of 4.5 billion US dollars; Vano Chkhartishvili, estimated

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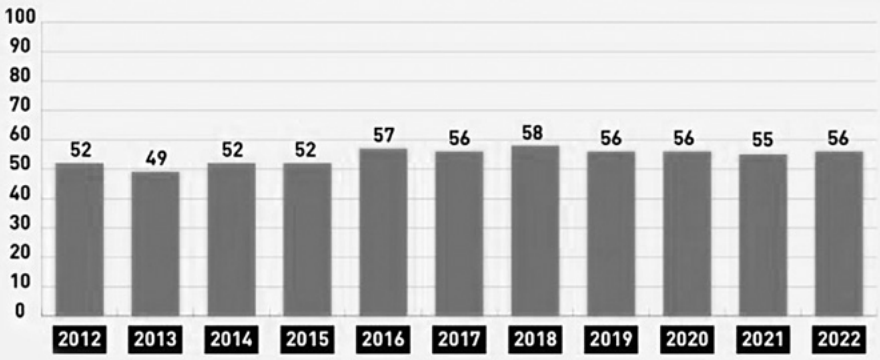

Source: Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), 2022.

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) results for Georgia 2012–2022

to hold assets valued around 1.5 billion; and Davit Kezerashvili, a former defence minister and financial backer of the opposition United National Movement, with a fortune of roughly 2.5 billion US dollars (Kezerashvili currently resides in Cyprus).

On December 30th 2023, Ivanishvili unexpectedly announced his return to active politics for the third time. His first political appearance was in November 2011, when he founded the Georgian Dream coalition to oppose the then-ruling United National Movement. He served as prime minister until 2014. His second return occurred in 2018, when he became chairman of the ruling party.

Now, in what appears to be his final political comeback, he has re-entered the scene once more. Ivanishvili's return is driven by several key factors, most notably the dramatic rise of elite-level corruption during the previous government. This corruption not only surpassed acceptable norms but also crossed a critical threshold that seriously threatened the very foundations of Georgian statehood. While geopolitical competition among major powers – US, Russia and China – continues to impact the dynamics of the South Caucasus and Caspian regions, it is internal corruption that poses the most pressing challenge to Georgia's political stability today.

For reference, Georgia's standing in Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) improved slightly by one point (it is noteworthy that change by one point is considered statistically insignificant by the methodology of the CPI). Even though the country leads in Eastern Europe and Central Asia with 56 points, the watchdog noted that "this is due to previous gains in eliminating low-level bribery; the country has stagnated on the CPI since 2012." Moreover, as opposed to some countries in the region, such as Armenia or Moldova, which

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have experienced significant improvement since 2017, Georgia has not progressed in the fight against corruption in recent years according to the index.

The graph above indicates that efforts to fight corruption in Georgia have sharply decreased since 2013. This is when Georgian Dream came to power and the political regime transformed into the so-called "hybrid regime" and comprador state, with around 60 per cent of parliament members close to being millionaires. It is important to note that all of this has resulted in the decreasing position of Garibashvili, the former prime minister, as he was appointed the chairman of the ruling party but only with nominal power. Kobakhidze retained his party position as political secretary and Ivanishvili became the honorary chairman – in other words, the real chairman of the party.

New priorities

Kobakhidze, as prime minister, has announced four main geopolitical aims as the basis for his government's future foreign policy priorities. These include integration into EU structures; the restoration of peaceful relations with Russia; providing political stability to Georgia; and developing stable regional security. The creation of the so-called "Caucasian geopolitical code" is viewed as the key foreign policy mission. This means that any pro-NATO agenda has been erased from Georgian foreign policy's priority list. There was also no mention of strategic relations with China, while the "Russian vector" appears to be more of an appeasement policy when it comes to the country's northern neighbour.

It remains unclear whether the development of the "Middle Corridor" (Middle Transit Corridor) will continue to be treated as a top strategic priority under the new government, as it was under the previous administration. There is also speculation that Georgia may consider promoting the idea of the "3+3" regional security platform. The platform, which is promoted by Russia, would be made up of the three Caucasian states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as their three "big neighbours" – Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Nevertheless, the main political mission of the new government appears to be ensuring that the ruling party retains power through future parliamentary elections. As a result, a form of "light isolationism" may be emerging in Georgian politics during this transitional period. Interestingly, the Kremlin appears to be showing less overt support for the current ruling party and its centralized "political vertical" system.

Instead, the Kremlin seems to be nurturing a new political "echelon" made up of more overtly pro-Kremlin actors. According to some sources, the Kremlin has

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allocated over 20 million US dollars to conducting a hybrid information war against Georgia. This effort is reflected in the return of Otar Romanov-Pirtskhaladze – Georgia's former chief prosecutor and a figure designated by the US State Department as a "Kremlin agent". He is now promoting a pro-Russian political movement called Peace and Solidarity. Additionally, a new television channel, Solidarity and Peace, has been launched in Georgia, openly broadcasting pro-Russian content and narratives.

In the end, in understanding the current political system of Georgia, it becomes clear that the Kremlin's strategy – which is centred on hybrid warfare, including information-psychological operations and the use of the so-called "sharp power" – has achieved some success. The Georgian government is no longer openly anti-Russian and can be even considered softly pro-Russian. It is enough to keep it out of the West's orbit and ultimately gives Moscow more influence in its neighbourhood. PE

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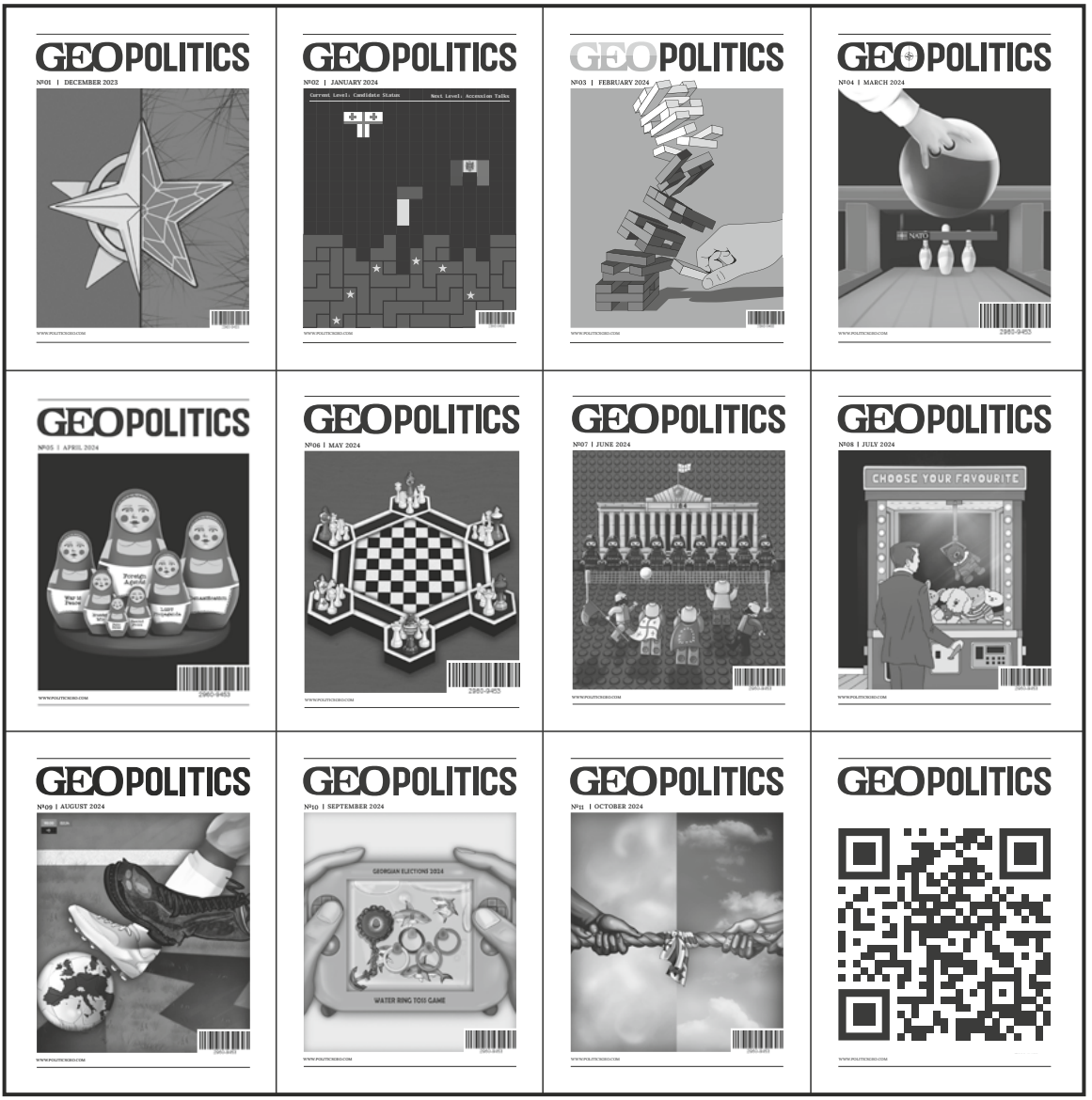

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The end of the "Big Brother" myth in Armenia

MIKAYEL ZOLYAN

The image of Russians as "protectors" and "saviours" has been deeply embedded in Armenian political mythology throughout the past two centuries. This mythology has been largely based on events connected to the rule of the Ottoman Empire, where Russia often positioned itself as the defender of the region's Christian population. Armenia's experience of the last 200 years shows that Russian imperial domination has been surprisingly resilient, having been able to reinvent itself in many ways.

In September 2023, tragic events took place that became just another chapter in the decades-long Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. At the centre of the conflict is Nagorno-Karabakh, the (until then) Armenian-populated enclave within Azerbaijan, which Armenians refer to as Artsakh. The conflict started in 1988, when both Armenia and Azerbaijan were part of the Soviet Union and Armenians in the region demanded unification with the Armenian republic. Inter-communal violence followed. As the USSR collapsed, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence in 1991, with sporadic violence turning into full-scale war.

With the support of Armenia, the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic won the First Karabakh War. However, in 2020 the Azerbaijani government launched a military operation that ended in a humiliating defeat for the Armenians. Russian peacekeepers were subsequently stationed in the region. A few years later, when the Azerbaijani government launched a new operation against the Armenians of

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the region in September 2023, the Russian peacekeepers were unwilling, or unable, to stop it. The entire Armenian population of the region, which at that time numbered around 100,000 people, was forcefully displaced.

Protectors no more

The present-day forced displacement of Armenians reactivated a deep-seated trauma within Armenia's historical memory. About 100 years ago, in the aftermath of the 1915 Armenian genocide in Ottoman Turkey, Armenians had to flee the territory of what is today eastern Turkey. Following the withdrawal of Russian imperial forces from the area, Armenians were left at the mercy of advancing Ottoman troops. Although they took place over a century ago, these events still have huge significance for Armenians. This is due to the geopolitical continuity between the Russian Empire, the USSR and post-Soviet Russia on the one hand, and a similar geopolitical continuity between the Ottoman Empire and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey on the other (Ankara being Azerbaijan's main ally in the current conflict). However, what seemed remarkable about the events of 2023 was not only the speed of the destruction of an entire community, but also the complete inaction of the Russian peacekeeping forces stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenian perceptions of Russia have been changing since the Armenia-Azerbaijan war of 2020. These changes have affected not only Armenia's foreign policy choices but also the place and significance of Russia within the collective memory of Armenians. In the "44-day War" of 2020, Russia failed to support its traditional ally Armenia when a war broke out with Azerbaijan, which was supported in turn by Turkey. This lack of direct support, which in Armenia was perceived as Russia's tacit approval of Azerbaijani actions, repeated itself across several more armed clashes after 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh itself and on the Armenia-Azerbaijani border. This all formed a pattern that culminated in the events of September 2023. The complicity of Russian troops came as a shock to many Armenian inhabitants of the region, who, like many generations before them, had been told that Russia was there to save them from attacks by their neighbours.

The image of Russians as "protectors" and "saviours" has been deeply embedded in Armenian political mythology throughout the past two centuries. This served in turn as a justification for the domination of the Russian Empire, then Armenia's "Sovietization", and, finally, Armenia's neo-colonial dependence on the Russian Federation. This mythology has been largely based on events connected to the rule of the Ottoman Empire, where Russia often positioned itself as the defender of the region's Christian population, particularly Armenians.

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This narrative was constructed through official discourse but often contradicted by actual historical developments, leading to severe disappointment and anger among Armenians when Russia either ignored their calls for help or sided with Armenia's enemies. Over time, Armenian intellectuals, dissidents and politicians of different generations have challenged this acquiescent attitude towards Russia, deconstructing its imperialist origins and showing the harm that it had done and continued to inflict on Armenians. Yet, in the last 200 years, each time Russia temporarily withdrew its support, it nonetheless somehow managed to restore its political influence over Armenia, renewing the very mythology that constructed the image of Russia as the country's protector. Will the tragic events of 2020–23 turn the tide and become the final nail in the coffin of Russia's mythological image as the "protector of Armenians"?

Conflict, narratives and empire

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is closely connected to the heritage of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, as well as the policies of Russia after the collapse of the USSR. From the point of view of the peoples of the South Caucasus, the Soviet Union can be seen as the continuation of the Russian Empire in a new form, and Russia's policies can be seen as neo-colonial in nature. While empires commonly pursue a "divide and rule" policy in their territorial conquests, the practical reality of colonial rule is often more complicated. Conflicts and differences are indeed exploited by imperial powers to impose and perpetuate their rule over their subjects. However, some of these conflicts and differences predate the imperial imposition and are not necessarily created artificially by the empire itself. This convoluted relationship between colonial order and social fracture is best described by the words of Maulana Mohammed Ali, a Muslim Indian scholar and activist. Commenting on how Hindu-Muslim antagonism had been exploited by the British Empire, he stated: "there is a division of labour: we divide, you rule."

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is closely connected to the heritage of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.

Imperial policies often exploit differences and heighten conflicts that already exist. This is done in order to first conquer and then realize the domination of the periphery. Furthermore, empires exploit these conflicts to serve their interests, while at the same time engaging in conflict management, or in certain cases, conflict resolution. Thus, empires not only exploit conflict, but can also provide a certain kind of conflict resolution (*"Russkiy Mir"* or *"Pax Sovietica"* in our case). This

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role of conflict mediator is used by those actors who pursue colonial or neo-colonial policies to achieve the continuity of their post-imperial or colonial geopolitical influence, legitimizing political meddling and diplomatic authority.

This type of conflict exploitation, management and resolution structured the complicated relationship between the Russian Empire and the Armenian-Azerbaijani situation and, on a larger scale, between Armenians and their various Muslim neighbours. By the late 17th century, the Armenian lands were divided between two major Muslim empires, the Ottoman and Persian, which were administered locally through feudal lords of Persian or Turkic origin.

Imperial policies often exploit differences and heighten conflicts that already exist.

Among the rare exceptions were the Armenian *meliks* (i.e. semi-independent princes of the Karabakh region). Religion was not just a social marker of identity but also a political category that determined the place of indigenous populations in the imperial hierarchy. As a result, this made Christian Armenians inferior in relation to their Muslim rulers and neighbours. This situation created resentment among Armenians, which was articulated predominantly by the educated representatives of Armenian communities in Armenia and across the Armenian diaspora. Time and again, Armenians rebelled against their Ottoman rulers, while missions were also sent to European countries, which asked for help in liberating the Christian Armenians from their Muslim overlords.

The Russian Empire as the "saviour" of Armenians

This inter-ethnic and inter-religious tension opened the door to European imperial powers. In the Caucasus the most active was the Russian Empire, which positioned itself not just as the disseminator of modern civilization in the East but also as the defender of Eastern Christianity. The precarious position of Armenians, Georgians and other Christian communities vis-à-vis their Muslim rulers and neighbours became political tools that were used by the European powers to justify their meddling in the affairs of the Caucasus and eventual territorial conquest. These concerns were put forward by Russia in its confrontation with the Persian and Ottoman Empires, particularly the two Russian-Persian and the Russo-Turkish wars that took place in the 19th century. After absorption into the empire, Russian rule supposedly solved existing contradictions between various religious and ethnic groups, a claim that became the framework for the imperial cultural narrative and the ideological basis for continuing Russian domination. The cultural-politi-

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cal aspects of imperial conquest thus invite various analogies from other imperial/colonial contexts characterized by divided ethnic and religious groups. While it would be naïve to see these differences and conflicts as artificially created, they were nonetheless used by the empire to advance its goals.

After the Russian Empire was replaced by the Soviet Union, the previous tsarist narrative of protecting Christians gradually transformed into the Soviet narrative of the "voluntary accession" of Armenia into Russia. In this narrative, not only was the inclusion of Armenia into the Russian Empire viewed as a positive event, but Russia also took on the role of the defender of the Armenians who remained oppressed within the Ottoman Empire, an oppression that culminated in the Armenian genocide of 1915. As is usually the case with such cultural narratives, the Russian saviour role was loosely based on some historical events, while being contradicted by many others.

This narrative was, however, a useful one during Soviet times, both for the Soviet centre and the local Armenian elites. It crucially underscored the peculiar compromise between Armenian nationalism and Soviet hegemony, which was formed by the late Soviet period. Armenians were allowed expressions of national identity, and even of a nationalist agenda, as long as it was not aimed against Russia/USSR. This narrative faced severe criticism by the end of Soviet rule, when this compromise began to unravel due to *perestroika* and the Karabakh conflict.

The emergence of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict

The short interregnum of 1918–1920, between the break-up of the tsarist empire and its re-emergence in the form of the Soviet Union, was marked by the formation of independent republics in Georgia, Armenia and elsewhere in the South Caucasus. These new republics, though short-lived, ensured that when Russia returned to the region, it had to accommodate the new political and social realities on the ground. This is how Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan became Soviet republics, as political units with many attributes of statehood, rather than simple provinces of Russia.

Today, all three countries, though in different forms, consider these short-lived independent republics, rather than the subsequent quasi-autonomous Soviet republics, to be the origins of their modern nationhood. At the same time, in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflict that started in 1918–1920 was frozen, rather than resolved by the advent of Soviet power. As a result, after a forced pause of over six decades, this conflict reignited as the USSR became weaker in the late 1980s.

The Soviet annexation of the South Caucasus in 1920–21 had a two-fold effect for the existing Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry. On the one hand, there was a cer-

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tain resolution to the conflict, at least for the time being. Nagorno-Karabakh was awarded to Azerbaijan but an autonomous unit was created there to satisfy some of Armenia's demands. Yet, the way it was resolved effectively institutionalized the conflict and, in effect, froze and perpetuated it.

In the post-war decades, as both Armenia and Azerbaijan were engaging in covert nation-building processes, the contradictions between the interests of the Armenian population of the region and those of the Azerbaijani leadership in Baku appeared again. The Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh complained about ethnic discrimination and encroachment on their cultural and linguistic rights. They claimed that the Azerbaijani leadership was pursuing a policy that aimed to transform the demographic balance in the region, and pointed to the example of another autonomous region in Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, where Armenians had constituted almost half of the population in the 1920s but only one to two per cent by the end of the Soviet period.

In the eyes of Karabakh Armenians, the most obvious solution to their grievances was not the pursuit of civil rights, only possible in a democratic system, but rather the transfer of the region from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia. Representatives of the Armenian population of the region, including prominent communists and intellectuals, repeatedly sent requests to Moscow for the transfer of the region during the Soviet period. These requests were usually supported by Armenian Communist Party bosses in Yerevan and opposed by the leadership of the Azerbaijani Communist Party in Baku. These requests were denied and the general public knew little about them.

Movement for independence

The last time such a request was sent to Moscow, however, things got out of control. This happened in the age of *perestroika* launched by Mikhail Gorbachev. An important part of these policies was *glasnost*, the practice of making issues open and public. Thus, when the request was once again denied, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh made it public. In February 1988, thousands of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians demonstrated in support of the request in Stepanakert, the capital of the autonomous region. These local protests prompted rallies in Yerevan and Baku both in support of, and against, the request. Such large-scale rallies were unprecedented for the Soviet Union, indicating how the regional equilibrium, achieved through imperial-style rule, was now compromised.

At the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenian society as a whole was overwhelmingly under the influence of the traditional narrative that pictured

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Russia (in this case the Soviet Union) as the protector and saviour of the Armenian people. However, as the Armenian national movement was becoming stronger, this narrative was increasingly questioned by Armenian intellectuals. Among the most influential voices was Rafael Ishkhanyan, who deconstructed this idealizing narrative to point out that it also implied that Armenians are doomed to extermination by Turkey without Russia's protection. He argued that Armenians needed instead to take their fate into their own hands and become political subjects, dealing with their neighbours on the basis of their own national interests.

These ideas were shared by many in the leadership of the Armenian National Movement, the main opposition party. As a result of the first democratic elections in 1990, the party came to power as the USSR collapsed. However, the ongoing Karabakh conflict shed light on the contradiction at the heart of the agenda, between the challenges in solving disputes with neighbouring states and the need to establish independence from Moscow. In the early stages of the conflict this contradiction was not so obvious, as Moscow was perceived as an ally of Azerbaijan. However, upon Armenia's independence, part of the new political elite, led by the first President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, realized that in the longterm this contradiction needed to be resolved. Their solution was to find a compromise with their Azerbaijani neighbours while at the same time building a pragmatic relationship with the former imperial metropole.

Balancing independence and security

Yet, a satisfactory compromise was difficult to find. Azerbaijan and Turkey were not open to the overtures by the Armenian National Movement, while internally the proposal was unpopular among the public in Armenia. This was especially true among the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, who worried that Ter-Petrosyan was going to subordinate their interests in order to find a compromise with Azerbaijan.

The seemingly impossible resolution of the conflict turned the government towards Russia, once again to fulfil the role of security ally. The very people who had led Armenia to independence eventually concluded an alliance with Russia out of necessity, which included outsourcing important elements of Armenia's security to Moscow. Of course, at the time of the decision, the majority of Armenians did not understand it as something that could compromise Armenia's independence and sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the Armenian government did not abandon its efforts to find a compromise with Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, Ter-Petrosyan's approach was not shared by many, even in his own team. Internal contradictions eventually emerged

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in February 1998 when Ter-Petrosyan was forced out of power by his own associates. Eventually, he was replaced by Robert Kocharyan, the former leader of the Karabakh Armenians. He rejected Ter-Petrosyan's approach as "defeatist", claiming that he could have gotten a better deal. In reality, the change in political leadership meant that finding a compromise with the country's neighbours was going to be harder, since neither Baku nor Ankara seemed particularly interested in making concessions. On the contrary, Azerbaijan's leadership was openly stating that its goal was to take back Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories at any cost, including military means, and was arming at a rapid pace. Hence, Armenia's dependence on Russia was set to grow during this time.

As the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan tilted in favour of Baku, Armenia's dependence on Russia increased. In the 2000s and especially 2010s, this diplomatic alliance increasingly came to look like a neo-colonial dependency. Armenia's reliance on Russia in terms of security gave Moscow significant political leverage, which was used to expand Moscow's influence in Armenia across various sectors including the economy, mass media and culture. Armenia had little choice but to join Russian-dominated security and economic organizations. For example, it joined the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) in 2002 and then, in 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union. All this was happening in spite of the Kremlin's parallel strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, which included massive sales of Russian weapons to that country. Obviously, Russia's military exports to Azerbaijan angered the Armenians but these concerns were dismissed by Russian officials. Successive Armenian governments were often unable or unwilling to raise the issue with Moscow, at least publicly.

The Russian protection myth

As Armenia found itself once again under Russia's hegemony, the cultural narrative of Russia as protector was renewed once again. By the second half of the 2010s a consensus formed within Armenia's political and intellectual elites about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which considered the preservation of the status quo the most desirable outcome for Armenia. The consensus entrenched Russia's role as Armenia's main security ally, with the alliance viewed as a viable guarantee of security for Armenia and Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

It is worth noting that this consensus was never openly articulated, but was also rarely challenged by influential actors. Even the revolution of 2018, which brought down Serzh Sargsyan's authoritarian regime, did not initially challenge this consensus. Even though the new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his Civil Contract

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party, while being in opposition, had been critical of Armenia's relationship with Russia, they changed course after coming to power. While the Armenian elite was unwilling to get rid of the mythologized narrative of Russian protection, the course of events once again shattered these illusions in ways that proved painful and dramatic. A large-scale war started in 2020 as Azerbaijan attacked the de facto Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which prompted Armenia to step in to protect it. In what became known as the "44-day War" Armenia suffered a humiliating defeat. Over the course of this conflict, Russia maintained a relatively neutral position, while Turkey fully and openly supported Azerbaijan. Eventually, when an Armenian defeat became obvious, Russia mediated a ceasefire agreement on November 9th 2020, which included the stationing of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. These soldiers were also to take control over the so-called Lachin corridor, the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

Reality demonstrated that reliance on Russia as sole guarantor of security was not enough to solve Armenia's issues.

Once again, reality demonstrated that reliance on Russia as sole guarantor of security was not enough to solve Armenia's issues. As Armenian society was slowly recovering from the shock and trauma of defeat, voices calling for a reappraisal of Russia's role in the conflict became difficult to ignore. Russia's position in the aftermath of the 2020 war increased public criticism, since in numerous ensuing episodes of violence Russian peacekeepers effectively let down the Armenian side, failing to prevent or stop Azerbaijani attacks on Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh or on Armenia itself. However, there was little that Armenia could do about this, as it seemed that Russia's influence and military were the only things that stood between the defeated and weakened Armenians and new Azerbaijani attacks.

The situation dramatically changed in 2022 when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which also led the West to pay significantly more attention in the region, including the South Caucasus. In fact, western mediation efforts in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict started before the invasion of Ukraine although, at the time, it was obvious that Russia was the most influential force. With Russia overstretched in Ukraine in 2022, western involvement in the Caucasus meant that Armenia was finally getting a chance to move beyond its dependence on Russia. The watershed moment in the Armenia-Russia relationship came in September 2022, a year before the latest clash in 2023, when Azerbaijan launched a large-scale attack on the borders of the Republic of Armenia. At the time neither Russia, nor the Russian-dominated CSTO, did anything to help Yerevan. On the contrary, Armenia received diplomatic support from the West, as diplomatic pressure on Baku from the United States and the European Union helped cease Azerbaijani

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advances. Soon, an EU monitoring mission was placed on the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan. Since then, Armenia has begun a process of geopolitical re-orientation. This has included not only changes in foreign policy but also a reappraisal of the Armenia-Russia relationship.

Nevertheless, this change of course in the state of Armenia was not reflected among the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, where the majority continued to pin their hopes on Russian protection. Since November 2020, the presence of close to 2,000 Russian peacekeepers on the ground came to represent the only force preventing a military takeover of the region by Azerbaijan. While there were reservations about their conduct among Karabakh Armenians, the majority of the Karabakh Armenian political elite considered these troops as the only guarantee that the Azerbaijanis would not attack. Hence, Yerevan's drive to reduce its dependence on Russia was not shared by the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, who hoped that the Russians would help them maintain their de facto independence from Azerbaijan.

As Azerbaijan launched a military attack on Karabakh Armenians, the Russian peacekeepers once again looked on.

The events of the following months dissipated the hopes that Karabakh Armenians placed on Russian peacekeepers. In December 2022, Russian peacekeepers did nothing to prevent an Azerbaijani blockade of the Lachin corridor. For several months the Karabakh Armenians lived under a partial and then complete blockade, a dire situation which Russian peacekeepers simply observed. Finally, on September 19th 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military attack on the positions of the Karabakh Armenians, as the Russian peacekeepers once again looked on. A day later, the de facto President Samvel Shahramanyan was forced to sign what was effectively a capitulation agreement. Within a few days, about 100,000 remaining Karabakh Armenians fled the region for Armenia. Once again, Armenians who had pinned their hopes on Russian protection ended up being forced out of their homes.

What is next?

Will the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, carried out with Russia's tacit approval, be the final chapter in this sad saga? Will Armenia be able to break not only its economic and military dependence on Russia, but also the cultural and ideological narratives that sustain this dependence? There are signs that the Armenian elites and society are, indeed, going through a process of deep reappraisal regarding the political thinking that has brought Armenians to

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this catastrophe. Today, in the context of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, there is hope that countries like Armenia will finally be able to break their dependence on Russia, which has lasted for centuries.

Today, Russian imperialism and colonialism have once again become a topic of global discussion. In this context, societies that have historically been under Russian cultural hegemony are finding the language to talk about their experience, as well as the cultural tools to deconstruct the narratives that have served that hegemony. However, as Armenia's experience of the last 200 years shows, Russian imperial domination has been surprisingly resilient, as it has been able to re-invent itself in many ways. What is more concerning is the fact that each time it was the contradictions and conflicts between Moscow's former imperial subjects that allowed imperialism to return in a new form. Once again, "there is a division of labour, we divide, you rule." Perhaps it is time for "us", the people who have been subjected to imperial hegemony, to stop dividing ourselves, so that "they" can no longer rule us. ЛЕ

This text was originally published in the framework of the Confronting Memories project of the Civil Society Forum.

Mikayel Zolyan is a social researcher and political analyst from Yerevan, Armenia. His areas of expertise include issues of politics of memory, nationalism, national identity, foreign policy and regional conflict, as well as social and political movements and democratization in a post-Soviet context. After the revolution in 2018, Zolyan entered parliament as a member of the ruling bloc "My Step". In 2021, he returned to academia and civil society, doing research on the politics of memory and working as a consultant with Armenian and international NGOs. He is also the host of a TV show on the Armenian educational channel Boon TV.

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Twenty-five years on, the Yeltsin Centre shows Russia's danger

JAMES C. PEARCE

Although I have been to the Yeltsin Centre in Yekaterinburg many times for research, about half way through my last visit, I began to feel uneasy. Videos of the coup and parliament bombings touched a nerve. How quickly the situation changed then. Images of buildings around Pushkin Square in Moscow, near where I used to work, being smashed by vandals and cars alike. Such events feel unthinkable in Moscow today. In the Yeltsin Centre, I realized just how likely they could be.

Twenty-five years ago, as Boris Yeltsin resigned from his position as president of the Russian Federation, his wife and daughter were utterly relieved. The job had taken its toll in just about every way and the Yeltsins were excited to get their family life back. But Russia and the world were stunned. It came out of the blue. What next for Russia after the chaos? Nobody knew.

Two and a half decades later, this remains an open question. The Russia that Yeltsin left behind was a very different country than it is today. On the one hand, today Russia is a more prosperous, safe, westernized and modern country, at least more than it was at any point in its history. On the other, it is an autocratic state centred around one person which ignores the 1993 constitution, invaded its neighbours, and is cut off from former allies in Europe and the West. Many of Yeltsin's biggest supporters have fled the country, been sent to prison, or stay at home in silence.

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I visited the Yeltsin Centre in Yekaterinburg, on the banks of the Iset River, on the eve of Yeltsin's famous New Year address. It was an overall very sobering experience. Hands down one of the best museums I have ever seen. The visit brought something home that perhaps I, and many others, have neglected: Russia is one bad day away from political chaos.

A monument to democracy

The Yeltsin Centre is Russia's only presidential museum. It stands as a testament to the man who finally "brought democracy to Russia". Boris Yeltsin was a man who by his own admission was not a democrat and had authoritarian tendencies. In a 1990 interview with Vladimir Pozner, Yeltsin said that he cannot possibly be a democrat. He was born in the Soviet Union and grew up in this system. He hoped others in the West would help him to become more democratic. Yet, Yeltsin struggled. He ignored and dismissed the Russian parliament, his ministers and advisors, and cancelled elections. Even his biggest supporters admit that the 1996 presidential election was effectively stolen.

The museum starts with a film made up of crystal figurines. It is a story about democracy in Russia going back to the *veche* (popular assembly) of Velikiy Novgorod. The film takes us through the attempts of many Russian tsars, politicians and even Soviet leaders to introduce wider democratic reforms. The greats of Ivan, Peter and Catherine all get special mention, as do Aleksandr I, Nicholas II and Nikita Khrushchev. Constitutions and reforms are covered, as are the terrors of Stalin and Ivan IV as the consequence of democratic failures.

Boris Yeltsin was a man who by his own admission was not a democrat and had authoritarian tendencies.

This film's greatest success is its most obvious metaphor. The crystal figurines are a representation of democracy itself. Crystal is beautiful and highly sought after – just like democracy. But it is also fragile, needs constant care and comes at a huge price – just like democracy. It was a price paid by millions of innocent people throughout Russian history, not to mention leadership that was incompetent, corrupt or uncaring.

The Soviet-era part of the exhibition details the USSR's history, with Yeltsin's personal biography going on in the background. Photos of him as a girl's football coach, his party cards, school diplomas, newspaper cuttings and job appointments adorn the hall. The message here is that despite wars, revolution, purges and suffering, ordinary life continued and offered hope amidst the darkness.

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Photo: Mikhail Markovskiy / Shutterstock

Outside the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center in Yekaterinburg, Russia.

After this comes the main exhibit: the "seven days" of Yeltsin's rule. From his time as a regional politician, through the Soviet collapse, the economic blunders, 1996 election, and right up until his final days in office, Yeltsin's career is laid out for the visitor to see how he freed Russia from tyranny. Despite this, it does not shy away from criticizing Yeltsin. The botched economic reforms are discussed at length by those around Yeltsin, his critics and ordinary citizens. Lengthy video interviews are available and accompany archival material and film to show just how tough this decade was for the country.

Interestingly, Vladimir Putin is hardly featured. He appears only at the end of the sixth hall, merely listed as the last prime minister who succeeded Yeltsin. The final photo is of Putin receiving the nuclear briefcase, with a model replica beside it. Opposite, as you leave for Yeltsin's office, the words *береги Россию* (take care of Russia) are inscribed on the wall.

The visitor then enters a replica of Yeltsin's Kremlin office to watch his New Year's resignation before leaving into the freedom hall. Famous people, journalists, politicians, cultural figures, university professors and TV personalities all recite

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words from the 1993 constitution and remind the visitor that these are their freedoms they need to "take care" of.

There is one noticeable change about the exhibition from two years ago. Many of those interviewed for the centre's exhibit are now foreign agents. Thus, foreign agent stickers are slapped over exhibitions where figures from the likes of Dmitriy Muratov to Ivan Urgant speak in videos.

There are rumours that the centre is slated to be shut down completely. If the rumours are true, and the centre does, in fact, close, that would be a huge blow not just to the city, but Russia as a whole. It is a unique place where the final remnants of Russian democracy have survived so far. The centre admits it was a messy ride, but that ultimately, democracy is still better than the alternative. It is a message that has not always cut through in Russian society.

The failed coup

Although I have been to the Yeltsin Centre many times for research, personal enjoyment and dinners at its lovely restaurants, about half way through my last visit I began to feel uneasy. Videos of the 1991 coup and parliament bombings touched a nerve. How quickly the situation changed then. How suddenly Russia and the USSR fell into utter chaos and uncertainty. At first nobody knew if Mikhail Gorbachev was dead or alive. Once the coup had failed, many accused him of secretly being on it. Images of buildings around Pushkin Square in Moscow, near where I used to work, being smashed by vandals and cars alike. Such events feel unthinkable in Moscow today. In the Yeltsin Centre, I realized just how likely they could be.

Watching these historical archives brought back memories of Evgeniy Prigozhin's march on Moscow in 2023. That day caused a real feeling of nervousness. What would have happened if Prigozhin had reached Moscow? What if Putin had fled because the army stood down and refused to stop Prigozhin and Wagner? Few expected much good to come out of it, yet for a while it looked like nobody was trying to stop them. The government fell silent as the nation sat glued to its phones in a state of shock. There is a generation that lived through the 1991 August coup and for whom Swan Lake will forever cause nervous flashbacks. In 2023, that was almost Prigozhin's video in Rostov.

Russia sometimes feels closer to a Prigozhin-like figure taking over than it is to a democratic transition. As readers of this magazine know, power in modern Russia is three-fold. First is the economic power of the oligarch class. They have been bought off, silenced or forced out the country. Second are the technocrats, who run the government for the president. They are a mixed bag of capable, cold, calculating

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bodies in suits who do not appear to have any ideological leanings. Finally, there are the security forces. Known in Russian as *siloviki*, these are the ones with the guns. The first two groups, more open to liberal ideas and the West, could bring Russia out of the cold and back into the fold – but not without the last group's blessing.

A recent report by the Free Russia Foundation concluded that the best hope of democratic change lies with the technocrats. People like the prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin, the central bank head, Elvira Nabiullina, or the finance minister, Anton Siluanov. People who are actually running the government, and capably it must be acknowledged. They probably know better, but are resigned to the current status quo because there is a lack of an alternative. Whether they will be able to piggyback democratic initiatives and ride on the hopes of a population desperate for a return to normality in a post-Putin world is unclear. The reason why can be seen clearly in the Yeltsin Centre: Yeltsin found himself in a much better and more favourable position than today's democrats.

Yeltsin found himself in a much better and more favourable position than today's democrats in Russia.

In 1991 the coup plotters had literally everything going for them. They had decorated political and military careers for one thing. For another, they controlled literally everything: the communist party, the parliament, security services and the army, as well as communications systems. No outside force, or foreign country, could have stopped them or even wanted to try. But the coup failed. It failed because the society, though disillusioned with *perestroika*, feared what going back would mean. Watching three youngsters die on Moscow's streets brought that home. Moreover, an alternative path was available then and it had a clear leader: the popular Boris Yeltsin.

Take care of Russia

The current discontent with the state, standard of living and quality of services was rising before the COVID-19 pandemic. It has not dissipated overtime, but now the avenues and channels to vent that frustration are fewer. Today the alternative paths for Russia are clear, but there is no opportunity or a clear leader. The late Alexei Navalny was a polarizing figure even among Russia's liberal opposition, not to mention the population at large. Yeltsin, on the other hand, was a patriot, and nobody doubted that. Meanwhile, today some of Russia's opposition figures are seen as actively rooting for their own country's failure and defeat. Such things rarely come across well.

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Russia's economic crises of the 1990s were unique to the decade. Neither they nor the economic devastation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union are likely to be repeated. A recession and housing bubble are not out of the question in the next five years, however, and both could shake people psychologically. Worse, though, would be if a Prigozhin-like figure seizes the initiative again at a vulnerable moment for the state. There are others of his ilk in the *siloviki* closer to the reins of power than many would like to imagine. Controlling the guns makes it easier for them to make a bid for Russia's future. Who, realistically, could stop them if they tried? Once more, the Yeltsin Centre has an answer.

Yeltsin's famous words to Putin as he left Moscow and the Kremlin were "take care of Russia". That phrase is plastered on the walls of the Yeltsin Centre, and repeated by several famous people in a video titled "Freedom". It is also a regurgitated phrase used by the media and academics alike, who spend little time decoding it.

Ultimately, it is the Russian people's duty to take care of Russia and their freedoms. That was Yeltsin's message echoed loudly throughout the centre. The Yeltsin Centre argues that, if nothing else, Yeltsin delivered Russians their freedom from tyranny. Mistakes were made in the election campaign, Chechnya, the economy, privatization and distribution of wealth, and even in the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. But the main thing, the centre argues, is that Russia emerged from the terror, the pain, the darkness of its recent past – and is much better for it.

Russia can do so again. But as I wrote many times last year, the wishful thinking of foreigners and western governments will not be the reason if it does. It will indeed fall on the shoulders of Russian citizens to demand better of their government and rediscover the spirit of 1991. For another attempted *siloviki* takeover to fail, it will require that passion to unite behind a genuine alternative. For now, though, a lack of empathy prevails and that void is huge. All that is left is the Yeltsin Centre. EE

James C. Pearce is a historian and author of *The Use of History in Putin's Russia* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020). He is currently writing a history of Russia's Golden Ring Cities.

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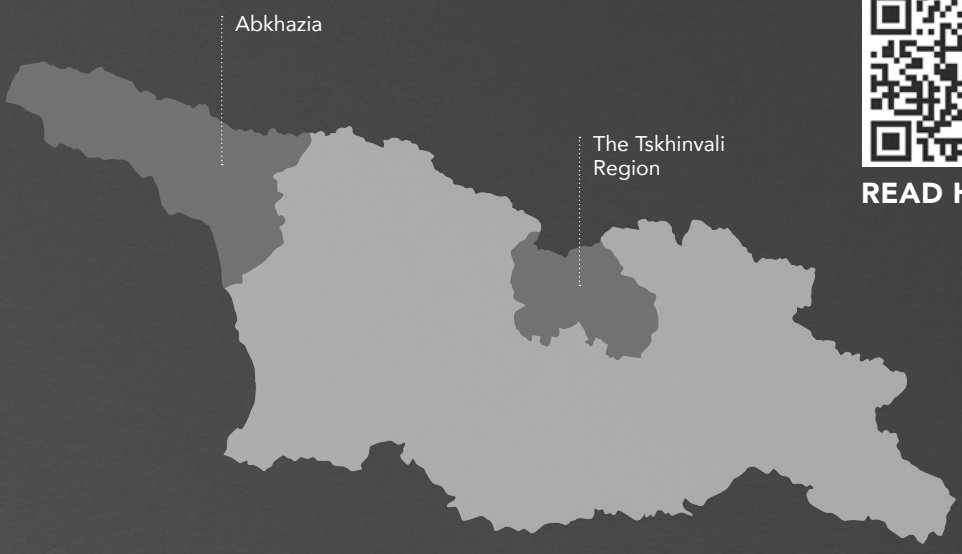
The “foreign policy” of Georgia’s occupied regions, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, relies entirely on Russia’s diplomatic, political, and logistical support. We examine the “foreign policy” activities of these regions since 2008 August war, including decision-making processes and bilateral relations with other states and various groups.

“FOREIGN POLICY” OF THE RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED REGIONS OF GEORGIA AFTER THE AUGUST 2008 WAR



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The faces of resilience

ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

Ukrainians are reclaiming their roots
and identity, flooding cultural venues in defiance.
This highlights a disconnect the West fails to understand.
War here is not just about soldiers and weapons:
it is a rallying cry for the entire society.

My trip back home to Germany, after visiting Kyiv and Lviv, awaits. But before leaving, I meet Olga Myrovych, head of the Lviv Media Forum. This non-profit organization champions media independence and public dialogue in Ukraine. In a warm Lviv café, the contrast to the weight of our conversation is stark. After a week of intense reporting, I ask the question that has grown ever more urgent: how can the world truly grasp Ukraine's fight for survival?

Olga is why I am here. The forum was born after Ukraine co-hosted Euro 2012 with Poland, exposing a harsh truth: most European journalists knew next to nothing about the country. "For many, Ukraine didn't exist," Myrovych says. It was a "blind spot". Supported by international donors, the forum strives to fill that void by bringing foreign journalists like me to Ukraine and hosting various events to foster dialogue and reshape the country's global image. For too long, Ukraine was dismissed as little more than a vague extension of "Great Russia". That distorted perspective fuelled global indifference when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Now, as Ukrainians fight for survival, journalists' role in illuminating their history, and struggles, is more vital than ever.

Expectation versus reality

I had written on Ukraine before, but this was my first time on the ground. Arriving a week earlier with six French journalists, guests of the forum, I expected

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to find a nation on its knees as the third anniversary of a brutal war loomed. The reality stunned me. In Lviv, young soldiers in uniform strolled arm-in-arm with their girlfriends. Families packed restaurants. Theatres buzzed. Bookstores stayed open late. At the Bernardine Church, a Sunday choir spilled into the streets, where people raised funds – was it for the families of fallen soldiers? For the war itself? It was life and death, resilience and suffering, woven together.

Everywhere, I saw this duality. Amputees played table tennis at the state-of-the-art "Superhumans" rehabilitation centre. A father joined the "Da Vinci Wolves" recruiting battalion. Young mothers from Irpin, survivors of Russian massacres, counselled others in Bucha. An IT specialist tested smart jammers to shield soldiers from enemy drones. Museum directors, professors, journalists, ordinary citizens, all contributing in their own ways. That night, over coffee with Olga, I realized this disconnect mirrored a deeper gap: the chasm between how Ukraine's war is lived and how it is understood in the West.

> For too long, Ukraine was dismissed as little more than a vague extension of "Great Russia".

Why do Ukrainians insist on calling Russia's aggression a "full-scale invasion" rather than simply a "war"? I ask. "Language matters," Myrovych explains. "When you say "war", you look for different solutions: negotiations, compromises. But what's the solution to an invasion? It's simple: get out. There's no middle ground. That's why the wording is so crucial. This is where our worldviews differ."

"When people like [US President Donald] Trump talk about "stopping the war", they ignore what kind of war this really is," she continues. "This war isn't about Russia needing more land, they have plenty. They want us to stop being Ukrainian and become Russian." And this war is not an isolated phenomenon. Seeing it in a historical context, as the continuation of a pattern of aggression and betrayal, is the only way for us in the West to grasp why Ukrainians will never stop fighting.

"What would peace bring?" Myrovych probes, "likely occupation. And in that sense, Ukraine and the West often see things very differently".

Everybody's war

That night in the Lviv café, on the eve of my departure, Myrovych shares how she tried to get theatre tickets for her mother. They were sold out. Concert halls were packed, and cafés overflowing. Just months ago, a new bookstore opened in Lviv.

"I've never seen such a cultural renaissance," she says. "Putin is trying to erase Ukraine, but the war, for sure, has achieved the opposite."

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Ukrainians are reclaiming their roots and identity, flooding cultural venues in defiance. This highlights a disconnect the West fails to understand. War here is not just about soldiers and weapons: it is a rallying cry for the entire society. As we part, Myrovych shows me the Diia app on her phone. Launched in 2020, it lets Ukrainians pay taxes, renew licences and even donate to the war with a tap. Since 2022, it has become a symbol of tech driving the war effort. With Diia, soldiers and civilians alike can apply for aid, access emergency services, and track Russian troop movements. More importantly, it simplifies donations to the army.

"Organizing from the bottom up is our tradition," Myrovych explains. "We don't believe in authorities, it is part of our history." This grassroots spirit has fuelled Ukraine's mobilization. In 2014, civilians stepped in to support a broken army. Today, civil society is the backbone of the war effort. Myrovych herself says she donates 60 per cent of her salary to the army. Licenced charities buy weapons, support families and keep the army running. "Civil society has helped us survive and sustain this war," she says.

Ukrainians understand that they have no choice. This explains the resilience that I have witnessed: a blend of tension, suffering and an unbroken will to survive. It is the many faces of this Ukrainian resilience that I want to bring back home with me.

Resilience in innovation

I meet Oleksiy on a freezing field near Bucha as he tests a drone-detection device. Once an e-learning pioneer and co-founder of Technomatix, one of Ukraine's top digital education firms, he's now a soldier, of a special kind.

When Russia invaded in 2022 and like many Ukrainians, Oleksiy felt compelled to act. With the war increasingly fought in the air via drones, his tech expertise became a weapon. "The amount of forces doesn't matter; we fight a massive enemy, and only technology can change the situation on the battlefield," Oleksiy, who has young sons, says.

Ukrainian resilience can be described as a blend of tension, suffering and an unbroken will to survive.

In 2023, he teamed up with IT experts to create Moodro.Tech, a system that detects incoming drones, distinguishing friends from foes and preventing deadly hits on Ukrainian soldiers. It is "smart jamming" … "a constant game of cat and mouse: they invent something new, and we counter it".

"We have to provide our guys with technology that's better than the enemy's," he adds. Oleksiy is part of Ukraine's thriving defence-tech ecosystem. "Our goal

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Soldiers carrying coffins of their comrades to their final resting place at the cemetery in Lviv.

isn't just to save soldiers' lives. We have to give them an edge on the battlefield. Without this technological advantage, we cannot win. It's that simple."

Resilience in rebuilding

Viktoriya Semko, a mother from Irpin, the suburban city bordering Bucha, shows me the true meaning of resilience. We meet in her city, where new buildings rise on land scarred by atrocities. Semko had moved there from Kyiv only years before the war, seeking safer streets and better schools. On February 24th 2022, everything changed. She had just dropped off her three kids at school when Russian bombs began to fall. Later, Bucha and Irpin became the sites of some of Russia's

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most vicious war crimes. She stayed through the occupation, even as mass graves were uncovered. A trained therapist, she helped and, with others, opened the Tanto Psychological Hub, to cater to those dealing with trauma. "The main question," asks Semko, "is how to continue to live when you've seen so much pain?" To her, there is only one answer: stay, heal and rebuild, one life at a time.

Resilience in dying

Near Lychakiv Military Cemetery in Lviv, one of Europe's oldest graveyards, the true cost of resilience is laid bare. Blue and yellow flags ripple over fresh graves. Photos of young faces stare back from headstones, like Yuriy "Ruf" Dadak, a poet killed in 2022; and Iryna "Cheka" Tsybukh, a journalist and medic killed in the Kharkiv region just days before her 26th birthday. A year before she died, in April 2023, Iryna wrote a farewell letter. Her brother made it public after her death.

To have the strength to be a free person, one must be brave. Because only the brave have happiness, and it is better to die running than to live rotting. Be worthy of the exploits of our heroes; Don't be sad; be brave!

Kisses, yours, Iryna

Anastasiya Hlotova, our guide, pauses at the headstone of an architect friend. "He was one of those people you can't forget." Like her, her friend was from Luhansk, now occupied by Russia. She fled in 2015. Settling in Lviv, she rebuilt her life and learnt Ukrainian. But the war has fractured the family: her father, who is pro-Russian, lives in Moscow. Her elderly aunt stayed behind in Luhansk. Will she ever see them again? Hlotova recalls a German parliamentarian who, not long ago, visited Lviv. He opposed sending weapons to Ukraine in the name of "peace". She shakes her head.

As I leave the cemetery, a brass military orchestra fills the air, not for a concert, but a funeral. Grandmothers weep as their grandsons are lowered into the earth. Flags wave over fresh graves. There is an average of four funerals a day at the cemetery. "Peace?" Hlotova muses. "If the Russians stop fighting, the war ends. If Ukrainians stop fighting, Ukraine ceases to exist."

Resilience amidst tension and tragedy

The challenges facing Ukrainian society are immense: loss, anger, exhaustion and the desperate yearning for the fighting to stop: Nataliya Latyashova, a young mother, left Melitopol –now occupied by Russia – 12 years ago. She made her home

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in Lviv. Her husband is part of the military and they have two children. We met at an event for children at an animal shelter on the outskirts of Lviv, organized by the non-profit "Voices of Children". Does she believe in victory? I ask her.

"It's a tough question." She hesitates, before adding, "If I had to choose between my home, my loved ones, or property – I'd choose life." Her mother is still in Melitopol, but, after three years of war, "We've learned to value life over material things."

At the NGO's headquarters, Eugene Gerasimov, a therapist, shares the struggles of displaced teens. "Why bother studying if when I grow up, I will go fight in the war?" He says many ask this question. Yet resilience shines through. In a photobook on the coffee table – *War Through the Voices of the Children* – a child named Danya, just five years old, reassures his mother: "Don't be scared, mum, it's not a missile, it's just the water pipes rumbling."

Resilience in recovery

At the café in Lviv with Olga Myrovych, the lights flicker, then go out, it is a blackout. A soldier limps by and sits with his girlfriend or wife. He laughs; a quiet moment of joy amidst the chaos. Will he return to the front?

I think of Artem Peretiatko, a young photographer whose leg was shattered by a Russian drone in Kharkiv on Ukrainian Independence Day, August 24th, last year. We meet at Superhumans, the amazing rehab and prosthesis centre in Lviv, born from the war and funded by donations and international medical partnerships. He jokes about his new reality. Would he go back to the front? "It'll be harder for them to target me now, fewer parts," he says with a wry smile. His son can't wait to see his new leg.

There is also Jalyna, 52. Her sad smile will always stay with me. She lost her left leg stepping onto a landmine just 100 metres from her house in Bakhmut. Her two daughters fled the war. At Superhumans, she received a prosthesis and is now learning kickboxing and playing the piano.

Artem and Yalyna are among the over 20,000 Ukrainians who have lost limbs during the war. Many return to the front. Others open businesses. Some do not survive. "The centre", Yalyna says, "is the best thing that has ever happened to me".

Resilience in food and land

Food is resilience. Ticho, a small café run by Darusiya Ishchenko, embodies that spirit. In 2022, she fled Ukraine with her infant son, crossing Europe to find refuge

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in a tiny French village near Marseille called Bouc Bel Air. Her neighbour Caroline taught her to bake bread and quiches, helping her sell online and build up a clientele. Ishchenko found her calling. But home was always the goal. She returned to Ukraine to open a bakery selling quiches and cinnamon buns.

We meet there, a 12-square-metre haven with handmade signs, a vintage oven and the warm scent of freshly baked bread. It is more than a business; it is a refuge. Comfort lives here.

"I got older there," Ishchenko says of her time in France. "Before this trip, I was younger inside." Watching her country get torn apart from afar was devastating.

"The mental strain is immense," she admits. Tensions sear through society, those who stayed versus those who fled, those who fight versus those who do not. "The worst is when Ukrainians argue among themselves. We must support our army and each other. Only then can we achieve great things and stand united against Russia."

She has seen too much loss. Funerals no one should have to attend – her friend's husband, her assistant's relatives, her brother, her friends: "These are not the moments we were meant to share, but this is our reality." Yet Ishchenko believes in unity through comfort. "We can't change the war, but we can do small things, speak with good people, listen to great music, enjoy healthy food."

Even when missiles strike and the power cuts, life goes on. "People come here for comfort, for something good to eat. We chat, and I try to send them away in a better mood."

Peace? It is complicated. "We have a cemetery full of soldiers who believed we would win. It is tempting, but how long would it last? Ten years? Then they'd attack again, better armed and prepared. It's a never-ending story."

"This is our reality – the war," she says. "We live our lives, never forgetting those who make it possible. Many men and women are fighting for us. They stand out there in the cold. All I can do is donate, support the army and pay taxes so the government can keep the country running."

Her three-and-a-half-year-old son has grown up with air-raid sirens. "Let's go to the basement" is as familiar as "Let's go to the playground," she admits. "When I get frustrated with our government, I remind myself: it's not them, it's Russia attacking us."

Resilience in culture, emptiness and books

The land. The bread. The unbreakable bond between bread and Ukrainian identity. Bread is more than food – it is the soul of Ukraine, a symbol of survival etched in trauma. The Holodomor famine still scars the nation's memory. For centuries,

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Russia has tried to erase Ukraine, not just by starving its people and destroying its land, but by colonizing its artists, poets and painters. Baking bread is an act of quiet resistance. So is music. I feel this first-hand at Lehaim, a café in Lviv serving Odesa Jewish food, on my first night in Ukraine. A pianist plays Ukrainian folk tunes and guests sing along. Drawn in, I approach him.

Bread is more than food – it is the soul of Ukraine, a symbol of survival etched in trauma.

Vitaliy Chmyr is the conductor of the men's choir at Ivan Franko National University. He has toured the world, directed at the Alte Oper in Frankfurt, but now plays Ukrainian music for café guests at least once a week. "If people stop listening, playing, or singing, there's no point in life," he tells me.

When we speak of the war and his choir, his voice breaks. Two of his singers, both professors, have died in combat. Now their sons sing in the choir, carrying their fathers' legacy.

"Under the Soviet Union we had to preserve our traditions, singing, painting, poetry," Chmyr says. "It's the same today. When people sing, they fight against Russia. We'll fight for as long as it takes: one year, two, five. The enemy has tried to destroy us for 350 years. They will not stop."

The Khanenko Art Museum in Kyiv now stands mostly empty. On October 10th 2022, a missile shattered the museum's window. Early on, the war had forced the evacuation of its collections, Ukraine's most extensive collection of European and ancient art. The pieces were scattered, stored safely, or sent abroad. Some reappeared in European museums like the Louvre, through new collaborations. A creative lifeline for Ukrainian culture, and indeed, world culture, in the face of war. But one space remains: "the empty room" – a solitary piano sits among the shadows of absent masterpieces. It is an exhibit of absence, of what has been lost.

"This room is a part of our memory, our history," says museum director Yuliya Vahanova. "Every time we walk through this empty space, you start to physically understand the Russian methodology of erasing memory. The first year, you remember. The second year, you're not sure. By the third year, you can't recall what used to be here."

This erasure of Ukrainian identity and memory is a tactic Russia has used for generations. The museum's empty spaces refuse to let us forget, they are resistance in their own right. Once, a prominent Ukrainian offered to raise money to fix the shattered window. Vahanova refused. "We don't have to repair windows. We have to stop those who do the destruction."

Despite its emptiness, the museum thrives with new forms of expression: concerts, collaborations with musicians, photo exhibits on the war. Visitors still come, making up 70 per cent of pre-war numbers.

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"Before, they came for the collection, familiar, beloved," Vahanova says. "Now, they come for something else. For comfort." At fundraising events, the money often goes toward buying weapons and aiding the army. Vahanova never imagined raising money for war, but this is her new reality.

For Tetyana Ogarkova, culture is the "foundation of Ukrainian resistance". A professor of French literature in Kyiv and member of PEN Ukraine, she is the driving force behind "Unbreakable Libraries". The front-line regions around Kherson have endured unimaginable devastation. Beyond the bombings, Russian forces deliberately burned hundreds of libraries to the ground, targeting Ukraine's cultural lifeblood. Every month, Tetyana joins a team of volunteers: writers, artists, book lovers, who travel across war-torn Ukraine in buses loaded with books. They rebuild libraries where schools and cultural centres once stood. These "unbreakable libraries" rise from the ashes in communities like Kherson and Odesa, offering more than books. They host poetry readings, writing workshops, and moments of connection for soldiers, deminers and locals alike. In Ukraine, culture is no ornament. It is the battlefield itself.

Never again?

Weeks later, safe at home, I am caught in the swirl of President Donald Trump's abandonment of Ukraine. The sense of betrayal must cut deep. My mind drifts to the PEN Ukraine volunteers, buses packed with books, heading to the front lines near Kherson. I think of the overflowing cafés and concert halls in Lviv and Kyiv. And I think of Oleksandra Matviychuk of the Centre for Civil Liberties, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022 for documenting Russia's war crimes. In her Kyiv office, when I met her, she spoke of tens of thousands of Ukrainian children deported to Russia, with over a million indoctrinated.

"Not only is it a war crime," she said, "but a genocidal policy aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity". This, she told my group, is "the most documented war in history".

But documentation is not enough. Matviychuk warned of "the collapse of the post-Second World War international system". She called on all of us to take responsibility for stopping these atrocities. The full-scale invasion, she said, is far more than a territorial issue. "It's a war against the founding values of European civilization. If we do not stop this chain of war, crime and impunity, Putin will go further. He will attack another country and apply the same strategy."

"One day, we may add Estonia, Moldova or Poland to the list of Chechnya, Syria, Ukraine," she said. "We live in an interconnected world, and only the extension of freedom will make it safer."

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Her words resonate now, amidst news that the Trump administration could end US-funded initiatives that document Russian war crimes, and its push for a quick "peace deal".

"Some think "never again" means avoiding new conflict at all costs. For us, it means defending freedom, even when our allies doubt our ability to resist the Russian offensive. Never again does not mean compromising with evil. It does not mean sacrificing one country, hoping that evil will spare yours. That is not never again."

In Ukraine, they understand the stakes. With or without American aid, they will continue the fight. Thanks to the Lviv Media Forum, I think I better understand why.

Isabelle de Pommereau is a journalist and reporter. Originally from France, she is based in Frankfurt and works as a correspondent for international outlets, including *The Christian Science Monitor*, die *Tageszeitung*, and *Alternatives Economiques*.

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Peace, not surrender

Under these conditions Ukrainians will return home

HALYNA KHALYMONYK

According to Ukraine's ministry of national unity only 30 per cent of those who are abroad have said that they were ready to return home immediately. Another 40 per cent are waiting for the official end of the war and long-term security guarantees. The remaining 30 per cent have now said they would build their lives abroad.

Many Ukrainian refugees who are now spread around the world fear that even after a ceasefire the war could flare up again, putting their families at risk one more time. Diplomatic pressure without guarantees of a just and lasting peace that takes into account Ukraine's interests is perceived as something akin to surrender. Such a peace would not provide what Ukrainians need most: certainty that their lives will not be turned into rubble again.

"Ukraine's tragedy lies in the fact that it is struggling to join a world that partly no longer exists – a world of liberal democracy, human rights and the rule of law," says Joanna Mosiej-Sitek, a Polish journalist and editor of the Ukrainian-Polish publication *Sestry*. Indeed, this world has been collapsing before our eyes for quite some time now. Yet, most Ukrainians still believe in it.

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Waiting for security guarantees

The majority of refugees from Ukraine have relocated to western countries. Around 6.9 million of them, which is 20 per cent of the country's pre-war population, are still there. Germany, Poland, Czechia, Spain and Romania are the countries that have hosted the largest number of Ukrainians since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. Despite the active talk about peace initiated by US President Donald Trump, the number of Ukrainians leaving Ukraine has only increased in recent months. In January 2025, as many as 25,530 Ukrainian refugees were granted temporary protection in the European Union.

In 2024 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that there were 1.2 million Ukrainians in Russia and Belarus. It remains unknown how many of them left voluntarily and how many were deported. This "voting with their feet" demonstrates which political course is closest to Ukrainians. It also undermines the rhetoric of Russian propaganda that Ukrainians expected liberation from their own statehood and wanted to join the so-called *Russkiy Mir* – or Russian world.

However, if Moscow announces a ceasefire tomorrow, it does not mean that we will see a massive return of Ukrainian refugees. According to Oleksiy Chernyshev, Ukraine's minister of national unity, only 30 per cent of those Ukrainians who are abroad have said that they were ready to return home immediately. Another 40 per cent are waiting for the official end of the war and long-term security guarantees. The remaining 30 per cent have now said they would build their lives abroad.

"I am from Zaporizhzhia. Russia is demanding to be handed four regions, including mine, which it has not even been able to fully capture by military force," says Anastasiya Holikova, a 44-year-old Ukrainian project manager who has been living in the UK. "Even if there is a ceasefire, Russia may think that the captured territories give it the right to regain its strength and attack Zaporizhzhia again."

Stained with blood

Ukrainians fear the possibility of a renewed Russian occupation, loss of life and national identity – not now, but in the near future. They do not believe that Russia will ever stop and they are well aware of what is happening in the occupied territories. According to the head of the Mobile Justice Group, Wayne Jordash, the Russians have created a network of 20 torture chambers there. International investigators found that the Russian occupation administration acted according to a well-planned scheme, using established methods. This is indicative of what could happen in the event of a full occupation of Ukraine: the persecution and elimina-

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tion of pro-Ukrainian leaders; kidnapping; torture; blackmail through the threat of murdering relatives; rape; and ultimately the destruction of an independent Ukrainian identity. This final point has already included the banning of Ukrainian books and music, as well as excluding the Ukrainian curriculum from schools in the occupied territories.

Anna Shalia, a 47-year-old Ukrainian mother of three whose stable with horses burned down in the Babusyn Sad hotel complex during the Russian offensive in the Kyiv region, says: "I don't believe in any peace agreements. I don't have the strength to repeat what I did in 2022: to say goodbye to the ashes of almost 20 years of my life and my ten beloved horses, take my children and the remains of my stables to Poland where I had to rebuild my life from scratch. For me, my hometown will forever be associated with danger."

Many Ukrainians fear that during a possible ceasefire, Russian forces may start hunting down activists, volunteers and public figures.

During their offensive in the Kyiv region, the Russians set up their headquarters in the hotel complex, which the woman's family had built over the years. Locals still remember how in the basement of one of the buildings they found women's underwear. It was stained with blood. There was also dried blood on clothes and mattresses. Nearby, between the villages of Myle and Mriya, about ten cars with people in them were shot at and a mass grave with bodies of civilians was found in a neighbouring village.

Many Ukrainian refugees also fear that during a possible ceasefire, Russian special forces may start hunting down Ukrainian activists, volunteers and public figures, even if the territory is formally under Ukrainian control. A break at the front would mean that Russian special forces would be directed to destroy any Ukrainian resistance. Terrorist acts could be carried out as well. There is also a fear that a weakened Ukraine will be destabilized by the spread of pro-Russian narratives, as well as the presence of Moscow's proxies in the Ukrainian government. Ukraine has already experienced this during the presidency of the now fugitive Viktor Yanukovych. And it has also seen the consequences of internal conflicts stirred up by Russian forces.

The verdict of the European Court of Human Rights on the events in Odesa on May 2nd 2014, when people were burned alive in the Trade Union Building, is illustrative. The court found the Ukrainian state guilty on three counts: the police allowed the riots to take place and failed to protect the citizens; the firefighters failed to save people in the building; and the investigation of the events was long and ineffective. The paradox of the situation is that almost all of these representatives of the "Ukrainian authorities" – the head of the police and rescuers – imme-

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diately fled to Russia and made careers there. These figures have been placed on international wanted lists.

A just peace?

According to a survey published by *The Economist*, the "demilitarization" that Putin so eagerly seeks is not approved by 80 per cent of Ukrainians. "The only possibility for me to return is not even the absence of active hostilities or rocket attacks," says 37-year-old Ukrainian Alyona Fedorova. "The prerequisite is a just peace. For me, this means that Ukraine should be able to develop its army, preserve its sovereignty and become a part of the European Union and have security guarantees."

Fedorova went through a very difficult path of integration in Lithuania. In three years, she has learned Lithuanian and English to a confident level of proficiency. She works for an international company and in the beginning was ready to return to Ukraine, if these conditions were met. However, now she admits that she will make every effort to stay in Lithuania. At home, she will miss the things she associates with "Europeanness": inclusive spaces, a lack of discrimination, a sense of security, and equality for all before the law.

"When they say that Ukrainians took advantage of the war in search of a better life, it is a big manipulation. We started fighting for the right to remain Ukrainian and be a part of the European democratic community," says Alona Tanieva, a mother of 1.5-year-old Mariya. She and her daughter recently returned to the city of Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi in the Odesa Oblast after living in Poland for two and a half years.

According T*he Economist*, Putin's "demilitarization" plan is not approved by 80 per cent of Ukrainians.

Before the war, she worked as a manager of a hardware store and an English teacher. She moved to Poland to live with her husband, who had been working there for a long time. They wanted to build a family and have a child. Alyona says that two and a half years convinced her that forced emigration is an extremely difficult journey. She felt that she had lost everything: her social status, standard of living, family and friends. Only then did she see the benefits that pre-war Ukraine had offered her: comfortable housing; an opportunity to live in her own language environment, at her own pace, and not in a constant race for survival; a high level of services; and a sense of freedom.

"I was abroad with my husband, who took on most of the responsibilities for the family, while most refugee women are struggling to obtain for themselves and their children the most basic standard of living. It's hard work, but women do it

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to protect their children and give them the opportunity to live in a democratic country," she says.

Yet, Alyona admits that her decision to return to Ukraine is temporary. Together with her husband, they are planning to live for some time in the United States, where he now works as a truck driver. She is hoping to join him, and has already obtained the right documents, but cannot go because of the suspension of the programme "Uniting for Ukraine" (this programme was launched by the US government under the previous administration and established a free online process for qualifying nationals of Ukraine, and their immediate family members, to come to the United States for a temporary period of up to two years – editor's note). "We had a plan to live in the United States, earn money to start our own business in Ukraine, and then return to Odesa. Now we are separated and the future is unclear. However, I decided to stay home during this time, close to my family. Missiles do not scare me as much as living alone in a foreign country."

"Missiles do not scare me as much as living alone in a foreign country," says Alyona.

Adaptive people

The desire to reunite with family is one of the main reasons for Ukrainian refugees to return home. It often drives them to come back, even if there is still risk. "We are from a front-line city," says Iryna Pylypenko, "and we lived in the UK with our son for two and a half years. It was a difficult choice between safety, financial stability, a good school for the child and danger, uncertainty, financial difficulties, but with my husband and the child's father."

The National Bank of Ukraine's inflation report notes that there are fewer and fewer people willing to return to Ukraine because of their adaptation abroad. Ukrainians are, in fact, very adaptive people. As a nation they have learned to live even in the worst conditions. That is why most Ukrainian refugees are employed. In Germany, which is famous for its generous social programmes, as many as 43 per cent of refugees from Ukraine had found work as of February 2025. Geographically speaking, Ukrainian refugees, according to the Center for Economic Strategy, come mostly from the country's east (33.4 per cent) and south (26.9 per cent). Among them, many have no place left to return to the country.

In this group is 42-year-old Mariya Brusova. Russia has deprived her of home twice. First, in 2014, together with her mother and young son, they fled pro-Russian militants in Luhansk. Then in 2022, she fled from Russian missiles that were falling

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on Kharkiv. For three years now she has been building a new life in Germany. She works as a nurse in a local clinic, has passed all the necessary exams to transfer her diploma, has learnt the language to a sufficient level, and changed her status from temporary protection to one based on her work contract.

"I love Ukraine, I miss it, but I am not ready to start all over again. When I return to Ukraine, I am not ready to look for housing and work. I am also not ready to take my son away from his school," the woman admits. "Ukraine's economy has been destroyed by the war and my salary as a nurse will not even allow me to pay the rent."

The economic situation in Ukraine has the greatest effect on the people whose homes have been destroyed or who remain in the occupied territories. Now, when they hear that Ukraine has to cede these territories so that Russia can "save face" by agreeing to a ceasefire, they feel betrayed. For them, this means that their roots have been cut off. That is why, in their view, it is easier to live in a country that is more economically developed.

Afraid to return

Another reason influencing the desire or unwillingness to return is children. In many countries, including Germany, and more recently Poland, refugees were required to enrol their children in national schools. This cuts them off from the Ukrainian education system. Many of the refugee children have already invested a lot of effort in learning the language of their host country and adapting to the new school system. This makes parents look for ways to stay abroad at least for the duration of their children's education.

Natalyia Marynych, a 37-year-old Ukrainian woman, lives in Canada with her daughter. She works in a bakery there and her daughter attends school: "In the event of a ceasefire, I will stay in Canada, because my daughter has so far only experienced the Canadian school system. She has friends here and I don't want to tear her away from that environment."

There is a flip side to the coin. There are also children who play a role in encouraging their mothers to return. Olena Belyaeva stayed in Europe for less than a year – it was hard to be alone with a young son in her arms. However, instead of her native Kryvyi Rih, in the eastern part of Ukraine, she now lives in Zakarpattia, closer to the border with the European Union. "I wanted my child to grow up in a country where people speak his native language, among his native people, but I don't want to live next to Russia. I want to feel safe."

It is difficult to return for those who have been given a chance to receive life-saving treatment in western medical systems. For ten years now, Inna Bezroda has

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been suffering from a rare and incurable blood cancer. In Ukraine, such patients have to buy their own medicine, which costs them an equivalent of three thousand US dollars per ampoule. In Poland, on the other hand, if they are a part of the national health system, they can receive it free of charge. This medicine needs to be taken for life.

"I am in Poland with my husband, he worked as a lawyer in Ukraine, and here he delivers large-sized equipment," says Inna, "even if the European Union cancels the status of temporary protection, we will legalize our stay here through a work contract because for me it is a matter of survival. I dream that someday Ukraine will have the same level of healthcare system as the one that is here in Poland: transparent, responsible, people-oriented … staying here is my only chance to live."

"Many of those who have left Ukraine are afraid to return. They are convinced that they will be stigmatized and marginalized," says Ella Libanova, director of the Institute of Demography. At the same time, most Ukrainians believe that Russia wants to seize new Ukrainian territories and destroy Ukraine's statehood. These are the results of a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. The fear of Russian revenge; the possibility of large-scale shelling and fighting; occupation; the economic situation; and the labour market all have a large impact on why some Ukrainian refugees decide not to return home.

Peace not surrender

Another topic on which many Ukrainian refugees speak quite frankly is that they do not believe in appeasing Russia. They think that in the event of a new offensive, Russia could use Ukrainians as cannon fodder to attack the Baltic states, Poland and the European Union as a whole. In their view, it will be very difficult for two radically different value systems to co-exist peacefully on the same planet. In this battle, Ukrainians, even hypothetically, do not want to be on the same side as Russians.

Ukrainians want peace, not a surrender that will allow Russia to leave with the loot.

Hanna Maluzhonok, a 48-year-old Ukrainian who has worked as an analyst in banking and data management for 26 years, participated in several large-scale database development and implementation projects in Ukraine and is now successfully continuing her career in Ireland, where she moved because of the war. "I deliberately chose Ireland because it is a distant island country. I hope that Russia will be the last to come here," she says. "I do not believe that there are levers of influence that can force Russia

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to stop the war. If Russia is not stopped, even the United States may not be able to be saved by the 'beautiful ocean'."

Ukrainian refugees with teenage sons will not rush to return. They are afraid that they will be mobilized – now into the Ukrainian army, or worse, into the Russian occupation army if there is a second attack in the event of an unjust and unstable peace. "My son is 14 years old, I am scared to imagine that he could be forced to kill Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, or anyone who has extended a helping hand to us, but this is a possible scenario if Russia is not stopped," says 43-year-old Elizaveta B., who now lives in Germany. "I really want to return to my Kharkiv, if there is a stable ceasefire. I will definitely go there, but to visit. For the sake of my son, I will stay in Germany."

Ukrainians want peace, not a surrender that will allow Russia to leave with the loot. This would set a dangerous precedent. They are listening with concern to statements by world leaders about redrawing borders according to the right of the strong. This Pandora's box was opened by Russia, and it is Ukraine that can close it, defending its sovereignty not only for itself but for the whole free world. In a just world, Ukrainians will not have to decide whether to stay somewhere or return home. The choice should be obvious. ЕЕ

Halyna Khalymonyk is a Ukrainian editor and journalist. In 2006 she created the city newspaper *Visti Bilyayivka*. The publication successfully started to reach a national audience in 2017, transforming into a news agency with two websites. Since the beginning of the full-scale war she has lived and worked in Katowice, Poland.

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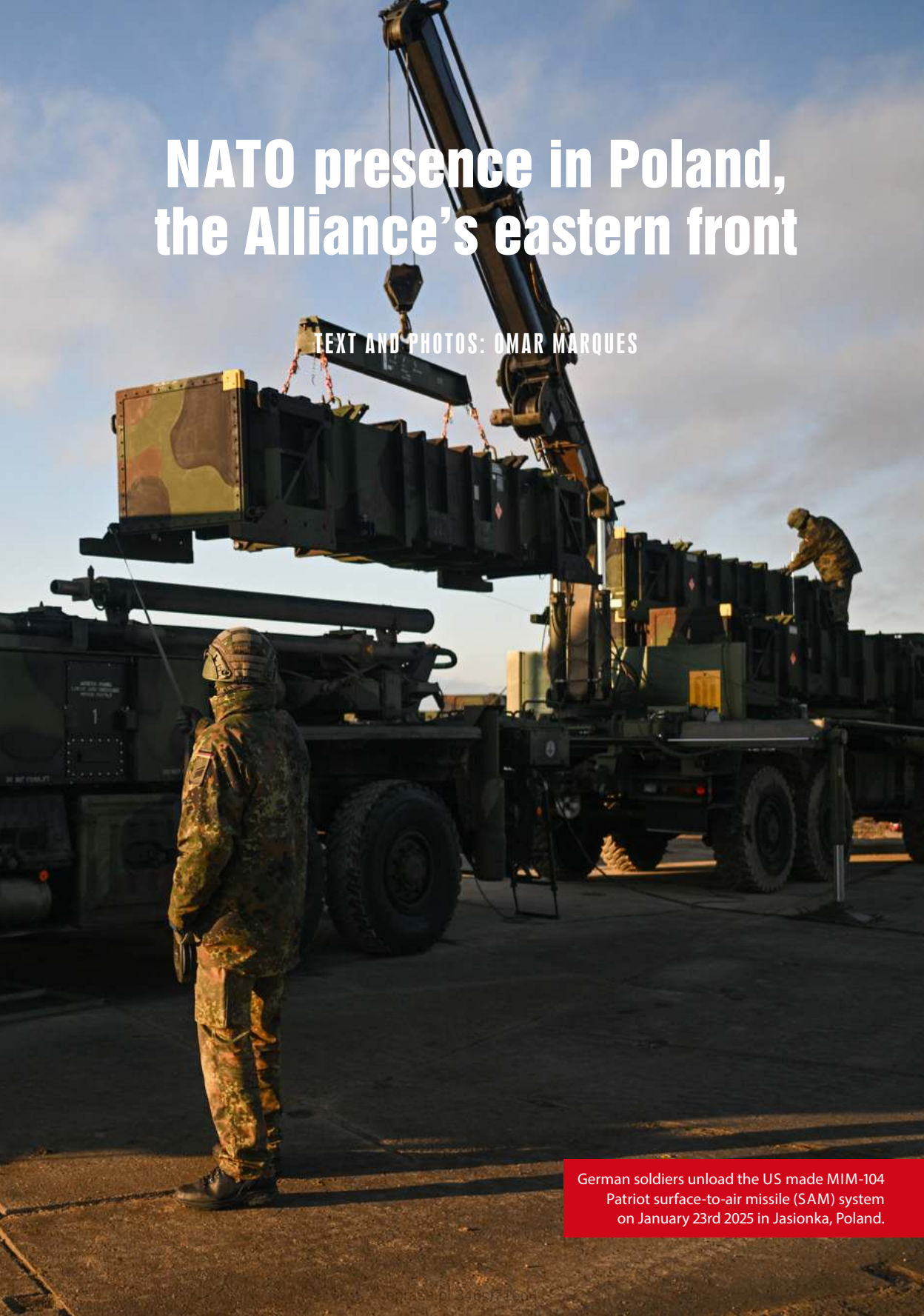
NATO presence in Poland, the Alliance's eastern front

TEXT AND PHOTOS: OMAR MARQUES



German soldiers unload the US made MIM-104 Patriot surface-to-air missile (SAM) system on January 23rd 2025 in Jasionka, Poland.

As Russia proceeded with its full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and continues until today, Poland, a NATO member bordering Ukraine, has increased its defence spending to over four per cent of GDP. As Donald Trump returned to the US presidency, he has clearly demanded from NATO members an increase in their defence spending as the US military shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific.

Days before the Russian full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, US troops landed in southeastern Poland near the border with Ukraine, following the former President Joe Biden's orders. Since then, Poland has become the eastern front of the NATO Alliance, now housing 10,000 US troops and other military units from the alliance members.

This photo essay, presents the extensive presence and cooperation between NATO members in Polish territory in the face of the ongoing Russian war. As the Trump Administration forces Ukraine to enter peace talks with Russia, Europe is now facing a new challenge – how to increase their military spending on a short notice. Poland, being the only European member that moved ahead, is now hailed as an example to follow, not just for defence spending but also for their relations with the US.

Photographs taken between 2022 to 2025

Omar Marques is a freelance photojournalist from northwest Portugal based in Kraków, Poland. He works as a stringer for Getty Images, Anadolu Agency and collaborates with magazines on editorial and commercial assignments between Central/Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

A Mikoyan MIG-29 fighter jet of the Polish Air Force takes part in a NATO shielding exercise at the Lask Air Base on October 12th 2022 in Lask, Poland. NATO's Allied Air Command, the Polish Air Force and the United States Air Force demonstrated the modern aircraft capabilities of Polish F-16s and the US F-22s. As the Russian Invasion of Ukraine continues, NATO member Poland has been investing in new military equipment and various NATO troops are now stationed in the country.

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A live fire exercise during the NATO multinational battle group eFPon at the Orzysz training ground on July 3rd 2022 in Orzysz, Poland. Observers included the then-Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

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US Army soldiers assigned to the 82nd Airborne carry military equipment as they take part in an exercise outside the operating base at the Arłamów Airport in March 2022 in Wola Korzeniecka, Poland.

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A view of the USS Gravely Destroyer Ship at the Port of Gdynia on June 7th 2022 in Gdynia, Poland.

Overcoming the crisis of hope

An interview with Agnieszka Holland, a Polish film director. Interviewer: Joanna Mosiej, editor in chief of the *Sestry* magazine

JOANNA MOSIEJ: You once said that your biggest dream is for the world to wake up and for us to have a future. Are we now living in a reality that resembles the Weimar Republic in its final days? Meaning, there is no hope and no return? That history needs to repeat itself?

AGNIESZKA HOLLAND: I am worried that it will be difficult to reverse from this path, unless there is a true will to do so. Of course we know that hope is what dies last, but this hope needs to be a collective, and not individual, experience. At this moment, when I am observing those who decide on our fate, I see that they neither have any ideas, nor will. And there is no courage. At the moment all governments that are either liberal or centre right are heading towards a direction of reactivity towards something which in their view seems inevitable, that is a wave of brown-shirt populism. When this wave is not counterbalanced with anything but more populism, then we cannot win in the game of deciding the world's fate. At least we won't be able to win in the next decade. At the same time, I do not see the hard work, the determination, nor the charisma that would make people believe that it is worth fighting for some values. And that means fighting in every aspect of the word: like the Ukrainians are fighting now, but also by giving up a certain level of comfort in order to ensure a better future and expand the rights of others.

Instead, we can see that many people who until now were engaged have become tired, disappointed and lost hope. As a result, they opt for what we call "internal migration".

It seems to me that we are moving to some kind of state of absence and passivity and that is why the crisis of hope seems to me to be the deepest and most dangerous of the current crises. This is expressed in many forms, including the

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Photo: Martin Kraft (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

unwillingness to procreate, which we can observe in the wealthier countries and which results from this lack of hope, or lack of faith in a meaningful future. People do not see enough goodness around them to project their life into the future. This huge disappointment, sense of meaninglessness or a tendency among young or sensitive people to just cut off from politics is in my view extremely dangerous if we want to maintain any form of democracy. So, yes, we are living in sad times. What is taking place in Poland is a certain reflection of what is taking place across the world. Just look at what Donald Trump is doing in the United States and how fast different authoritarianisms are now growing. All of this is very dystopian. Our reaction could be that of fatalism, we could give in and go with the flow, which is something that the majority of the political class has been doing. This approach of a very unique narcissistic egoism is masterfully exploited by politicians such as Donald Trump. They actually construct reality based on that. They give hope to those who are so uncritical that they will accept every little shiny object as gold and become enticed very easily. They are not equipped with the basic tools of critical thinking that would make them immune

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from the influence of modern media manipulations. At the time of internet revolution, artificial intelligence, social media and their algorithms, the manipulation of public opinion can be super easy and super effective. These monsters thus have incredible tools working for them. The blame for this situation lies with the entire education system but also the media, which have fallen under the commercial pressure of clickbait so much that they have ceased to be the authority for anybody.

I am under the impression that Ukraine's tragedy lies in its attempt to become a part of the world that no longer exists – that is the world of liberal democracy, human rights, rule of law, etc.

The moves of Donald Trump, such as the freezing of the resources coming from USAID, affect the Ukrainians directly. Not only are they deprived of hope for a better future, but also for a better today. These resources were used to finance the work of many non-governmental organizations and humanitarian aid. It will be very difficult to replace these resources. That is why we need to rebuild completely anew, and based on different rules, non-governmental organizations and independent media. This will take a huge effort, because today money is mostly on the side of all the millionaires and big tech. Trump and his vice president, just like some students of a wizard, may be able to impress some people with their effectiveness. However, this is all the result of their lack of any inhibitions. Until now we were convinced that there are some rules and borders that cannot be crossed. Today we find ourselves definitely on the defensive.

And what will this lead us to?

I think we more or less know. It will lead us to some kind of apocalyptic catastrophe after which, I hope, we will return home. If we survive this disaster, we will return to something more meaningful, but for the moment things do not look good.

So how can we give people hope?

I can only express my admiration, because – frankly speaking – creating hope in a situation where we do not know where to take it from would be irresponsible.

You are the voice of conscience in Polish cinematography, but who do you see as the hero/heroine in today's world? In other words, who is your Mr Jones?

Mr Jones (a reference to Gareth Jones, who uncovered the Holodomor famine in Soviet Ukraine and the main character of the film *Mr Jones*, which Holland directed – editor's note), a brave whistleblower, has always been my hero. Also, the activists who go against the current and fight for the most fundamental values are my heroes and heroines. They are the heroes of our times. They are in a difficult position because they are a minority. Just like the democratic opposition was a minority under communism or the first Christian community was a minority under the Roman Empire. But I

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believe that each time this world rebuilds itself and with every new turmoil a new moment comes when our freedoms and liberties only grow. That is why I hope that this time this will again be the case.

In your film *Europa, Europa* there is one scene, a surreal one indeed, when Hitler dances with Stalin. I think that today we could show a similar scene of Putin dancing with…

Well yes. I think we could actually create quite a large circle of crazy authoritarian narcissists dancing together with Putin. What unites them is a complete lack of interest in any values and only a focus on some kind of huge victory. *Europa, Europa* was in a way a warning. Its message looks valid today, as is the case with all films or stories which explore the topic of the choice that men need to make when they want to survive. In such moments, nothing else matters. We made this movie in 1989. It was screened in cinemas at the start of 1991. This was the time of great hope and big changes for our part of Europe. I was often asked why I had chosen such a title. My answer was that I am interested in the duality of Europe, its certain dichotomy that is reflected in the story of the boy who is the protagonist in this film. On the one hand, Europe is the cradle of our greatest values: democracy, human rights, equality, brotherhood, solidarity and an amazing culture. On the other hand, it is a cradle of the biggest crimes and cruelties committed against mankind. This is the duality. Now we are seeing it tipping towards the dark side. We are entering the dark side and cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel yet. This, however, does not mean that we should not be heading towards this light. We need to build coalitions against all of this that is going on. We need to give hope to those who are doubtful. There are still many people of good will, and based on their resistance we can build our future.

Finally, some comfort…

And to my Ukrainian friends and acquaintances, I would like to say that the light will come back. At the moment we are only seeing darkness around us and that is why we think that there is no light. But the light is there. It is in us. We are the carriers of this light. And those who are fighting now in Ukraine are, more than anybody else, the carriers of this light. We are surrounded by the forces who want to put out this light, but we need to protect it. That is why the only thing I can express now is my admiration for the strength and solidarity of the Ukrainian people.

Thank you so much for saying this. In our editorial team we are always saying that hope is inside us. We know that when we cannot find it elsewhere, we need to find it inside.

You are right. I actually just wanted to say that that light, or hope, is in us. ŁE

This interview was first published in Sestry *magazine.*

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Agnieszka Holland is a Polish film and television director and screenwriter. She is best known for her films *Europa Europa* (1990), for which she received a Golden Globe Award as well as an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay nomination. Other notable films include *The Secret Garden*, *In Darkness* and *Mr Jones*. In 2023, her film *Green Border* won the Special Jury Prize at the Venice International Film Festival.

Joanna Mosiej-Sitek is a Polish journalist and media expert and editor in chief of *Sestry* a Polish-Ukrainian magazine focusing on topics related to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. She is the former managing director of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and publishing director of *Wysokie Obcasy*. She is a creator of countless media projects building social engagement and supporting women.

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Europe is the only alternative

An interview with Salome Zourabichvili, fifth president of Georgia. Interviewer: Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

WOJCIECH WOJTASIEWICZ: Madame President, I would like to start by asking about your political plans and how best to resolve the current political and constitutional crisis in Georgia?

SALOME ZOURABICHVILI: Don't ask me about plans, because there are no plans when you are fighting. Practically speaking, Georgia now has a dictatorship, or a Russian-style regime. Since the so-called elections, which were clearly manipulated, the Georgian Dream parliament and government have been pursuing repressive measures in the country. Day after day, they are applying measures to crush the protests and civil society. The latest thing that we are seeing are repressions in the public sector, forcing it under the complete control of the government, which – as everyone in Georgia knows – is very important. About 40 per cent of Georgians are employed in this sector. As a result, these repressions have placed enormous pressure on the society as a whole. That is what we are fighting against. We are fighting with our bare hands and by peaceful means. We are protesting against these fraudulent elections, and especially the November 28th decision of the Georgian Dream prime minister to turn this country away from Europe and towards Russia. There is no middle ground. Our choice is to be either with Europe or in Russia's hands.

That is where they are taking us and that is why the protests continue. We are in a standoff in which the Georgian Dream government is in fact no longer governing properly. They do not have any policies, be it internal, economic or foreign. They only rule by repressions. On the other hand, there is the peaceful protest movement, which can continue in its current form because the society does not have any other means. This standoff has led our small country to an enormous crisis. Unlike large players, such as Russia or Iran, we cannot turn inwards and continue existing while being isolated. Instead, we can say that it is the government that is completely iso-

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lated from a very large part of the society, including those who stay silent, as they have no other choice. The question is how long can this situation last? We have no resources, tourism is plummeting, foreign investments have practically stopped. The only income that we have now is dark money. This is circulated as a result of some Georgian Dream decisions and the offshore laws that, for example, allow Bidzina Ivanishvili to bring back his art collection to Georgia without paying taxes. This offshore law has truly allowed Georgia to become a grey zone, not only for Ivanishvili, but also other potentially sanctioned oligarchs.

That is why I say this country is not being governed anymore, and that is very dangerous. It is not only dangerous for Georgia but also for our partners who, as I believe, cannot accept having a country in the Black Sea region that can turn into this unpredictable zone where terrorism or trafficking can develop. We are at crossroads. Nobody knows how things will develop. In my view, the solution is to go back to the people and allow them to express their will through new elections. We have a date for our next local elections in October. These could be accompanied by early parliamentary elections. That is the only way that this country can get out of its current crisis.

You mean that local and snap parliamentary elections should be organized at the same time?

Yes. The government can decide to have parliamentary elections before the local ones. However, the pressure from our partners should aim at having both elections at the same time. In this way, we could find a path to get out of this crisis. Otherwise I do not know what will happen. We might see our country turn into a Russian protectorate in some kind of grey zone. This will lead to instability because half of the population, if not more, will find themselves placed under a repressive regime. And no one knows for how long things can remain completely peaceful.

You mentioned the engagement of external actors with regards to Georgia. What are your expectations regarding them at the moment? Also, what were your feelings after the Oval Office meeting between President Donald Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy?

Well, I think that any country that knows what it means to defend its own independence and freedom, knows that you need security guarantees. That is why President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's defence of his state is something that any Georgian or Pole can understand very well. We know that there will be no peace if concessions are made to Russia, which will simply allow it to strengthen its positions. A just and lasting peace can only be obtained if real concessions are found on both sides, and security guarantees are provided. That is something we should all strive for. Here I would like to add that now, when guarantees to ensure Ukraine's sovereignty and independence are discussed, one should not

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forget about Georgia. As long as there are Russian-occupied territories also in Georgia, it will be very difficult to imagine Russia suddenly becoming a peaceful neighbour and partner for the western world. These are the lessons of our history. You can negotiate with Russia only if there is a sense that you are both making concessions and not when you make all the concessions, because then Russia will always want more.

How could the European Union help solve the deadlock faced by Georgia since last year's elections?

The EU should increase pressure on Georgian Dream in order to bring them towards the only peaceful solution, which is new elections in October. For that to happen, they should use all the instruments that they have, including the conditionality of everything that the EU has brought to Georgia. This is especially important at a time when there are no more USAID programmes which were not, as the narrative of Georgian Dream goes, just fuelling NGOs based in the capital. They were also present in rural areas where they were supporting the country's transformation. For example, these programmes were used by organizations that help disabled people. With these programmes either suspended or about to get cut, Europe now needs to take over the role of USAID. It should become Georgia's indispensable partner, no matter who is in power, and be more demanding in what it expects from the Georgian authorities.

Evidently, it has been difficult for the EU to reach an agreement regarding sanctions against the Georgian Dream government. Several weeks ago, the European Parliament passed a resolution regarding Georgia and appealed to EU member states to introduce sanctions. What are you and the opposition parties doing to encourage the European governments to impose those sanctions?

I think that sanctions should not be used as a punishment but to apply pressure. That is why conditionality is very important and I think that there has not been enough conditionality. Sanctions were applied as a last resort when it became clear that nothing else could be done regarding the authoritarian turn of Georgian Dream. Yet punishments do not work. They are something you have to expect if you do not do what is expected in the country. This includes declaring dates for new elections. If you do not do things like that, you need to take the responsibility for the additional sanctions that will come afterwards. The terms of conditionality thus have to be very clearly articulated in advance and clearly presented to the government and society at large. Otherwise, all this talk about sanctions is only self-defeating.

What do you think about mediation between the opposition and you and the Georgian Dream government? This could be like the previous effort made by the then President of the European Council Charles Michel.

Today's situation is not the same. Obviously we could imagine some form of

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Photo: Dmitry Khorov / Shutterstock

Georgia's fifth president, Salome Zourabichvili, at a rally in Tbilisi.

mediation involving the participation of the Europeans. I said at the beginning of this crisis that I was ready to enter immediate discussions. What needs to be clear now is that there has to be pressure and conditionality. That is what will set the stage for any potential mediation. However, the government will not enter into such a discussion today. They are clearly interested only in repression. This is what the Europeans should be thinking about if they do not want to have a very deep crisis that could turn into wider instability. This is another reason why the EU should not forget about Georgia, while understanding that the priority is Ukraine. In Georgia, Russia has been testing its new hybrid strategy through the manipulation of elections and a friendly government that has now taken over the country. The same may happen to other countries in Europe. They have tested these methods in Romania and Moldova and they might test them in Ukraine or other countries. This strategy involves a combination of propaganda, war, and pressure through different means during elections. That is why everybody should study what happened in Georgia. Here, practically the entire arsenal of what you can use to manipulate elections has been used. This ranges from dedicated call centres to electronics and direct propaganda spread by Russian propagandists, who are present in our country as well.

How can Georgia counter Russia's influence, disinformation, and its increasing control over Abkhazia?

Again, for Georgia the only alternative is Europe. Our self-defence mechanism against Russian influence is our determination to maintain our independence and identity. Our culture is very strong. In fact, we have become resilient

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not only during the past months but over the years and centuries. In other words, we understand that the only alternative to Russia is to have closer connections with Europe. This is also true for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and their connections with Georgia. This may not be achieved in a direct way, as long as Russia is around. Clearly, the political sentiments of the people living in Abkhazia have been changing. Russia has been putting pressure on the Abkhazian identity and wants to gain concessions from its leaders. This has been generating some clear local reactions. There were street protests, but that is not enough to allow at this stage for any new relations between Georgia and the separatist regions. We will need outside support, especially economic support, to build a new relationship with those occupied territories.

How do you finance your current activities? Do you do this by yourself or with the help of the opposition parties?

No, not with the opposition parties. They have enough problems of their own with securing financial resources. That of course is a difficult situation and it is going to be even more difficult in the months to come. This is mainly because it will probably be more difficult to count on some outside support. But we are resilient.

If new parliamentary elections were held and the opposition took power, would you be willing to take the post of prime minister in order to implement the tasks enshrined in the Georgian Charter (an initiative by Zourabichvili to politically unite the opposition and create a technical government – editor's note)?

I would be ready to do anything that is necessary, depending on the political conditions. I clearly do not have any personal ambitions in politics anymore but I have one ambition: to get this country back on its natural track, which is Europe, democracy and independence. EE

Salome Zourabichvili is Georgia's fifth president. She still considers herself head of state in the wake of the political crisis following last year's parliamentary elections, which she and the opposition believe were rigged by the current government. Her past positions include the French ambassador to Georgia, Georgian foreign minister, deputy to the Georgian parliament, and a French diplomat. She was born in Paris to a family of Georgian political émigrés who moved to France after the Soviet conquest of Georgia.

Wojciech Wojtasiewicz is a political analyst at the Eastern Europe Programme in the Polish Institute of International Affairs. He specializes in the South Caucasus region, covering foreign and domestic politics, as well as social affairs in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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Fossil fuels are a geopolitical weapon

An interview with Sviltana Romanko,
founder and director of "Razom We Stand".
Interviewer: Aureliusz M. Pędziwol

AURELIUSZ M. PĘDZIWOL: Can you tell me a bit about your organization, which is called Razom We Stand?

SVITLANA ROMANKO: In Ukrainian *razom* means together. In the very first days of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine I initiated an international campaign called "Stand with Ukraine". Its goal was to end the global fossil fuel addiction that feeds Vladimir Putin's war machine. Our organization developed from this initiative and today we are made up of 15 brilliant individuals who reside in Kyiv and Ivano-Frankivsk, but we also have staff spread across in Europe, especially in Germany. We also have some of our staff members located in Brussels and Portugal. That is why we are now an international Ukrainian organization. As a Ukrainian organization, we also aim to rebuild Ukraine with the use of renewable energy sources. When we started the campaign, we succeeded in mobilizing over 850 organizations from 60 different countries. Together we formed a broad coalition. Its members then started reaching out to their respective governments, demanding a ban on Russian oil, natural gas and coal. So far, we have been successful in ensuring a ban on Russian coal, but demands for a price cap on Russian oil have proven less effective, unfortunately. Yet, we know that also in this regard better effects can be achieved. Currently we are working to ban Russian gas, especially LNG gas, from European premium markets and to actually deprive Russia of its financial profits. Evidently, Russia has been able to continue its sales of oil and gas to Europe and beyond.

In Ukraine we work to empower local communities to deploy renewable energy sources. We work with our local governments, but also with the state authorities to ensure that adequate and ambitious pro-climate and renewable energy provisions are included in national regula-

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tions and legislation. In this way, we want to set the foundation for a sustainable rebuilding of Ukraine, which won't be powered by oil and gas resources from unfriendly, undemocratic countries, but our own renewable energy sources and community-generated energy that does not belong to the oligarchs or oppressive political regimes.

Another area where we have seen successes is our collaboration with the US government which is aimed at imposing sanctions on the large-scale Russian project called Arctic LNG 2. As a result, Russia was deprived of profits from this resource and investors have been pulling out of it, which is huge. As much as 11 billion euros have been pulled out from this investment so far. Just recently we have also developed an investment portfolio, which involves a catalogue including 26 Ukrainian cities. Our experts went to these cities and carried out a technical service survey, to help local authorities develop renewable energy projects that could attract investments and provide energy to local communities. This approach is driven by the current situation in Ukraine, where the destruction of our energy infrastructure is massive and lots of people are suffering as a result. Neither households nor industrial facilities have adequate levels of energy to meet their needs. We have been also working with international media to initiate investigations that would expose companies, mainly in the West, as well as some governments that delay activities aimed at helping Ukraine and banning Russian fossil fuels.

You have not mentioned nuclear energy. What is your attitude towards this type of energy resource?

I see that there is an increasing recognition of the importance of nuclear energy, which is more and more treated as a geopolitical weapon. Russia's war in Ukraine has clearly showed us that fossil fuels are actually a geopolitical weapon that can be used for blackmail. It is also a tool for exerting pressure, as Russia did with the German and European markets by offering them cheap gas and then cutting it off through the Nord Stream pipelines. That is one aspect of the problem. The other aspect is that nuclear energy is highly dangerous. It constitutes a threat to human lives and to the environment, while it is indeed low carbon and can be used as a transition fuel. However, as we can see, the world has been threatened by the nuclear button being in Putin's reach and the risk its use poses to Ukraine and the entire planet.

And what about the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant?

Since the beginning of the full-scale war we have seen that Russia sees this plant as a tool to threaten Ukraine's existence and thus wants to keep it occupied. I was a child when the Chernobyl power plant exploded. I remember that back then we were not told what had happened nor advised to take any measures. The Soviet authorities remained

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Photo courtesy of Sviltana Romanko

silent. Only later, when I was about 30, did I learn that there was research that revealed that people like me, who were children at the time of the disaster, have a very high chance of cancer in our old age, which is a side-effect of the nuclear radiation. In Ukraine we also remember the moment when, as an independent country, but once the second-largest holder of nuclear resources in the Soviet Union, we were forced to give up our nuclear potential. Today, we know that had we kept this resource, our relations with Russia would have gone very differently. But to be honest, I support more democratic measures and the fact that it is international law that governs these kinds of issues. However, as we see, there are limitations also in that regard. Russia has shown us that it is not respecting international norms, neither those passed by the United Nations, nor other organizations. For this reason, we will have to hold it accountable for the huge damage and destruction it has been doing in Ukraine. Not to mention the war crimes, including those inflicted on Ukrainian children.

Speaking about Russian resources, what about the frozen Russian assets? Could they be used to rebuild Ukraine?

At the moment these assets are worth around 300 billion US dollars. They have been frozen by the European Union and could be used for that and other purposes. This resource could be used to compensate for the losses that Ukraine experienced and until Russia stops being a threat. I think it is time for the EU to

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make a straightforward and strong decision on these assets, along with introducing a ban on Russian LNG gas. Such decisive moves would have an impact on our political and energy security, as well as actual European security in the long term. All these things that we've listed: nuclear weapons; nuclear power plants, which also constitute a form of nuclear potential; as well as the frozen Russian assets; and the lack of a ban on Russian LNG, are challenges that we must overcome in order to deprive Russia of its ability to fund the war. On a more optimistic note, I can say that we are quite close to reaching this final point. The current budget of the Russian Federation already shows a huge deficit in funds. In addition, Russia is experiencing significant inflation. Gas prices have increased for ordinary Russians while Russian oil and gas companies are paying higher taxes, which is a resource for the Kremlin to finance its war efforts. That is why I think we need to push the EU to find a way to get Slovakia and Hungary on our side. The starting point should also be banning Russian LNG across Europe because for Russia that's the main source of money it makes in Europe.

I'd like to return to the topic of nuclear power plants. There is new nuclear technology being developed that is called small modular reactors (SMR). What do you think about this technology?

I am an environmentalist and a former environmental law professor. That is why I am quite sure that small modular reactors are not yet a proven and reliable technology. This technology does not yet exist nor has proven its effectiveness. I think it is too early to say what it will bring us. Just like carbon capture and storage (CCS), which is something that does not exist. We can say it's fake … or hope that something like this will be developed one day.

I have been hearing about CCS for a quarter of a century now…

I don't think that SMR will be possible in the near future. There is actually a practical reason for that. Most of the work on small model reactors was funded by the US Department of State and the "Net Zero" labs. With the change of administration in Washington DC, they experienced funding cuts. As a result, there is no money for this development. I think that in addition to what has been a false solution, we can't make these small modular reactors work. Neither can we make them industrially widespread and economically viable. And with the lack of investments, this technology will never be implemented.

At the moment, the dominating discourse in Europe is that we need to spend more on defence. Yet, many people say that defence and the Green Deal do not go together. What is your opinion?

I do think that the most pressing need is to invest in defence. But I also believe that having the European Green Deal move forward uninterrupted and properly financed is the key to energy inde-

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pendence. It is just as much of a necessity as defence. It is a different kind of resilience which can serve as a competitive advantage for the European economy. It will be a low carbon and low emitting economy. I believe that is our future. We are already witnessing the devastating impact of extreme weather events, which are causing significant damage to our economies. Therefore, I don't believe it's wise for Europe to prioritize defence spending at the sacrifice of the Green Deal. Doing so could leave us vulnerable to the most pressing climate threats.

Here I would like to mention what we call a climate genocide, which is quite a new term. It suggests that we may reach a point when only a very few wealthy people will be able to enjoy a few islands of fresh air and uncontaminated food. While everywhere else, people will be at risk of dying from floods or extreme heat, signs of which we are already seeing across Europe and the globe. For this reason, I don't think that Europe should walk away from its climate goals. An emission-free economy is really a long-term priority. Let me point out here to maybe lesser-known research done in 2023 by the Oxford-based Smith Institute, which showed that by applying gas reduction measures Europe can effectively save 500 billion euros by 2028. This money could then be used for defence, for example. As an environmentalist, of course I don't think that this is the best use of money. We know that the missiles that Russia launches against Ukraine almost every night now are very expensive and they are also contributing to increasing emissions. That is why I will never agree with a statement that military activities are good for the planet. But the current situation requires us to arm and defend ourselves. Yet at the same time we cannot give up on protecting the climate.

Do you really believe that renewable energy sources are reliable and sufficient to keep our economies going?

Yes. But of course, there are new challenges. But take Germany, which obtains about 54 per cent of its energy supply from renewables.

But it is not every day that you have sun or wind…

Of course, and that is why you need what we call a balancing capacity. We need to invest in batteries and this balancing capacity, which is currently provided by gas or nuclear stations. I think that in the future when more renewable sources are developed this will be highly possible. Naturally, things like batteries or generators raise serious environmental questions but we also cannot solely rely on gas as a transition fuel because it is, as we have been witnessing, a geopolitical weapon that is used by non-democratic countries to expand their power. I really believe in Europe. There is research that shows that as early as 2040, by replacing its current energy with renewable energy, Europe can cut its emissions by 100 per cent. This gives us great hope. It will require financial re-

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sources, of course, but those can be obtained if we, as I said earlier, reduce our gas demand. In my view, heat pumps are a good solution here. As we can see renewable energy is becoming cheaper than fossil fuels. So I think a breakthrough is already on the horizon. But we have to behave responsibly, recycle property, and not use plastic that is made with oil for everything we buy in a supermarket. If we continue doing that, we will of course never reach energy independence.

This interview took place on March 20th 2025 after the discussion "Cafe Kyiv Prague: How to sustain support for Ukraine in 2025?", which was organized by the Association for International Affairs (AMO) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS).

Svitlana Romanko is the founder and director of the Ukrainian campaign group "Razom We Stand", which grew out of the #StandWithUkraine campaign. Romanko launched and coordinated both groups once the Russian war against Ukraine began. She has been an environmental lawyer for over 20 years and a high-impact climate justice campaigner for a decade. In 2022 she was awarded the Rose Braz Award for Bold Activism.

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

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